



Letter from the Executive Director

UNEP in 2020



The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) is a passionate advocate for planetary and human health. For almost 50 years, UNEP has delivered science to help the world understand the damage humanity's carbon- and resource-hungry development path is causing to the planet, human health and economies, and has supported policies and actions to halt and reverse this damage.

But in 2020, the planet spoke up for itself. COVID-19 hit hard, claiming lives and magnifying inequalities. Economies are facing deep recessions. For the first time in 30 years, poverty is on the rise while the pandemic is driving the world further off-course from achieving the promise of the 2030 Agenda.

Like others before it, this pandemic is linked to the way humanity treats nature as fuel for the economic growth engine. The systemic issues that helped to create this pandemic – particularly unsustainable consumption and production – are the same ones driving the three planetary crises: the climate crisis, the biodiversity and nature crisis, and the pollution and waste crisis. The world continued to heat up in 2020, contributing to wildfires, droughts, floods and ravenous locust swarms. The loss of nature to agriculture, infrastructure and human settlements continues to escalate. Pollution of the air, land and sea is still claiming lives and damaging crucial ecosystems.

In December 2020, United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres put these issues at the top of the agenda. He said that humanity must make peace with nature, or face problems far more damaging than COVID-19 in the future. Making peace with nature requires resetting the system. It requires a long-term transformation of how humanity extracts and consumes resources. It requires a rapid and permanent shift to a world that works with nature, not against it.

In 2020, despite disruption from the pandemic, UNEP pushed even harder to address the three planetary crises, including by refocusing some of our work to deal with the immediate environmental impacts of COVID-19, such as increased waste and laying the foundations for a green post-pandemic recovery. With this letter, I present some highlights from this work.

Inger Andersen

UN Under-Secretary-General and
UNEP Executive Director





Climate Change



We face three imperatives in addressing the climate crisis: first, we need to achieve global carbon neutrality within the next three decades. Second, we have to align global finance behind the Paris Agreement, the world's blueprint for climate action. Third, we must deliver a breakthrough on adaptation to protect the world.

António Guterres, United Nations Secretary-General speaking on 2 December 2020 in his *State of the Planet* address.



Creating a low-carbon future through science and engagement

Over five years have passed since nations negotiated the Paris Agreement to limit global warming this century to well below 2°C and pursue 1.5°C. UNEP, through the annual Emissions Gap Report, tracks how commitments are stacking up towards this goal. The [latest edition](#), released in December 2020, found that the pandemic-linked economic slowdown will make a negligible difference to long-term emissions and temperatures. Based on current Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), the world is still off track for meeting the goals of the Paris Agreement. Meanwhile, the [Production Gap Report](#), which UNEP publishes with leading scientific bodies, found that the world needs to decrease fossil fuel production by around 6 per cent per year until 2030 to have a chance of hitting the 1.5°C target. Current projections suggest annual increases of 2 per cent.

These reports also tell us how to catch up on climate goals. The Emissions Gap Report found that pandemic stimulus packages can help, if invested in zero-emissions technologies, subsidies for renewables rather than fossil fuels, and nature-based solutions. Such investments can put the world on at least a 2°C pathway while supporting other environmental, social and economic goals.

To contribute to green recovery plans, the [Partnership for Action on Green Economy](#), for which UNEP provides the secretariat, set up a support mechanism for a green economic recovery in its 20 partner countries. UNEP provided briefings in legislatures, including to US lawmakers on the benefits of a green recovery, and presented the findings of the Emissions Gap Report to the European Commission.

This scientific analysis in the Emissions Gap Report is critical in this pivotal year, when the delayed Climate Change Conference (COP26) takes place. According to UNEP's findings, if the new US administration fulfills its election promise to join the race to zero, countries accounting for more than 63 per cent of global carbon dioxide emissions will have committed to GHG neutrality. But these commitments must be translated into strong, near-term policies and actions and be included in stronger NDCs ahead of COP26. In this respect, UNEP is working with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) to provide technical assistance to countries preparing their enhanced NDCs.

