

# FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

June 12, 2001

# 2001 BLUE PLANET PRIZE: ANNOUNCEMENT OF PRIZE WINNERS

# Sir Robert M. May (Australia)

For developing mathematical ecology and the fundamental tools for ecological conservation planning.

# Dr. Norman Myers (United Kingdom)

For being the first to warn of mass species extinction and for continuing to speak out about environmental problems.

The Asahi Glass Foundation (Chairman Hiromichi Seya) has announced the recipients of the 10<sup>th</sup> Blue Planet Prize, an international environmental award. The Blue Planet Prize is awarded annually to two individuals or organizations that have made outstanding scientific contributions to global environmental conservation.

The following individuals were selected as the recipients of the Blue Planet Prize for 2001.

Sir Robert M. May established statistical methods for tracking and estimating species populations based on mathematical models, thereby providing the basic tools for planning ecological preservation efforts ranging in scope from the local to the global. He has not limited his approach to animals. His mathematical models are also widely applied in studies of disease transmission caused by microorganisms, such as bacteria.

Dr. Norman Myers works as an independent scientist. He was the first to alert the world to the mass extinction of species underway, and to spell out action responses to both species loss and the associated problem of tropical deforestation. In addition, he has warned of fundamental challenges such as the intertwined issues of environmental conservation and economic development.

The recipients will be awarded certificates of merit, commemorative trophies and supplementary awards of 50 million yen.

The award ceremony will be held on Thursday November 15, 2001, at the Hotel New Ohtani in Tokyo (Chiyoda-ku,) which will be followed the next day by commemorative lectures delivered by the recipients at the United Nations University in Tokyo (Shibuya-ku)

(For further information about the winners, please see the attachment.)

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# Remarks from the Award Recipients upon Being Notified of Their Selection

# Sir Robert M. May

"I am honoured to receive the 2001 Blue Planet Prize. Also, I am very aware that I receive this Prize as a symbolic representative of the large community of scientists who in recent years have greatly advanced our understanding of the causes and consequences of biological diversity, and of growing threats to it.

Properly to understand how today's rich and varied plant and animal life came to be here, we need to answer underlying ecological questions. How does the structure of the web of interactions among species affect communities' ability to recover from disturbance or to resist invasion? What factors determine the observed variety of patterns of species abundance, of commonness and rarity? More generally, what determines species numbers in different places? Above all, what are the various causes of observed extinctions, and to what extent are extinction rates currently accelerating?

I believe these are matters of concern for all of us. But effective action must be based on good scientific understanding of the underlying causes, and likely consequences, of loss of biological diversity. So I am hugely pleased to accept the 2001 Blue Planet Prize which recognizes the vital importance of this general subject."

# Dr. Norman Myers

"I am deeply grateful to the Asahi Glass Foundation for awarding me this prestigious prize. I am specially gratified because I pursue environmental science in a way different from most of my colleagues around the world. I work on my own. This has many advantages but also its drawbacks. Your generous award will enable me to carry on with my independent career in a much more productive manner than hitherto. I can now concentrate on what I view as the most important environmental questions of our time. I feel you are setting me free to do more in the next decade than in all my professional life to date.

I am also grateful that you have recognized me for work that spans a range of environmental fields. I specialize in being a generalist, which, like my independent status, is far different from what most scientists do and is rarely recognized through a top rank prize. Your award will send a strong message to start-out scientists who will be encouraged to undertake the kinds of interdisciplinary work that are sorely needed if we are to measure up to our environmental challenges. Your Prize will similarly encourage those same young scientists to take their scientific findings and policy recommendations to political leaders and others in the public arenawhere they certainly belong."

# **Profiles of the 2001 Blue Planet Prize Recipients**

# Sir Robert M. May

Sir Robert obtained his doctorate in theoretical physics from the University of Sydney at the age of 23 in 1959, researching that field there for the next 13 years until in due course he switched disciplines to population biology at Princeton University in the United States, where he remained a further 15 years. In 1988, he moved to Oxford University in the United Kingdom and solidified his position as a world leader in mathematical biology. Since 1995, he has been Chief Scientific Adviser to the British Government and Head of the Office of Science and Technology, playing an influential role in national scientific affairs.

Applying the mathematical concepts nurtured in theoretical physics to the field of biology, in 1973 he authored "Stability and Complexity in Model Ecosystems," a book that used mathematical modeling to investigate the stability and complexity of a community of interacting plants and animals following the foodweb as clue. Contrary to the general understanding that species are motivated toward greater stability in complex ecosystems, he showed in population dynamics models that individual species are liable to greater fluctuations in abundance in such ecosystems when the number of species is increased and species interactions are randomly added. Since the publication of this research, Sir Robert has accumulated a solid record of noteworthy accomplishments in the field of mathematical biology.

Sir Robert was also the first to discover that, first-order nonlinear difference equations can exhibit an astonishing array of dynamical behavior, ranging from stable points to apparently random or "chaotic" fluctuations. Although chaos theory itself was discovered independently by several mathematicians at about the same period of time, it was Sir Robert's research, beginning with his article published in "*Nature*" in 1976, that can be credited with creating the new field of "chaotic dynamics" in biology.

One of Sir Robert's major contributions was to be the first to build a model that includes environmental stochasticity and spatial heterogeneity in studies of population dynamics, and thereby contributing to our ability to formulate environmental policies. He also drew attention to these characteristic changes in populations for the purposes of managing ecosystems. For example, in collaboration with others he has explored the ways fish harvesting affects multispecies ecosystems of the fishing grounds. "Exploitation of Marine Communities" reports the results of this work. He has also contributed importantly to understand the cyclic oscillations exhibited in insect parasitoid populations in the wild, demonstrating through mathematical models the relationship between the ecology of predatory parasites, such as parasitic wasps, and population numbers, which matched the actual observations in the wild.

