



WWF

FACT SHEET

WHAT IMPACTS DO HUMAN ACTIVITIES HAVE ON HABITATS AND WILDLIFE

Every living creature needs room to exist and reproduce. The natural home of a plant, animal or other organism is known as its habitat and maintaining this space is crucial to the ongoing survival of both individuals and species.

Unfortunately, the habitats of large numbers of the Earth's plant and animal species are under threat due to the impact of human beings on the planet. Habitat loss is contributing to the permanent loss of species, the weakening of ecosystems, and is impacting on both the overall health of the planet and the quality of human life.

Causes of habitat loss

Human activity is by far the biggest cause of habitat loss. The planet's human population has doubled in the past 50 years and the pressure to house and feed more than seven billion people has seen incursions into previously pristine natural habitats increase dramatically. At the same time, human impacts on the Earth's climate are radically changing weather patterns and, as a result, the spread and nature of wild habitats.

The primary individual cause of loss of habitat is the clearing of land for agriculture. An estimated 177,000 square kilometres of forests and woodlands are cleared annually to make space for farming or in order to harvest timber for fuel and wood products. Estimates suggest the Earth has lost about half of its forests in 8,000 years of human activity, with much of this occurring in recent decades. About 3% of forests have been lost since the 1990s alone.

And it's not just forest clearing that leads to habitat loss. The loss of wetlands, plains, lakes, and other natural environments all destroy or degrade habitat, as do other human activities such as introducing invasive species, polluting, trading in wildlife, and engaging in wars. This destruction of habitat also involves marine zones and the ocean, with urbanisation, industrialisation and tourism all affecting habitats in coastal areas. Some 40% of the global population live within 100 kilometres of the coast, placing major strains on wetlands and oceans.

Impacts of human activity

With such significant habitat destruction underway, the effects on ecosystems and wildlife are significant. Figures from the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) suggest about 2,000 mammals around the globe are affected by habitat loss. It is the primary threat to 85% of species on the union's Red List which lists organisms whose existence is either vulnerable, endangered, or critically endangered.



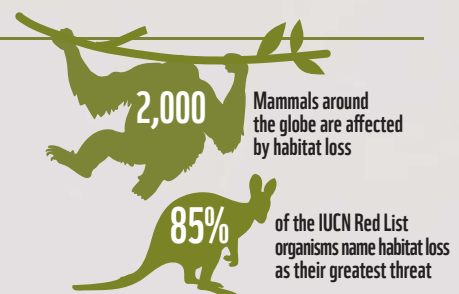
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Deforestation in east Kalimantan



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Oily residue found in waters affected by Montara oil rig leak in the Timor Sea



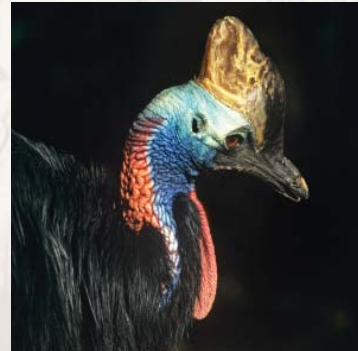
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The problem is particularly acute in Australia where, thanks to human impacts, more mammal species have been lost in the past 200 years than in all other continents combined. Of the 1,250 plant and 390 terrestrial animal species considered threatened, 964 plants and 286 animals have deforestation and resulting habitat fragmentation or degradation listed as threats. These include Carnaby's cockatoo, the southern cassowary, Bennet's tree kangaroo, the Cape York rock-wallaby, and the black-flanked rock-wallaby, as well as the iconic koala, recently listed as vulnerable to extinction in Queensland and NSW.

While tree-clearing is a significant cause of habitat loss in Australia, other major contributing factors include altered bushfire frequency and the introduction of pest species such as cats, foxes and weeds that make habitats unsafe for native species or outcompete them. Meanwhile, on the Great Barrier Reef, the impacts of human-induced climate change are altering the habitats of corals, leading to large-scale coral bleaching. Over time, destruction of such habitats leads to reduced biodiversity, weakening the Earth's ecosystems, and ultimately posing a major threat to human life.

Protecting habitats

While, significant tracts of habitat have been lost, and along with them many species of plant and animal, steps can be taken to slow and even reverse the process. One key measure is the establishment of protected areas where human activity is restricted in order to conserve existing ecosystems and wildlife. Well-planned and well-managed reserves, parks and forests can help to safeguard freshwater and food supplies, reduce poverty, and reduce the impacts of natural disasters.



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The southern cassowary is among many animals listed as vulnerable to extinction in Australia



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Human-induced climate change is leading to large-scale coral bleaching in the Great Barrier Reef



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Nangeen Hill Nature Reserve in Western Australia creates a sanctuary for black-flanked rock-wallabies