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As COP26 Presidency, we will use the findings from this [Emissions Gap] Report ... and we will also use the upcoming Adaptation Gap Report to continue to champion the need for the highest possible ambition that the world has to offer across all pillars of the Paris Agreement.

Archie Young, Lead Climate Negotiator for COP26, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland

Action on the buildings and construction sector is important for stronger NDCs and a green pandemic recovery (see the [2020 Global Status Report for Buildings and Construction](#)). Sustainable infrastructure can make a significant difference to climate, nature and pollution – which is why UNEP worked with partners to develop [best practices and guidance](#) for the sector. And the UNEP-led [Cool Coalition](#) works to deliver huge climate benefits by improving cooling efficiency, and energy efficiency broadly.

35 years of the Vienna Convention

Last year brought the 35th anniversary of the Vienna Convention for the Protection of the Ozone Layer. Through the Convention's Montreal Protocol, nations have virtually eliminated ozone-depleting substances, meaning the ozone layer that protects the planet from harmful UV radiation is now on the mend. But the Montreal Protocol is not finished. The Protocol's Kigali Amendment commits nations to reducing climate-warming hydrofluorocarbons used in cooling. This amendment, projected to avoid up to 0.4°C of global temperature rise by 2100, was ratified by an additional 21 nations in 2020, bringing the total to 112. UNEP hosts the Ozone and Multilateral Fund Secretariats, serves as Treasurer, and is a Multilateral Fund Implementing Agency.

Another key piece of science and engagement came in the form of the [Used Vehicles and the Environment Report](#), which pointed to climate and air quality issues arising from developed nations exporting unroadworthy, polluting second-hand vehicles to developing nations, and called for minimum quality standards. As a result of UNEP's support and with the leadership of Ghana, the Economic Community of West African States Commission last year announced stricter vehicle standards. The directives bar the import of light-duty vehicles more than five years old and aim to double the efficiency of cars by 2030. The rules are a milestone in slashing greenhouse gas emissions in a region that is home to about 400 million people, where many vehicles are past their prime.

Supporting vulnerable populations to adapt to climate change

Another priority is helping developing countries and vulnerable communities deal with the impacts of climate change, which will intensify even if the world meets the Paris Agreement goals. UNEP's [Adaptation Gap Report 2020](#) shows that the world is still not taking adaptation finance seriously. Finance remains far below the levels required and most initiatives are yet to reduce risks. The world needs to commit to fulfilling the Paris Agreement goals on adaptation financing.

UNEP is also taking concrete measures to help countries adapt. In 2020, UNEP supported over 50 nations to develop national adaptation plans and early warning systems on climate change, and launched new projects in Benin, Ghana, Iraq, Lesotho and Mauritania. Through the [Global Environment Facility Blue Forests Project](#), UNEP supported the launch of mangrove carbon market projects in Kenya and in Madagascar, which cover the protection and restoration of almost 2,000 hectares of mangrove and sustain the livelihoods of at least 20,000 people.

Transforming the private and financial sectors

The private sector must also shoulder its share of the burden for climate action. Public-private collaboration is beginning to accelerate, with UNEP playing a key role through its [Finance Initiative](#) and other engagements.

The blended [AGRI3 fund, created by UNEP and banking partners](#), aims to mobilize USD 1 billion in finance for nature- and climate-positive agriculture and forestry. The fund's first transactions – for forest protection and renovation of degraded pastureland in Mato Grosso, Brazil, and sustainable pepper farming in the larger Chongqing region of China – closed in December 2020, with USD 90 million backing from the Dutch government, Rabobank and the Global Environment Facility.

Quick gains through methane

Methane is a more powerful climate-warming gas than carbon dioxide, yet it stays in the atmosphere for less time. Managed by UNEP and led by the Climate and Clean Air Coalition, the European Commission and the Environmental Defense Fund, the Oil and Gas Methane Partnership includes 62 companies representing 30 per cent of all oil and gas production. The goal is to cut emissions by 45 per cent by 2025 and 60-75 per cent by 2030. In 2020, the partnership released a new [gold standard reporting framework](#) to improve the transparency of the sector's methane emissions.