In the last 10 years, Sir Robert, who has continued fundamental research into mathematical biology and sought policies that can be applied to the resolution of environmental problems, has played a leading role in two areas of research in particular. The first combines mathematical and applied techniques to analyze the conditions under which viruses and bacteria affect host populations and their distribution. The results obtained in these studies have been beneficial to a broad spectrum of science in the public health sector, ranging from genetic research into groups of disease carriers to immunology for rubella in the UK and to strategies for dealing with parasites. In addition, he is

investigating the conditions under which AIDS spreads, utilizing a combination of simplified analytical models and computer simulations to provide the data required to predict the spread of this disease.

The second area of concentration is research into the detailed reasons why the biodiversity of tropical regions is so extensive. He is studying the time and geographic factors in changes in biodiversity. The mathematical biology methodology he has developed are being used to measure this diversity, and make it possible to infer changes in that diversity, thereby increasing understanding of the composition and collapsing of biodiversity.

Sir Robert has used his mathematical modeling to explain the current state of biodiversity and warn that the risk of species extinction is currently at an historical high. He continues to strongly advocate the necessity of responding immediately to this crisis. He is presenting proposals and advice to governments and NGOs and making a real contribution toward the formulation of environmental conservation policies. He is also proffering effective proposals for policies to deal with contagious diseases, such as AIDS, based on his mathematical projections of the epidemiology.

His accomplishments have already been widely recognized in the United Kingdom and abroad. In 1995, he was named the Chief Scientific Advisor to the UK Government and was knighted the following year. In 2000, he was appointed President of the Royal Society of London, a position with a rich tradition and one of the most esteemed in the world of science. He is making good use of this elite standing to promote solutions to a wide range of issues, including ecological preservation, other urgent environmental problems such as global warming, and various problems related to medicine and biology.

## **Education and Academic and Professional Activities**

1936	Born on January 8 in Australia
1956	Graduates from Sydney University
1959	Obtains his Doctorate (Theoretical Physics, Sydney University)
1959-1961	Researcher, Harvard University, U.S.A.
1962-1972	Professor, Sydney University (Physics)
1973-1988	Professor, Princeton University (Biology)
1988-1995	Professor, Imperial College and Oxford University, United Kingdom
1995-2000	Chief Scientific Advisor to the Government of the United Kingdom
2000 ~	President, Royal Society of London in December

# **Major Awards Received**

1979	Fellow of The Royal Society of London
1980	Weldon Memorial Prize (Oxford University)
1984	MacArthur Award
1991	The Linnean Society's Linnean Medal
1991	Overseas Member, Australian Academy of Sciences
1992	The Inaugural Christian Marsh Prize
1992	Foreign Member of the US National Academy of Science
1995	Zoological Society Frink Medal
1996	Crafoord Prize in Biosciences (Sweden)
1998	Balzan Prize (awarded by the President of Italy)

# Dr. Norman Myers

After graduating from Oxford University in 1958, Dr. Myers spent 12 years researching wildlife in Africa before earning his doctorate in the United States in 1973. He has taught at a number of renowned universities on both sides of the Atlantic, including Oxford and Harvard. He has served as an adviser to many governments, international agencies and academic bodies. One of the chief characteristics of his research is his penchant for raising new questions as well as supplying new answers to established questions. To date, he has pioneered 15 research issues.

In the early 1970s the rate of species extinction was officially considered to be around one species per year. Dr. Myers calculated that it was likely to be as high as one species per day. If the extinction rate were to continue at that pace alone, it would precipitate the wholesale demise of species. Through more detailed research in the late 1980s and as tropical forests disappeared faster than ever—these forests feature the bulk of all species—he increased his extinction estimate to roughly 50 species per day. He also noted that the "natural" extinction rate before humans arrived was roughly one species every 3-5 years. Although his findings were severely criticized at first, most scientists have eventually come to accept them. In the late 1990s he has demonstrated that the current biotic crisis will not only eliminate large numbers of species, but it will destroy several major "powerhouses" of evolution, notably tropical forests and wetlands, these being the principal sources of new species in the wake of mass extinctions in the prehistoric past. The crisis will also deplete certain other basic processes of evolution. All in all, it will leave an impoverished planet for millions of years into the future—unless we take vigorous action forthwith.

Toward the end of the 1970s, Dr. Myers predicted that the rapidly accelerating decline of tropical forests, at approximately 75,000 square kilometers per year, could well double within another decade. Once again there were many critics of this conclusion, but he was ultimately proven correct through latest satellite imagery. In the early 1980s Myers was the first to warn that deforestation in Central America was mainly due to conversion of forests into cattle pastures to supply cheap beef for North America's fast food industry—a destructive process that he labeled the "hamburger connection", showing the international linkages of environmental decline. In similar style he drew attention to tropical forests' influence on climate both locally and globally.

Also in the early 1980s Dr. Myers documented the economic value of species and their genetic resources as start-point materials for pharmaceuticals including anti-cancer drugs, new foods, natural pesticides, and raw materials for industry ranging from oils and gums to plastics and latexes.

In the late 1980s Dr. Myers concluded that a sound way to conserve threatened species was to concentrate on "biodiversity hotspots", being areas where exceptional concentrations of endemic species are undergoing exceptional loss of habitat. In the late 1990s he and colleagues calculated that at least one third of all species are confined to 25 hotspots comprising just 1.4% of earth's land surface. He proposed that if these hotspots were preserved, the mass extinction ahead could be greatly reduced. His original analysis has been adopted by conservation organizations generating \$550 million to date, the largest sum ever assigned to a single conservation strategy.

