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Scientific Study Warns of "Catastrophic Declines" in Earth's Wilderness

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A recent scientific study showed that "catastrophic declines" in the Earth's wilderness areas have occurred in the last 20 years, and are continuing apace. US National Parks like this one, Lake Clark in Alaska, include wilderness areas that are becoming ever more rare. (Photo: Dahr Jamail)

A [recently published international study](#) led by the University of Queensland shows that the amount of wilderness around the globe that has been lost in just the last 20 years "is staggering."

The study, published in [Current Biology](#), produced findings that show that one-tenth of the entire area of global wilderness has vanished since the 1990s.

The report defines "wilderness" as "biologically and ecologically largely intact landscapes that are mostly free of human disturbance. These areas do not exclude people, as many are in fact critical to certain communities, including indigenous peoples."

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It points out that wilderness areas "have lower levels of impacts from the kinds of human uses that result in significant biophysical disturbance to natural habitats, such as large-scale land conversion, industrial activity, or infrastructure development."

"Unprecedented Threats"

In a [University of Queensland press release](#) for the study, Wildlife Conservation Society of New York researcher James Watson states that the Amazon and Central Africa have seen the largest amounts of wilderness area lost as of late.

"The findings underscore an immediate need for international policies to recognise the value of wilderness and to address the unprecedented threats it faces," Dr Watson [said](#). "Globally important wilderness areas are completely ignored in environmental policy, despite being strongholds for endangered biodiversity, for buffering and regulating local climates, and for supporting many of the world's most politically and economically marginalised communities."

According to the study, since the early 1990s, 30 percent of the wilderness in South America has been lost, as has 14 percent of the wilderness in Africa.

The study points out how wilderness is being lost at a rate exceeding that at which it is being protected, which is a trend that must be changed immediately.

"The amount of wilderness loss in just two decades is staggering and very saddening," Dr Watson [said](#).

We Have a Duty to Act

Watson and his colleagues expressed dissatisfaction with the United Nations, which, according to the resources, has ignored "globally significant wilderness areas" in several "key multilateral environmental agreements."

"If we don't act soon, it will be all gone, and this is a disaster for conservation, for climate change, and for some of the most vulnerable human communities on the planet," Watson [said](#). "We have a duty to act for our children and their children."

According to the study, at least 27 entire "ecoregions" -- environmentally and ecologically distinct geographic units at the global scale -- have lost all of their "remaining globally significant wilderness areas" since the early 1990s.

The Amazon basin, in particular, has been reduced from an area of 1.8 million km to 1.3 million km (a loss of over 30 percent) in the same time frame.

"We need to recognise that wilderness is being dramatically lost and that without proactive global interventions we could lose the last jewels in nature's crown," Watson [added](#). "You cannot restore wilderness. Once it is gone, the ecological process that underpins these ecosystems is gone, and it never comes back to the state it was. The only option is to proactively protect what is left."

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Dahr Jamail

Dahr Jamail, a Truthout staff reporter, is the author of [*The Will to Resist: Soldiers Who Refuse to Fight in Iraq and Afghanistan*](#), (Haymarket Books, 2009), and [*Beyond the Green Zone: Dispatches From an Unembedded Journalist in Occupied Iraq*](#) (Haymarket Books, 2007). Jamail reported from Iraq for more than a year, as well as from Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Turkey over the last 10 years, and has won the Martha Gellhorn Award for Investigative Journalism, among other awards.

His third book, [*The Mass Destruction of Iraq: Why It Is Happening, and Who Is Responsible*](#), co-written with [William Rivers Pitt](#), is available now on Amazon. He lives and works in Washington State.

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