

A Beginner's Guide to the Big Year(s) for Biodiversity

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2020 officially marks the end of ten years of the United Nations' [“Strategic Plan for Biodiversity 2011-2020” and its accompanying “Aichi Biodiversity Targets”](#). In 2010 in Nagoya, Japan, Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) agreed on these goals and targets, which represent their collective ambition to stem the tide of biodiversity loss and ecosystem degradation that is threatening the continued flourishing of humankind. Other key events, products and processes also make 2020 a big year for biodiversity but, due to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, some of them have had to be moved ahead to 2021. This briefing note overviews those events, products and processes and the links between them.

The Post-2020 GBF and the 15th Meeting of the COP to the CBD

At the heart of the current global discussion on biodiversity conservation is a ten-year plan “to implement broad-based action to bring about a transformation in society’s relationship with biodiversity and to ensure that, by 2050, the shared vision of living in harmony with nature is fulfilled”. The so-called [“post-2020 global biodiversity framework” \(GBF\)](#) spans 2021 to 2030 and is essentially the successor to the Strategic Plan for Biodiversity 2011-2020 (or, the Strategic Plan) and its 20 Aichi Biodiversity Targets, progress towards which was reported on in the 5th edition of the Global Biodiversity outlook, described below. The post-2020 GBF is due to be adopted at the [fifteenth meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity \(CBD COP15\)](#). While CBD COPs negotiate various issues with the goal of adopting decisions, it is the decision on adopting the GBF that is likely to be the main topic of focus for Parties to the Convention and the media covering the event. COP15 was originally due to be held in 2020 but its new tentative COVID-induced date is, at the time of writing, somewhere in the second quarter of 2021. The venue remains, as originally intended, Kunming in China. The CBD has [subsidiary bodies on scientific, technical and technological advice \(SBSTTA\)](#) and on [implementation \(SBI\)](#) whose meetings inform the COP. They, too, have been postponed, until the first quarter of 2021 in Canada. For the first time, however, the CBD convened components of SBSTTA and SBI online in September 2020. Both the virtual, and the physical SBSTTA and SBI events scheduled for early 2021, form part of an extensive participatory process that has been undertaken to develop the post-2020 GBF.

The 5th Global Biodiversity Outlook

Roughly every five years, the CBD produces its flagship publication, the [Global Biodiversity Outlook](#) (GBO). The latest of these is its fifth edition, [GBO5](#), which was released on 15 September 2020 at one of the above-mentioned online components of SBSTTA. The GBO series, as a whole, provides a summary of the status of biodiversity and “an analysis of the steps being taken by the global community to ensure that biodiversity is conserved and used sustainably, and that benefits arising from the use of genetic resources are shared equitably”. GBO5 reports on the 20 global Aichi Biodiversity Targets agreed in 2010 and mostly with a 2020 deadline, and offers lessons learned and best practices for getting on track. Unfortunately, the news in GBO5 is that none of the Aichi Biodiversity Targets have been fully met by all countries. Nevertheless, the publication comes with a message of hope, through several examples of how governments and other actors are starting to “flatten the curve” or “bend the curve” of ongoing biodiversity loss and ecosystem degradation. In the words of CBD Executive Secretary, Elizabeth Maruma Mrema, in the foreword to the publication, it “... remains achievable, but only if we respond to the compelling evidence now available regarding the transformative change required”.

International Biodiversity Discussions beyond the CBD, and the UN Biodiversity Summit

Those new to biodiversity negotiations may be somewhat mystified by the many different UN forums in which international biodiversity policy and strategy is discussed. Besides the CBD, there are eight other biodiversity-related conventions¹, each with their own decision-making structures and meetings. In addition to these, many of which generally align themselves with the CBD, this year, two broader UN institutions are taking a special interest in biodiversity: the General Assembly and UN Environment. The United Nations Environment Assembly, convened every two years by UNEP in Nairobi, is “the world’s highest-level decision-making body on the environment”. It addresses various environmental challenges, but its fifth iteration has a strong biodiversity focus with the theme “Strengthening Actions for Nature to Achieve the Sustainable Development Goals”. This meeting has been delayed from its original date in early 2021 due to COVID-19 and, at the time of writing, it is unclear when it will go ahead, and in what format.

