

Wildfires Aren't Just A Threat To People—They're Killing Off Earth's Biodiversity



*Reynard Loki - Photo:
Independent Media Institute*

Cataclysmic wildfires have increased in intensity and frequency due to climate change.

In early August 2023, a succession of wildfires ignited within the state of Hawaii, primarily affecting the island of Maui. It is [considered](#) “one of the worst natural disasters in Hawaii’s history, and the nation’s deadliest wildfires since 1918.” Driven by powerful winds, these fires sparked urgent evacuations, inflicted extensive devastation, and tragically [claimed](#) the lives of at least 115 individuals—though the final confirmed death toll may never be known due to the severity of the fires and the [lack](#) of DNA evidence to identify the victims. In the town of Lāhainā, as many as 850 people were [reported](#) missing by Hawaii officials as of August 21. The rapid spread of these wildfires was linked to the arid, gusty weather conditions [generated](#) by a robust high-pressure system located north of Hawaii, combined with the influence of Hurricane Dora from the southern region. This nightmare scenario in Hawaii is not unique.

In 2020, the catastrophic wildfires that raged across [California, Oregon, and Washington state](#) consumed around 5 million acres of dry forest. “I drove 600 miles up and down the state, and I never escaped the smoke,” Senator Jeff

Merkley (D-Or) [said](#) on the ABC News television show “This Week” on September 13, 2020. “We have thousands of people who have lost their homes. I could have never envisioned this.”

The firefighters on America’s West Coast were battling the deadly blazes as the [75th session of the United Nations General Assembly](#) convened in September 2020 at the UN headquarters in New York. One of the high-level meetings as part of the session was the [Summit on Biodiversity](#). Strikingly, the hot-button issue of wildfires was not mentioned in the event program, even though wildfires [continue](#) to pose a direct threat to biodiversity across the planet. According to the [Living Planet Report 2020](#) by the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), populations of monitored mammals, fish, birds, reptiles, and amphibians have collectively dwindled by nearly 70 percent worldwide from 1970 to 2016. The underlying cause: humanity.

Wildfires’ Impact on Biodiversity

The Hawaiian rainforests of Kauai once teemed with ‘akikiki, small songbirds cloaked in gray plumage. But when humans came to the island, they inadvertently introduced mosquitoes carrying avian malaria. “With no immunity to the disease, ‘akikiki and other native songbirds began to die off. The species’ population crashed in the early 2000s, and today, the situation is so dire that scientists estimate [just five ‘akikiki exist in the wild](#) in Kauai,” [stated](#) an August 2023 article in the Smithsonian Magazine.

The species’ survival is in the hands of scientists on a nearby island, at the Maui Bird Conservation Center, which houses approximately 40 ‘akikiki and actively encourages them to breed in captivity, according to the [article](#). This facility also provides shelter to around 40 ‘alalā, the Hawaiian crow, which has vanished from its natural habitat. Thankfully, the center’s avian residents were [rescued](#) from the August wildfires. Still, the episode highlights the increasing risk wildfires pose to the survival of wildlife, particularly the danger they cause to species already on the brink of extinction.

Cataclysmic wildfires—the [intensity and frequency of which have increased due to human-caused climate change](#)—are not just an American phenomenon. In the summer of 2023, catastrophic wildfires [swept](#) through Maui, Greece, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Algeria, Tunisia, and Canada. And wildfires impact far more than human life, trees, and the built environment; Countless wild animals have perished in the flames. “[A]s many as [1.25 billion animals](#)—including iconic Australian species

such as koalas, kangaroos, wallabies, and gliders—have been killed or displaced by the fires,” Earth | Food | Life (EFL) reporter Robin Scher [wrote](#) on Truthout in April 2020 about Australia’s “[Black Summer](#),” the colloquial name of the 2019-2020 Australian bushfire season, which was unusually intense. “In some instances, certain species may have even gone extinct,” Scher [reported](#).

Writing about the Amazon wildfires for Truthout, EFL reporter Daniel Ross [noted](#) in June 2020 that the “illegal logging, encroachment from agribusinesses, and profit-driven government policies,” that underpin Brazil’s wildfires, [impacted](#) wildlife, [threatened](#) Indigenous communities, and created an [air pollution-related health crisis](#) in the nation’s urban areas. The fires even [spread into virgin forests](#) in the country.