Dr. Myers' expertise in both the natural sciences and the social sciences has enabled him to contribute responses to a broad range of environmental issues, including population pressures, developing country poverty, over-consumption, unsustainable agriculture, climate change and environmental security. In a 2001 book, for example, he has presented a superb quantitative analysis of "perverse"

subsidies, being subsidies that damage both our economies and our environments. These subsidies amount to as much as \$2 trillion worldwide each year in sectors such as agriculture, fossil fuels, road transportation, water, forestry, and fisheries. The subsidies are large enough to cause major distortion of our economies and to inflict grandscale injury on our environments. As a response to his policy proposals, several governments are reducing their perverse subsidies.

In addition, Dr. Myers has been a senior advisor to organizations such as the United Nations, the World Bank, the White House, scientific academies in a dozen countries, and numerous Japanese corporations. This testifies to the high regard accorded to his innovative research. He has raised the awareness of influential politicians (including six prime ministers and presidents), leading policy makers, and business chiefs worldwide, notably with respect to the many linkages between environmental conservation and economic development.

Dr. Myers has publicized his work in more than 250 scholarly papers, plus 300 popular articles and 17 books (sales of these books, over one million copies). His efforts to raise an extended series of pioneering questions, together with proposals for integrating environmental imperatives into nation-wide policies, will help us to advance toward a sustainable future for both our earth and our world.

# **Education and Academic and Professional Activities**

1934	Born on August 24 in the United Kingdom.
1958	Graduated with bachelor's degree, Oxford University
1958-1965	District Officer in the Kenya Administration, and High School Teacher in Kenya
1963	Master's Degree, Oxford University
1966-1969	Freelance writer, photographer and lecturer on African wildlife
1970-1972	Attended the University of California, Berkeley
1973	Earned doctorate from the University of California, Berkeley
1972-present	Research projects for the U.S. National Academy of Sciences and its National Research Council,
	the Royal Society in the United Kingdom, the Soviet Academy of Sciences, the U.S. Department
	of State, NASA, the World Bank, United Nations agencies, the OECD, The European Commission,
	the World Wide Fund for Nature, the World Resources Institute, and many other bodies.
	Honorary Visiting Fellow of Green College, Oxford University.

# **Major Awards Received**

1983	Gold Medal, World Wildlife Fund
1986	Gold Medal, New York Zoological Society
1987	Special Achievement Award, the Sierra Club
1987	Distinguished Achievement Award, the Society for Conservation Biology
1989	Fellow, World Academy of Art and Sciences
1992	Volvo Environment Prize
1994	Member, U.S. National Academy of Sciences
1995	Sasakawa Prize, United Nations Environment Programme
1997	Appointed by Queen Elizabeth to The Order of St. Michael and St. George "For Services to The
	Global Environment."
2000	Ambassador for the World Wide Fund for Nature/UK

# Report on the Selection Process (10th Annual Prize, 2001)

A total of 1,100 nominators from Japan and 1,500 nominators from other countries recommended 136 candidates. The fields represented by the candidates, in order of numbers, were atmospheric and earth sciences (40), ecology (27), complex fields (14), and environmental ethics and philosophy, and restoration of environmental destruction (13).

The candidates were drawn from 29 countries, with those from developing countries numbering 23, or 17% of the total.

At a meeting of the Foundation's Board of Directors and Councillors, the Board formally resolved to award the Prize to Sir Robert M. May and Dr. Norman Myers after numerous screenings by the Selection Committee under consultation with the Presentation Committee, a subcommittee of the Board.

The contents of this press release may also be viewed at the Asahi Glass Foundation's Internet web site. Please visit us on-line at:

http://www.af-info.or.jp

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# Message to the Japanese Public

# Sir Robert M. May

The previous century has seen more advance in our understanding of the natural world than has all previous human history. We have applied this scientific understanding to improve lives, in both developed and developing countries. We are, however, now beginning to realise some of the unintended adverse consequences of well-intentioned actions: for example, climate change and diminishing biological diversity. What happens to our world, and to us, in the future depends on the actions we take now. As a new century dawns, our greatest challenge remains to ensure that necessary increases in global productivity are achieved in a sustainable and environmentally friendly way.

# Dr. Norman Myers

We live at an altogether unprecedented time in human history. Entire segments of our planetary ecosystem face terminal threat through mass extinction of species, tropical deforestation, global warming and a host of other environmental problems. These are economic problems as well since our economies are ultimately dependent on the environmental resource base that supports all human activities. By safeguarding our environments we are safeguarding our daily wellbeing too. Are we not a privileged generation to live at a stage in human history when we have opportunity to save both our earth and our world? We shall surely earn the thanks of numerous generations into the future.

# The Winners of the Blue Planet Prize

2001

# 2001

# **Blue Planet Prize**

# Lord (Robert) May of Oxford (Australia)

President of the Royal Society of London

# **Dr. Norman Myers** (U.K.)

Honorary Visiting Fellow, Green College, Oxford University





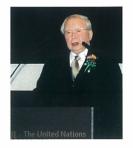




His Imperial Highness Prince Akishino at the ceremony.

His Imperial Highness Prince Akishino congratulates the laureates.

Dr. Jiro Kondo, chairman of the Selection Committee, describes the Blue Planet Prize selection process.



The prizewinners receive their trophies and certificates of merit from Foundation Chairman Hiromichi Seya.



Lord (Robert) May of Oxford



Dr. Norman Myers



The Blue Planet Prize Commemorative Lectures.





John McCarthy, Ambassador of Australia to Japan (left), and Stephen Gomersall, Ambassador of the United Kingdom to Japan (right), congratulate the laureates.