Held on 30 September 2020, “in the margins” of the historic 75th annual meeting of the UN General Assembly, the [UN Summit on Biodiversity](#) was probably one of the most high-level biodiversity-oriented meetings in history. It was attended by 30 Heads of State with addresses by, among others, the Secretary-General of the UN, António Guterres, and President of the People's Republic of China and host of CBD COP15, Xi Jinping. They and other senior figures opened the session and handed over to Administrator of the UN Development Programme, Achim Steiner; Executive Director of UN Environment, Inger Andersen; Executive Secretary of the CBD, Elizabeth Maruma Mrema; and Chair of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and

Ecosystem Services (IPBES), Ana María Hernández Salgar. Volkan Bozkir, President of the UN General Assembly (UNGA), called on Member States to use the Summit to build political momentum towards the Post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework. While COP15 will be centred around negotiation of text, the UN Summit on biodiversity was a ceremonial event aimed at demonstrating support for the uptake of the GBF by the world's governments and other actors, in light of their collective failure to achieve the Aichi Biodiversity Targets but also in light of the positive signs of progress indicated in publications like the GBO5 and [the many IPBES reports](#) that preceded it.

Inputs from some government representatives focused on highlighting their own efforts and achievements. Others, such as German Chancellor Angela Merkel, and intergovernmental representatives such as Mr Guterres, focused more on underlining the threats to global biodiversity, and the importance of protecting them not only for their own sake, but for the sake of humankind. Such rhetoric was rare outside the biodiversity sector only a few years ago. At this Summit, however, it was being eloquently articulated by several key figures whose mandate stretches far beyond biodiversity conservation and even environmental sustainability. Mr Guterres said that biodiversity and ecosystems are “essential for human wellbeing and prosperity” and “essential for achieving the sustainable development goals”. He added that “degradation of nature is not purely an environmental issue – it spans economics, health, social justice and human rights”, and yet it is “downplayed by other government sectors”. Earlier, Mr Steiner had expressed his expectation that the various speakers’ contributions would “have as much to do with nature as ... with people”. Mr Bozkir echoed these sentiments, saying that by losing biodiversity we “jeopardise food security, water supplies, livelihoods and our ability to fight diseases and face extreme events”. The relevance of the current coronavirus pandemic was also acknowledged by many. Executive Secretary of the Convention on Migratory Species, Amy Fraenkel, for example, pointed out that “COVID-19 has shined a spotlight on the link between overexploitation of wildlife and nature, and an increased risk of new infectious diseases in the future”. Several speakers also emphasised the need for action in response to these circumstances, perhaps most compellingly by President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, who drew attention to the ambitious goals of the European Green Deal.

In Summary

The GBO5 lays out the situation faced by the international community in dealing with the ongoing biodiversity crisis, with some reassuring messages regarding what may be achieved through concerted effort. The post-2020 GBF will lay out the global plan for addressing this momentous task over the next 10 years, with the consensus but non-binding buy-in of the 196 Parties to the CBD, at the 15th meeting of the CBD COP. The Parties’ embracing of the GBF is encouraged by the various biodiversity-related conventions, the exceptional UN Biodiversity Summit convened by the General Assembly, and UNEA-5. The CBD COP and its subsidiary bodies will, then, be responsible for keeping track of and promoting progress towards the goals of the GBF, punctuated by future editions of the GBO.

¹ [The United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification](#); [International Plant Protection Convention](#); [World Heritage Convention](#); [Ramsar Convention](#); [Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora](#); [Convention on Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals](#); [International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture](#); [International Whaling Commission](#).

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