Wildfires Linked to Cattle Farming

In addition, the fires—[many of which are illegally started](#) to create pasture for cows that supply Brazil’s multibillion-dollar beef industry—have created a dangerous situation for the global climate. “[R]esearch suggests that some deforested regions of the rainforest are exhaling more carbon dioxide than they’re taking in,” Ross [reported](#).

And make no mistake, a rapidly and unnaturally changing climate is a direct threat to the planet’s biodiversity, and to the variety of life on Earth that provides the foundation for a host of life-supporting ecological services—such as clean air, clean water, healthy soil, and crops, plant pollination, pest control, wastewater treatment, and outdoor recreation.

A Vicious Cycle

There is a vicious cycle at work: While wildfires are destroying biodiversity, biodiversity loss may contribute to increased susceptibility to wildfires. According to a 2016 [study](#) published in the journal *Animal Conservation*, the extinction of medium-sized, ground-dwelling mammals in Australia could be a factor that primes the bush to burn more easily.

“Australia has seen the extinction of 29 of 315 terrestrial mammal species in the last 200 years and several of these species were ecosystem engineers whose fossorial actions may increase the rate of leaf litter breakdown,” [wrote](#) Matt Hayward, the lead author of the report, and his co-authors, in the report’s abstract. “Thus, their extinction may have altered the rate of litter accumulation

and therefore fire ignition potential and rate of spread.”

Hayward [argued](#) that restoring biodiversity could help reduce the likelihood of wildfires starting and spreading rapidly.

Advocacy Groups Call for Action

Some organizations are fighting against the indiscriminate deforestation resulting from cattle farming activities that have fueled the wildfires in the Amazon forest. Amnesty International [reported](#) that “63 percent of the [Brazilian Amazon] deforested from 1988 to 2014 has become pasture for cattle—a land area five times the size of Portugal.” The group has called for ending illegal cattle farming in the Amazon. “Illegal cattle ranching is the main driver of Amazon deforestation. It poses a very real threat, not only to the human rights of Indigenous and traditional peoples who live there but also to the entire planet’s ecosystem,” [said](#) Richard Pearshouse in 2019, when he was the head of crisis and environment at Amnesty International.

Care2 launched a [public petition](#) in 2020 urging the Brazilian government to stop allowing these human-created fires destroying the Amazon rainforest. As of July 2023, the petition has garnered more than 122,000 signatures.

In 2020, Brazilian meat giant JBS pledged it would introduce, by 2025, a [new system to monitor](#) both its direct and indirect cattle suppliers. However, Amnesty criticized the announcement, [saying](#) the “timeline [was] too far removed.” The group pointed out that “JBS has been aware of the risks that cattle illegally grazed in protected areas may enter its supply chain since at least 2009, and [previously pledged to monitor its indirect suppliers by 2011.](#)”

Sustainable Environment Named a ‘Human Right’

In October 2021, the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) [recognized](#) for the first time “that having a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment is a human right.” The proposed text, put forth by Costa Rica, the Maldives, Morocco, Slovenia, and Switzerland, was approved with 43 votes in favor and four abstentions. The abstaining countries were Russia, India, China, and Japan.

Michelle Bachelet, who was at the time the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, had long supported the move. After the vote, she [said](#) “that she was ‘gratified’ that the decision ‘clearly recognizes environmental degradation and climate change as interconnected human rights crises,’” adding that “Bold action

is now required to ensure this resolution on the right to a healthy environment serves as a springboard to push for transformative economic, social and environmental policies that will protect people and nature.”

BirdLife International, a global partnership of non-governmental organizations working to conserve birds and their habitats, while seeking a resolution by the UN General Assembly reaffirming the rights recognized by the UNHRC, [said](#) that “to emerge from [the climate and biodiversity]... crises, to ensure our future and that of the planet, we need to entirely transform humanity’s relationship with nature. This human right helps make that happen.”

Wildfires Predicted to Increase

“The choking smoke cast a dark pall over the skies and created a vision of climate-change disaster that made worst-case scenarios for the future a terrifying reality for the present,” [reported](#) the New York Times about the wildfires that blazed across the Western United States in 2020. That terrifying reality could go on for generations if we don’t get a handle on the climate crisis.

In September 2022, climate journalist and native Oregonian Emma Pattee [wrote](#) in the New York Times that “[c]limate scientists estimate that the frequency of large wildfires [could increase](#) by over 30 percent in the next 30 years and over 50 percent in the next 80 years, thanks in large part to drought and extreme heat caused by climate change.” That is a frightening prospect not just for humans but for the countless nonhuman animals with whom we share this planet.

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