# **Profile**

# Lord (Robert) May of Oxford

President of the Royal Society of London

#### **Education and Academic and Professional Activities**

1936	Born in January in Australia.
1956	B. Sc., University of Sydney.
1959	Ph.D., Theoretical Physics, University of Sydney.
1959-1961	Researcher, Harvard University, U.S.A.
1962-1972	Professor, Physics, University of Sydney.
1973-1988	Professor, Biology, Princeton University.
1979	Fellow, Royal Society of London.
1980	Weldon Memorial Prize, Oxford University.
1984	MacArthur Award.
1988-1995	Professor, Imperial College and Oxford University, United Kingdom.
1991	Linnean Medal, Linnean Society.
1991	Overseas Member, Australian Academy of Sciences.
1992	Inaugural Christian Marsh Prize.
1992	Foreign Member, U.S. National Academy of Science.
1995	Frink Medal, Zoological Society.
1995-2000	Chief Scientific Advisor, Government of the United Kingdom.
1996	Crafoord Prize in Biosciences, Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences.
1998	Balzan Prize awarded by the President of Italy.
2000—	President, Royal Society of London.

After pursuing research in theoretical physics at the University of Sydney, Lord (Robert) May of Oxford shifted his focus to mathematical biology. He achieved a solid record of noteworthy accomplishments at Princeton University in the United States before coming to his present post at Oxford University, where he is active as an influential, world-leading academic.

Applying mathematical concepts to biology, he studied the stability of animal populations in 1973, and discovered for the first time that when you increase the number of species, even in complex animal societies, or add more interactions between species, the probability of the system becoming less stable was greater. Furthermore, he uncovered the fact that unidimensional nonlinear differential equations often exhibit dynamic states similar to those of animal populations, and founded the new field of "chaotic dynamics" in biology.

Lord May drew attention to the fact that if we wish to manage ecosystems—for example, if we wish to estimate the impact of human fishing on fishing grounds—that we must pay attention to the characteristic changes in the populations. He also investigated how AIDS,

which was transmitted to a different species as a result of environmental change, spreads, utilizing a combination of simplified analytical models and computer simulations to provide the data required to formulate preventative strategies.

In 1995, Lord May was appointed Chief Scientific Advisor to the British Government and Head of the Office of Science and Technology, and was honored in 2000 with election as President of the Royal Society of London. From these elite positions, he continues to counsel for ecological preservation and action to curb various urgent environmental problems.

# Biological Diversity in a Crowded World: Past, Present, and Likely Future

# Lord (Robert) May of Oxford

#### February 2002

How much do we know about the diversity of organisms on our planet? First, estimates of the number of distinct species of plants, animals and fungi (eukaryotes) that have been named and recorded—a simple, factual question, like how many books in the library catalogue—range from 1.4 million to 1.8 million. Second, estimates of the total number of species present on Earth today range over more than an order-of-magnitude, from a low of around 3 million, to a high of 30 million or possibly much more. And third, we have even less idea of the rates at which species may currently be going extinct as a result of habitat destruction, introduced aliens, overexploitation and other consequences of human population growth.

# **Numbers of Species Today**

The systematic naming and recording of species began relatively recently with Linneaus' canonical work, which in 1758 recognised some 9,000 species. Today, the total number of living species named and recorded is around 1.7 to 1.8 million. Amazingly, no centralised catalogue exists. Around one million of these are insects, of which an estimated 400,000 are beetles. And of these beetles, an estimated 40% are known from only one collecting site, and sometimes from only one specimen. So it is not surprising that there is a problem with synonymy (the same species unwittingly recorded under different names by different researchers). Known rates of synonymy run, on average, around 20%. Recent mathematical studies, however, suggest that if these rates are the ones we know, the true rates are likely to be higher (Solow *et al*, 1995). My estimate is that we may have named and recorded around 1.5 million species (May, 2000), but this number could be 10% higher or lower. To this total, we are adding around 13,000 new species each year. But at the same time, we are resolving synonymies, so that the net addition is around 10,000 new species each year (Hammond, 1995).

Some groups are much better known than others, reflecting patterns in the taxonomic workforce, which derive from intellectual fashions rather than analytic assessments of priorities. Bird and mammal species are comparatively well documented; even though three to five new bird species and around 10 new mammal species are found each year, such numbers are small fractions of the totals recorded in these classes (approximately 10,000 species of birds and 4,000 of mammals). The roughly 270,000 recorded species of vascular plants probably represent 90% or so of the true total. But comprehensive explorations of invertebrate groups

in previously-unstudied places—tropical canopy insects; deep-sea benthic macrofauna; fungi—typically find 20% to 50%, or even more, of the species are new to science. Taxonomists are distributed roughly evenly between vertebrates, plants and invertebrates. But there are roughly 10 plant species for each vertebrate animal species, and conservative estimates suggest around 100 insect species for each vertebrate one. Thus, current patterns of knowledge reflect the fact that the average vertebrate species receives 10 times more taxonomic effort than the average plant species, and 100 times more than the average invertebrate (Gaston and May, 1992). This is a bad way to run a business.

The true total number of living species is very uncertain. My guesstimate is in the range 5 to 15 million with a favoured figure of perhaps 7 million (May, 2000). Dramatically higher numbers have been proposed: 30-million insects on the basis of studies of beetles in tropical canopies; tens of millions of benthic invertebrates on the basis of a deep-shelf transect off the northeastern U.S.A.; 1.5-million fungi on the basis of scaling up the species ratio of fungi to vascular plants in Britain; and others. I am sceptical of all these estimates, but a true total anywhere in the range 3 to 100 million could turn out to be correct. The fact that reasonable estimates vary so widely says a lot about how little we know.

