



Elizabeth Maruma Mrema  
and the loss of biodiversity

## Description

# The Executive Secretary of the UN Convention on Biological Diversity speaks at the CORIM

By Patrick Barnard

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On June 7, 2022, the **Montreal Council on Foreign Relations (CORIM)** hosted a public meeting featuring **Elizabeth Mrema** and attendees heard her speak about a topic she knows well: ***The Loss of Biodiversity: What Will Be The Consequences for Individual Countries?***

Mrs. Mrema is the current Executive Secretary of the UN Convention on Biological Diversity whose head office is in downtown Montreal. A lawyer and university professor from Tanzania, she has devoted the last two decades of her life as an international civil servant to the study and defence of biodiversity.

Her speech came at a critical time since 2022 has been a turning point signalling the huge crisis facing all life on earth. On April 4th, when the **3rd Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)** issued its report, UN General Secretary **António Guterres** [used language in New York never before employed by a head of the UN:](#)

“The jury has reached a verdict, and it is damning. This report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change is a litany of broken climate promises. It is a file of shame, cataloguing the empty pledges that put us firmly on track towards an unliveable world. We are on a fast track to climate disaster, with major cities underwater, unprecedented heatwaves, terrifying storms, widespread water shortages, and the extinction of a million species of plants and animals. This is not fiction or exaggeration. It is what science tells us will result from our current energy policies. While we are on a pathway to global warming of more than double the 1.5°C limit agreed in Paris, some Government and business leaders are saying one thing, but doing another. Simply put, they are lying, and the results will be catastrophic. This is a climate emergency.”

Guterres highlighted the “extinction of a million species” because the greatest consequence of this climate catastrophe is the unrelenting destruction of every kind of living organism. And the loss of biodiversity was at the



very heart of his impassioned appeal to the world at large.

Our civilization hurtles forward, destroying the biosphere on which we depend, yet the science to describe what we are doing is still relatively new. For example, the term “biodiversity” only dates from the 1980s when the American naturalist **E. O. Wilson** and his colleagues began holding meetings to discuss what they all could see happening in front of their eyes (see [Biodiversity](#), National Academy Press, 1988.) Destruction of nature has marched ahead with environmental science racing to keep pace. In fact, it is certainly no accident that both the biodiversity crisis and the science to describe it have emerged simultaneously at this moment in history.

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At the very end of 2021, E.O. Wilson died in Massachusetts, so “the father of biodiversity” has just now given stead to those who will follow in the work of assessing the current situation. Secretary Guterres talks of a million organisms disappearing. That is a huge number. And the collapse of biodiversity is the most significant result of climate change because such diminishment has a fatal impact on the whole biosphere.

Furthermore, the mathematics of biodiversity loss is unforgiving. Take any area of habitat with its plants and animals – with 90% of habitat destruction approximately 50% of species are lost according to Wilson and his colleagues, but then with each further loss of 1%, the given population collapses towards total extinction.

Beyond the tipping point, there is a frightening, exponential descent to destruction. What ecologists call “the chessboard of life” is smashed in that habitat, and then in another, and another. (For “chessboard of life” see Beaugrand et al., [The mathematical influence on global patterns of biodiversity](#), June 11, 2020).

Secretary Guterres this spring was warning us all about this grim prospect. Biodiversity is important everywhere, but many remaining areas with high biodiversity are in Southeast Asia, Africa and Latin America. The situation of particular countries in those regions is especially important. Global change bears down on specific jurisdictions, and what happens there obviously affects the total biosphere.

This background of the general environmental crisis made Mrs. Elizabeth Mrema’s Montreal speech important because it was a report from a UN official who has worked on the biodiversity crisis at the ground level in countries where changes can be most dramatically seen.