The members of the [Net-Zero Asset Owner Alliance](#) – one of many robust commitments and engagements with investors and businesses run by the Finance Initiative – have committed to greenhouse gas emissions reductions in the 16 to 29 per cent range by 2025. This is the first milestone toward net-zero emissions portfolios by 2050. Representing USD 5.1 trillion in assets under management, the alliance will have a sizable impact on future global emissions.

Meanwhile, in support of the Secretary General's efforts to scale up financing for the 2030 Agenda, [UN-REDD](#) and partners launched a targeted effort to secure a gigatonne in annual emissions reductions – the equivalent of taking 80 per cent of the cars off American roads – through the [Green Gigaton Challenge](#). The total value of the initiative is USD 10-15 billion per year by 2025.

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Let me salute UNEP's efforts and the specific initiatives around the Principles for Responsible Banking and the Net-Zero Asset Owner Alliance - really translating principles into action.

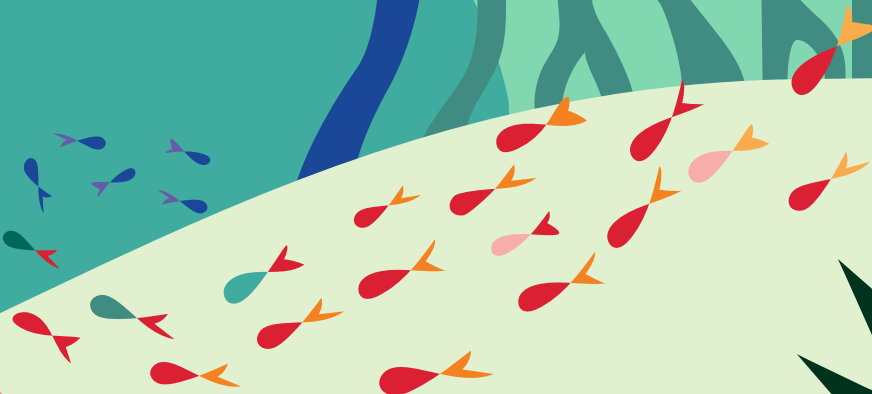
Mark Carney, UN Special Envoy on Climate Change & Finance and the UK's Finance Adviser for COP26, former Governor of the Bank of England

Nature and Biodiversity

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Making peace with nature is the defining task of the 21st century. It must be the top, top priority for everyone, everywhere.

António Guterres
United Nations Secretary-General



■ Putting global biodiversity efforts back on track

2020 was slated to be the super year for nature. Even though COVID-19 delayed significant processes, attention to biodiversity grew significantly. The first-ever **UN Biodiversity Summit** and the **Leader's Pledge for Nature** galvanized global commitments on stopping and reversing biodiversity loss. This is critical because nature is in trouble. The UNEP-administered Secretariat of the **Convention on Biological Diversity** (CBD) in 2020 released the **Global Biodiversity Outlook**, which found that, despite progress, the Aichi Biodiversity Targets have not been met. Through the **UNEP World Conservation Monitoring Centre** (UNEP-WCMC), UNEP played a key role in bringing together the data for these findings, including updating, verifying or adding records for over 200,000 protected areas and other area-based conservation measures in the **Protected Planet databases**.

An important goal in 2021 is for the world to agree on a new biodiversity framework at the 15th meeting of the **Conference of Parties to the CBD** in Kunming, China. Throughout 2020, UNEP advocated for an ambitious and measurable framework that backs more, larger and better-managed conservation areas, biodiversity-positive agriculture and fisheries, an end to harmful subsidies, and a move away from destructive extractive resource mining to patterns of sustainable consumption and production. Despite the pandemic, the CBD Secretariat continued to lay the foundations for this crucial new agreement, bringing together key experts to update the **zero draft of the framework** and, together with UNEP, to facilitate the involvement of other Multilateral Environmental Agreements in the process.

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It brings together the highest quality evidence on the state of nature across the globe and should be commended.

Professor Jane Memmott,
President, British Ecological
Society on the Global
Biodiversity Outlook

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