## **Uuderstanding Diversity**

The lack of systematic compilations of information about recorded species, much less about the true species totals, greatly impedes our understanding of the causes of biological diversity and of the likely consequences of its impending reduction.

Various patterns—some more general than others—have been tentatively documented. None are fully understood (May, 1990, 1999; Wilson, 1992; Lawton, 1995).

- (1) For most groups of organisms, there is a marked "latitudinal species diversity gradient." This is particularly notable for tree species, where the enormous diversity of tropical forests gives way to the almost monospecific conifer forests of northerly latitudes.
- (2) Other things being equal, there is a relation between a region's area and the number of species found in it. A tenfold reduction in area (as when a reserve is established and its surroundings modified) roughly halves the number of species; more generally, S=cA<sup>z</sup>, where the constant c varies from group to group, and the exponent z is usually in the range 0.2 to 0.3.
  - (3) There are broad trends in the relative abundances of species within a community or ecosystem. In old-established communities, these patterns of species relative abundance tend to be more even (often described by a subset of lognormal distributions) than those for early successional or highly disturbed situations. These "canonical" lognormal patterns can be interpreted as arising from the multiplicative interplay of many ecological and evolutionary factors, and the observed species-area relations can be derived from them (under the additional assumption that total numbers of

individuals scale roughly linearly with area).

- (4) The numbers of species in different categories of physical size vary systematically. For terrestrial animals, a decrease by a factor 10 in characteristic linear dimensions (or equivalently, a factor 1,000 in mass) roughly results in 100 times more species. This rough rule holds down to size categories around a few millimetres; species numbers fall away below this. What are the ecological or evolutionary origins of this rough rule, which holds true over four or more orders-of-magnitude in characteristic lengths of animals on land and roughly similarly in the sea (Fenchel, 1993). To what extent—and why—is the breakdown in this rule at small sizes real, and to what extent may it be a consequence of less knowledge about smaller-things?
- (5) Patterns in the relations between the body sizes and the geographical ranges of species are only just beginning to receive systematic attention. It is possible that geographical ranges are typically more extensive for relatively large organisms and for microorganisms (protozoa and below) than for mid-size organisms (insects). If true, such patterns, which are entwined with the species-size effects of (4), are relevant, amongst other things, to possible range modifications associated with climate change.

#### **Extinction Rates**

The history of life on Earth, written in the fossil record over the past 600-million years since the Cambrian explosion in the diversity of multicellular organisms, is one of broadly increasing diversity, albeit with many fluctuations and punctuated by episodes of mass extinction. As reviewed in more detail elsewhere (Sepkoski, 1992; May, 2000), the average lifespan of a species in the fossil record, from origination to extinction, is typically a few million years (that is, of the order  $10^6$  to  $10^7$  years). There is, however, much variation both within and among groups, and some groups have lifespans significantly longer or shorter than this. Comparing this few-million-year average lifespan with the 600-million-year fossil record span, we might estimate that 1% to 2% of all species ever to have lived are with us today. But, allowing for the fluctuating but steady—very roughly linear—average growth in species diversity since the Cambrian, a better estimate might be 2% to 4%. And if we recognise that most of today's species are terrestrial invertebrates (mainly insects), whose patterns of diversification began around 450-million years ago and whose average lifespan may be characteristically longer than 10-million years, it could be that today's species represent more like 5%, or conceivably even 10%, of those ever to have graced our planet.

Over the past century, rigorously documented extinctions in well-studied groups—primarily birds and mammals—have run around one species per year. Because tropical species typically receive less attention, true extinction rates of birds and mammals are undoubtedly higher. But even one per year among the roughly 14,000 species of birds and mammals translates to expected species' lifetimes, based on documented recent extinction rates, of around 10<sup>4</sup> years. Although seemingly long, this is shorter by a factor of order 10<sup>-2</sup> to 10<sup>-3</sup> than the back-

ground average lifespan of  $10^6$  to  $10^7$  years seen in the fossil record. That is, recent extinction rates in well-documented groups have run one-hundred to one-thousand times faster than the average background rates.

Looking toward the immediate future, four different approaches to estimating impending rates of extinction suggest species' life expectancies of around a few hundred to one-thousand years. One of these approaches is based on the above-mentioned species-area relations, coupled with assessments of current rates of tropical deforestation or other habitat loss (if tropical forests are being lost at the rate of 1% to 2% each year, the species-area relation implies this commits 0.25% to 0.5% of their species to extinction, which inverts to a rough estimate of species' lifetimes of roughly 200-400 years). Two other methods are based in different ways on the International Union for the Conservation of Nature's (IUCN) current catalogue of "endangered" or "vulnerable" species. As reviewed elsewhere (May et al, 1995), one of these estimates the average rate at which species in better-studied groups (birds, mammals and palm trees) are climbing the ladder of IUCN categories of endangerment. This suggests expected species' lifetimes in the range 100 to 800 years in these groups. A more precise variant of this approach uses species-by-species assessments of extinction probability distributions as functions of time. Using 10 vertebrate groups (3, 4, 3 orders or families of reptiles, birds and mammals, respectively), Mace (1994) estimates average species' lifetimes in the range 100 to 1,000 years, and mainly in the 300- to 400-year range for mammals and birds. The fourth method uses models for branching processes in phylogenetic trees, along with recent data for bird and mammal orders, to project average times to extinction within bird and mammal orders (McKinney, 1998). Under a range of assumptions about branching processes, these models suggest species' lifetimes again of the order of a few hundred years (characteristically shorter for mammals than birds). Thus, all four of these methods, each of which is unreliable in its own distinctive way, agree in suggesting a further shortening of expected species' lifetimes to around 10<sup>2</sup> to 10<sup>3</sup> years.