Mrs. Mrema spoke warmly of Montreal to her lunch-time audience, and the most striking thing about her eventual speech was its generality, as she talked about the upcoming efforts among members of the UN Convention on Biological Diversity to create a new “framework” for action from now until 2030. She gave no sharp and vivid description of how the biodiversity crisis plays itself out in particular countries. Instead, her focus was on the broad outlines of international negotiations. She also said that if the countries participating in the Convention on Biodiversity – the ‘parties’ as they are known – cannot meet in China later this year as planned, then she would favour Montreal as an alternative meeting place.

The personal optimism of Mrs. Mrema lies behind her hope for a new Convention framework that will be an “umbrella” and a “global beacon of hope” as the world moves toward 2050. At the same time, she told her audience that “biodiversity is the foundation of life” and “most assessments paint a stark picture.” She pointed out, just as Guterres did, that the recent rate of species extinction “is over one million” and “is accelerating.”

She referred to the 5th Global Diversity Outlook published in 2020 by the Secretariat that stated in its introduction: “Biodiversity is declining at an unprecedented rate, and the pressures driving this decline are intensifying.” The report took a cold look at the Aichi targets on biodiversity for 2020, agreed to by Convention signers in Japan in 2011, and found that 14 out of 20 were not reached by the end of the decade and 6 only partly so, a miserable result and a grim harbinger of what is to come.

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Mrs. Mrema did not speak so baldly in Montreal, and simply informed her listeners that “none of the Aichi targets were completely met” and “overall, globally none of the targets was met.” Obviously, her lay listeners would not have read the appalling details in the Outlook, nor have appreciated, perhaps, how foreboding that assessment is. And Mrs. Mrema put a good face on things as she talked of forging ahead, “placing nature at the heart of sustainable development” and she invoked a vision of 2050 “living in harmony with nature.”



The Montreal speech on June 7 presented two outlooks, one dark, and one hopeful. Mrs. Mrema called for “transformative changes in our modes of development.” Her audience liked her and her friendly warmth, but what vision did they carry back from their lunch break as they returned to their own jobs?

Failures to conserve biodiversity during the last decade do not bode well for the eight years left until 2030, let alone the route towards 2050. When it comes to biodiversity, the human prospect is awful. Nonetheless, UN officials, like the people who hear them, also go back to their jobs, performing faithfully as they try to see a different future, but their own expertise tells them, every day, of the huge storm clouds to come.

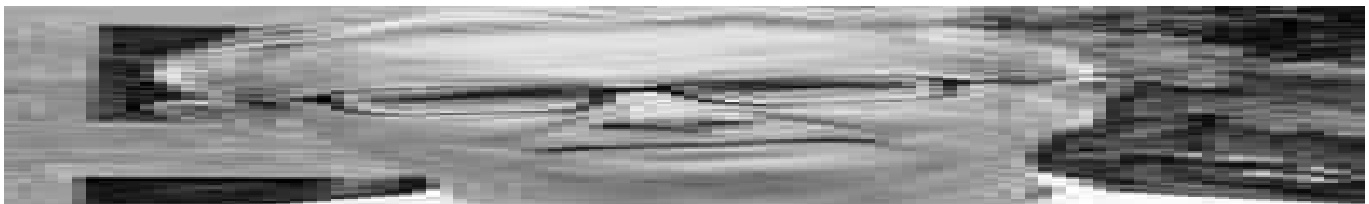
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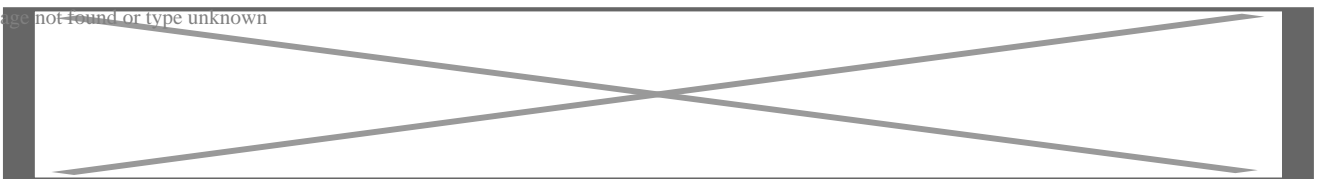
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