

# Interview – Jean-Christophe Vié

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## **How is biodiversity linked to human health?**

Biodiversity and wild species in particular, are the basic building blocks for most medicine we know today, and that includes modern western medicine and the pharmaceutical industry. What we also often forget is that hundreds of millions of people in the world make direct use of medicinal plants for healing. This is a perfect example of what nature has done for us by diversifying molecules and forms of life to create something it then generously makes available to all.

## **How serious are the impacts of climate change on biodiversity?**

Climate change will have an impact on all ecosystems. We know that many species have started migrating, toward the poles, for example. A study in 2004 showed that a third of all species will be threatened with extinction by 2050 as a result of climate change. Our role at the IUCN is to look at life, species by species, and figure out how each will respond to climate change. It's not yet the main cause of biodiversity loss, but it could well become so in a few decades.

## **What is the main threat to biodiversity today?**

Habitat destruction is the main cause of biodiversity loss today, there's no doubt about that. After that comes overexploitation of resources, notably in the sea where we're seeing fish stocks disappear one after the other. Then you've got invasive species and disease, which are decimating frogs and, in the case of Ebola, gorillas. Pollution is another big problem and finally there's the emergent threat of climate change.

## **How bad is the problem of habitat destruction today?**

Deforestation is getting worse, notably to make way for palm oil in Asia. We've just published a study showing that over 70 per cent of Asian primates are endangered mostly due to deforestation and to the hunting associated with it. The same goes for freshwater ecosystems: we know there's less and less water in rivers, for example. We've dried out a lot of our wetlands, and this is an ongoing process that hasn't slowed down enough to ensure biodiversity protection. It is unlikely to be by 2010, a target fixed by governments.

## **How aware is the majority of the world's population to the problem of biodiversity loss?**

I'm afraid there's still lots of awareness raising to be done, and not just in developing countries but in rich countries too. It's very hard to explain the consequences of losing species. It's very hard for an urbanite to understand that his actions have an impact on distant apes or corals; and it's very hard to explain why he should be concerned. And yet that's the case. Even if people's behaviour doesn't have a direct impact on, say, monkeys, they may buy tropical wood, biofuels or minerals found in zones where such animals are disappearing. So we have lots of educating to do, and we have to come to terms with all these economic imperatives that fill public discourse, in the media...everywhere, that's all you hear. We don't seem to be able to bring environmental issues to the same level of importance as the economy or social matters. There is more awareness, granted, but I feel that the threats are growing far faster than public awareness. To that you have to add the explosion of the human population. Human beings want more and ever more: more resources, more space, more things to buy...this can only go on so long.