Such figures correspond to likely extinction rates of a factor of ten thousand, give or take at most an order of magnitude, above background over the next century or so. This represents a sixth great wave of extinction, fully comparable with the Big Five mass extinctions of the geological past, but different in that it results from the activities of a single other species rather than from external environmental changes.

As we face this future, we must ask: does it matter more if we lose 25% of all mammal species than if we lose 25% of the vastly more numerous insect species? Or does it matter equally? Or less? There is need not only for more taxonomic information, but also for a "calculus of biodiversity" based on this information. Such a calculus should, ideally, quantify the taxonomic uniqueness, or amount of independent evolutionary history, inherent in individual species (Vane-Wright et al, 1991; Nee and May, 1997). I would like to see such quantification, along with more explicit recognition of constraining political, economic and social realities, replace emotion in assigning conservation priorities and places on the Ark (although emotional elements should, certainly, also be part of such a quantification). For further review and remarks on this topic, see May *et al* (1995).

# Why Value Biological Diversity?

One argument for the preservation of biological diversity is narrowly utilitarian. It correctly emphasises the benefits already derived from natural products, such as foods, medicines and so on. Currently, 25% of the drugs on the shelves in the pharmacy derive from a mere 120 species of plants. But, throughout the world, the traditional medicines of native peoples make use of around 25,000 species of plants (about 10% of the total number of plant species). We have much to learn. More generally, as our understanding of the natural world advances, both at the level of new species and at the level of the molecular machinery from which all organisms are self-assembled, the planet's genetic diversity is increasingly the raw stuff from which our future can be constructed. It seems a pity to be burning the books before we can read them, and before we can create wealth from the recipes on their pages.

Another class of arguments is more diffusely utilitarian. The interactions between biological and physical processes created and maintain the earth's biosphere as a place where life can flourish. With impending changes in climate caused by the increasing scale of human activity, we should be worried about reductions in biological diversity, at least until we understand its role in maintaining the planet's life support systems. The first rule of intelligent tinkering is to keep all the pieces.

For me, however, a third class of argument is the most compelling. It is clearly set out by the U.K. Government in *This Common Inheritance* (HMSO, 1990, ch 1.14). It is "the ethical imperative of stewardship ... we have a moral duty to look after our planet and hand it on in good order to future generations." This argument is, however, easier to sustain for those privileged to live in affluent developed countries. Were I struggling to feed my fifth child in abject poverty in some areas of the developing world, I suspect I would find this ethical argument less compelling.

#### Conclusion

The previous century has seen more advances in our understanding of the natural world than has all previous human history. We have applied this scientific understanding to improve lives in both developed and developing countries. We are, however, now beginning to realise some of the unintended adverse consequences of well-intentioned actions. Arguably the most significant is accelerating loss of biological diversity. What happens to our world, and to us and the creatures we share the world with, in the future depends on the actions we take now. As a new century dawns, our greatest challenge remains to ensure that necessary increases in global productivity are achieved in a sustainable and environmentally friendly way.

I believe these are matters of concern for all of us. But effective action must be based on good scientific understanding of the underlying causes, and likely consequences, of loss of biological diversity.

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# Lecture

# Biological Diversity: Causes, Consequences, and Conservation

# Lord (Robert) May of Oxford

#### Introduction

I am honoured to receive the 2001 Blue Planet Prize. Also I am very aware that I receive this prize as a symbolic representative of the large community of scientists, who in recent years have greatly advanced our understanding of the causes and consequences of biological diversity, and of growing threats to it. I especially commend the Asahi Glass Foundation for establishing this Prize in recognition of the importance of environmental and conservation science.

Properly to understand how today's rich and varied plant and animal life came to be here, we need to answer underlying ecological questions. How does the structure of the web of interactions among species affect communities' ability to recover from disturbance or to resist invasion? What factors determine the observed variety of patterns of species abundance, of commonness and rarity? More generally, what determines species numbers in different places? Above all, what are the various causes of observed extinctions, and to what extent are extinction rates currently accelerating? In what follows, I will sketch answers to some of these questions, and also will indicate remaining areas of uncertainty.

# **Structure of Ecosystems**

Earlier Ideas. Around 1970, the conventional wisdom—set out in textbooks, following the work of the pioneering ecologists, Charles Elton and Evelyn Hutchinson—was that "complex" communities (those with more species and/or richer webs of connections among them) were more "stable" (better able to resist or recover from disturbance, human-created or natural). Comparing mathematical models for ecological communities with few species against the corresponding models with many species, I showed there could be no such simple and general rule; all things being equal, complex systems are likely to be more dynamically fragile. This and other related work was drawn together in the monograph *Stability and Complexity in Model Ecosystems* (1973, with a second edition in 1974). In 2001, Princeton University Press reissued this book, with introductory "retrospective thoughts," in its *Landmarks in Biology* series.

Ecosystem Stability and Complexity. I believe this work helped to refocus the agenda for studies of the structure and function of ecosystems. For one thing, we have become more careful about distinguishing the productivity of a community of interacting plants and animals, as a whole, from the productivity and fluctuations in the individual populations that constitute the community. Recent studies by Tilman *et al* (1996, 1998), Naeem and Li (1997) and others

tend to bear out my earlier suggestions that increasing complexity or diversity, in the sense of a larger number of constituent species in the community (larger "species richness"), tends to make for greater stability in total productivity, but that individual species are liable to greater fluctuations in abundance in such communities. For another thing, it has become clear that increasing numbers of interactions among species in a foodweb (increasing "connectance") does not automatically enhance ability to resist disturbance; instead, current efforts seek to understand the special kinds of interconnectedness among subsets of species that reconcile complexity with stability in particular ecosystems (McCann *et al*, 1998).

