

# Does Life on Earth Have a Future?

Notes from the Conference Keynote Address by Stuart L. Pimm, Ph.D

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Where are we headed? Let's consider the situation we now have, in light of current policies and practice.

- The planet produces 130 billion tons of green stuff (biomass) each year.
- We humans use 40% of this green stuff for our food, our animal's food, and for wood.
- Half of the planet's land surface is forested. Agriculture now consumes one quarter of what was forested. Remaining forested lands are shrinking rapidly.
- Half of the planet's land surface is intensively grazed dry land. We have damaged two thirds of this, its value being lost to weeds and wind erosion.
- There are more than six billion people on the planet, with 10 to 12 billion predicted in a few more decades.

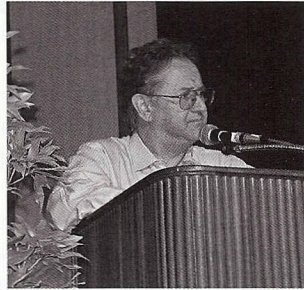
Along with global warming patterns, these impacts have led to an inflated rate of extinction. E.O. Wilson, well known Harvard researcher and author, calls it the "sixth wave of extinction" and Pimm estimates the rate of extinction to be 100 to 1000 times faster than would have come about naturally (and it may be as much as 10,000 times faster).

Now for the good news: If we are clever,

## Percentage of species in the U.S. currently on the verge of extinction

- 6.2% of birds
- 4.4% of butterflies
- 6.0% of mammals
- 7.1% of reptiles
- 6.0% of dragonflies
- 9.8% of ferns
- 13.1% of conifers
- 15.9% of flowering plants
- 43.0% of freshwater mussels

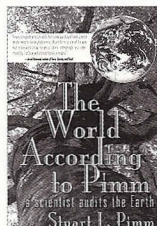
we can reduce the impact that we have on fisheries, we can use less of the planet's resources, and we can use water more efficiently. But extinction is forever—this is not



Stuart Pimm's address to us outlined specific natural areas of the world that should be targeted for protection through acquisition and management. Many hotspots occur in countries where there are critical needs for funding and scientific training.

Jurassic Park. We cannot bring back the species that we drive to extinction. Biodiversity loss is irreversible and the threats are immediate. What we do in the next 10 to 20 years will determine what will happen to life on Earth for centuries, maybe millions of years to come.

The greatest biodiversity hot spots are not in large forests, but in relatively small geographical areas. Using computer technology and satellite imagery, we can identify the most important areas and protect them. The cost of acquiring and managing these areas may be as much as \$30 billion annually, a lot, certainly, but within the reach of some of the world's citizens when leveraged through public giving and the support of governments. Various organizations are striving to find the resources and education-



Learn more by reading Dr. Pimm's recently published book, *The World According to Pimm: A Scientist Audits the Earth*, available through bookstores and online at Amazon.com and Barnes & Noble.

al tools to assist developing countries in which the hotspots occur, so that land can be set aside for conservation of flora and fauna.

Finally, we must lead with our own example. South Florida is one of 25 hot spots worldwide. Our problems mirror those of other countries. We are making poor choices in how we manage our natural resources. The U.S. pays twice the world price for sugar and supports an industry that dumps pollutants into the Everglades. We need to be particularly vigilant in Florida. *The Miami Herald* is the most widely read newspaper in Latin America, with enormous influence. What we do in Florida will be viewed with considerable interest across the Caribbean, Central and South America, regions where other critical hotspots need protection now.

Professor Pimm was highly critical of how well Florida is protecting its internationally important biodiversity. "The Everglades restoration plan is nothing more than a water supply plan" he said. "It's one that is deeply and systemically flawed in its ecological goals. Of a score of expensive projects, only a couple might benefit the natural ecosystems—and these won't even be built until 2036. As a Florida resident, I expect more from the Army Corps of Engineers than their continually building expensive pork-barrel projects to enhance their careers and line the pockets of contractors, all at the expense of us taxpayers and, in this case, the environment." ✨

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