A Contemporary Synthesis? More broadly, my own view is that, over evolutionary time, ecosystems are in tension between two opposing forces. On the one hand, evolution tends to favour every opportunity, every niche, being exploited, making for increasing diversity over time. On the other hand, more species-rich communities in general are more dynamically fragile, tending to set limits to diversification. In relatively environmentally predictable settings, such as tropical rainforests or some coral reefs, the trade-off between these two countervailing pressures is set at a point corresponding to more species-rich communities. In harsher and less predictable environments, such as boreal forests or estuaries, the trade-off results in relatively simpler communities. In both cases, the set point is determined by the acceptable average degree of fluctuation in individual populations, which is broadly similar—over the long run—in all cases. As noted above, this cuts across the earlier conventional wisdom, but seems increasingly in accord with observations about levels of fluctuation in tropical communities, and in various field experiments.

# Patterns in the Distribution and Abundance of Species

**Species Relative Abundance.** There are broad trends in the relative abundances of species within a community or ecosystem. In old-established communities, these patterns of species relative abundance tend to be more even (often described by a subset of lognormal distributions) than those for early successional or highly disturbed situations. Such "canonical" lognormal patterns can be interpreted as arising from the multiplicative interplay of many ecological and evolutionary factors. These patterns have implications, amongst other things, for understanding the different kinds of "rarity" (Rabinowitz et al, 1986; Gaston, 1994); see Table 1. In particular, they imply that to be rare is by no means necessarily to be in danger of extinction. This latter point appears frequently to be misunderstood: for example, the current IUCN Red List of Threatened Plants (Walter and Gillett, 1997) unaccountably, and unlike the corresponding animal lists, treats all "rare" plants as threatened.

**Table 1.** The distribution of 160 plant species from the *Biological Flora of the British Isles*, classified into eight categories according to geographic distribution (wide or narrow), habitat specificity (broad or restricted), and local abundance (somewhere large or everywhere small). We would recognise the circled category (wide distribution, broad range of habitats, locally abundant somewhere) as "common;" the other seven categories represent "seven kinds of rarity" (after Rabinowitz *et al*, 1986).

	Geographic distribution			
Local population size	Wide habitat specificity		Narrow habitat specificity	
	Broad	Restricted	Broad	Restricted
Somewhere large	(58)	71	6	14
Everywhere small	2	6	. 0	3

**Species-Area Relations.** Other things being equal, there is a relation between a region's area and the number of species found in it. A tenfold reduction in area (as when a reserve is established, and its surroundings modified) roughly halves the number of species. More generally, there is a power law relationship,  $S = cA^z$ ; here S denotes the number of species, A the area, c is a constant which varies from group to group, and the exponent z is usually in the range 0.2-0.3. Figure 1 gives an illustrative example. Interestingly, this relation follows from the "canonical" lognormal distribution of species relative abundance mentioned above, combined with the additional assumption that total numbers of individuals scale roughly linearly with area (for a recent review, see May and Stumpf, 2000). Given the shakiness of these theoretical assumptions, it is perhaps surprising that the species-area relationship is so widely found in nature. It has important implications. In particular, we shall see below how it can be used to make tentative projections about future extinction rates.

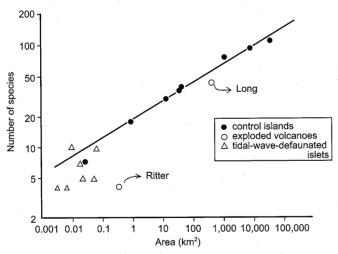
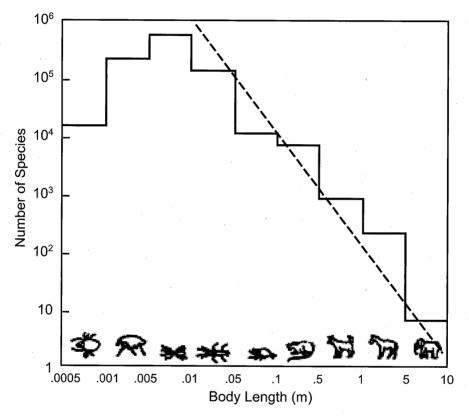


Figure 1. An example of the relation between species number and island area in an archipelago: number of resident, nonmarine, lowland bird species S on islands in the Bismarck Archipelago, plotted as a function of island area on a double logarithmic scale. The solid circles represent relatively undisturbed islands, and the straight line  $S = 18.9 \, A^{0.18}$  was fitted by least-mean-squares through the points for the seven largest islands. The open circles refer to the exploded volcanoes, Long and Ritter, where species number is still below equilibrium, especially on Ritter, because of incomplete regeneration of vegetation. The open triangles refer to coral islets inundated by the Ritter tidal wave in 1888. (From Diamond, 1974).

Numbers of Species in Relation to their Physical Sizes. The numbers of species of animals in different categories of physical size vary systematically. For terrestrial animals, a decrease by a factor 10 in characteristic linear dimensions (or, equivalently, a factor 1,000 in mass) roughly results in 100 times more species (May, 1978); see Figure 2. This rough rule holds down to size categories around a few millimetres; species numbers fall away below this. What are the ecological or evolutionary origins of this rough rule, which holds true over four or more orders-of-magnitude in characteristic lengths of animals on land, and roughly similarly in the sea (Fenchel, 1993)? To what extent—and why—is the breakdown in this rule at small sizes real, and to what extent may it be a consequence of less knowledge about smaller things?



**Figure 2.** A crude estimate of the distribution of all terrestrial animals categorized according to characteristic length L. The dashed line indicates the relation  $S - L^{-2}$ , as in Fig. 3 (S = number of species). (After May, 1978)

Body Sizes and Geographical Ranges. Patterns in the relations between the body sizes and the geographical ranges of species are only just beginning to receive systematic attention. It is possible that geographical ranges are typically more extensive for relatively large organisms and for microorganisms (protozoa and below) than for mid-size organisms (insects). If true, such patterns—which are entwined with the species-size effects mentioned immediately above—are relevant, amongst other things, to possible range modifications associated with climate change.

Patterns in Foodweb Structure. It has been strongly argued that each plant or animal species in a foodweb typically is connected—eating or being eaten—with only 3 to 5 other species. Why so roughly constant a number, and why so small? Also, the lengths of food chains in such webs—the number of links connecting the primary producing plants, through the animals eating them, and those eating them, and so on, to the top predators—typically are only 3 to 4 links long, with surprisingly little variation within and among foodwebs. Again, why so roughly constant a rule, and why are chains so short? Although these important empirical patterns (Pimm et al, 1991) may in part be artifacts of the way humans gather and analyse complicated data, there are important questions here. Various explanations currently contend: efficiency of energy transfer from level to level within a foodchain; relations between the dynamics of the system and its structure; evolutionary instability of excessively complex chains; and others. But every explanation proposed so far has important weaknesses.

Connections Among Seemingly Different Questions. To illustrate how the above questions are intimately entwined with seemingly simpler questions of how many species there are on earth, consider the relation between foodweb patterns and global species numbers. If we really had a fundamental understanding of how foodweb structure was determined by evolutionary and ecological factors in specific environments, we could predict the average ratio between the number of animal species and the number of primary producing plant species that ultimately sustain them, in foodwebs in particular environments, and thence the overall global average such ratio. We can be fairly certain, to within 10% or so, that the global total of plant species is around 300,000. So if we knew the animal/plant species ratio, we could assess the total number of animal species, by this indirect argument based on understanding ecosystem structure. Unfortunately, we have no such understanding. Such rough empirical data as are available suggest that the animal/plant species ratio is around 10 in foodwebs, although with much variation from place to place. This very rough empirical estimate suggests a global total of about 3-million animal species; we shall return to this below.

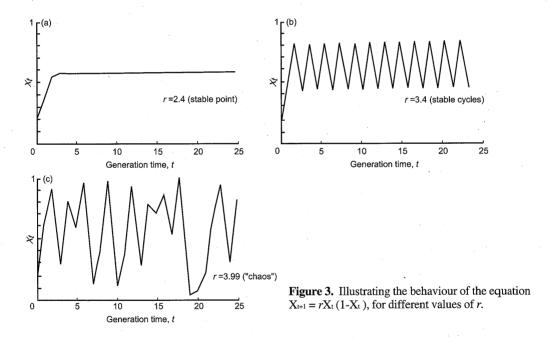
## **Dynamics of Plant and Animal Populations**

Another, very different, strand of my work is ultimately related to biodiversity, because of the surprising light it sheds on how populations can react to disturbance.

The Balance of Nature? Early work on "the balance of nature" implicitly tended to assume that population numbers would be roughly steady, unchanging from year to year, unless affected by environmental fluctuations. But the factors regulating the densities of plant and animal populations—food supplies, predators, infectious diseases, nest sites or other territorial considerations, and many others—tend to operate in a nonlinear way. That is, the strengths of the feedbacks that govern the possible steady or "equilibrium" population size themselves depend on population size, so that if the population doubles, it does not simply mean that per capita birth rates and death rates double; birth rates may fall, and death rates rise, more than proportionately or "linearly." This is what "nonlinear" means. In effect, two plus two does not necessarily add up to four when the governing mechanisms are nonlinear.

Chaos and Other Surprises. The simplest nonlinear equations representing how biological populations may be regulated by feedback mechanisms can exhibit a bewildering,

almost magical, array of behaviour. The simplest such equations, of the kind suggested by various people working on insect and on fish populations as descriptions of their systems, can—although purely deterministic, with no statistical elements—give rise not only to the expected constant "equilibrium" solutions, but alternatively to stable and self-generated cycles of boom and bust, or even more surprisingly, to apparently random fluctuations. For a population, such as many temperate insects, with discrete non-overlapping generations (adults appearing each year, laying eggs to develop into next year's adults, then dying), a simple metaphor is  $X_{t+1} = rX_t$  (1 -  $X_t$ ). Here  $X_t$  is the population in year t, scaled so that if X ever gets as large as 1, it extinguishes itself, and r is its intrinsic growth rate at low density (when X is close to 0). As can be verified by iterating this simple equation on a hand-held calculator, if r is between 1 and 3, this equation describes a population that settles to a constant equilibrium value, as earlier ecological intuition required. If r is above 3 but below about 3.57, we see self-sustained cycles. For r bigger than 3.57, but below 4, there is "chaos," apparently random fluctuations, generated by this trivially simple deterministic equation. This behaviour is illustrated in Figure 3.



General Implications of Chaos. This observation, motivated by purely ecological questions, was one of the strands that brought chaos centre stage across the sciences (May, 1974, 1976; the other strand was Lorenz's (1963) meteorological metaphor, based on a more complicated set of three differential equations). The recognition that simple and fully deterministic rules or equations can generate dynamical patterns that are effectively indistinguishable from random noise has very deep implications for science. It effectively marks the end of

the Newtonian dream that knowing the rules will enable prediction; predicting local weather beyond about 10–15 days is not just a problem of computational power, but of the inherent unpredictability of chaotic dynamical systems.

**Ecological Implications of Chaos.** The implications of cyclic and, even more, of chaotic, dynamics for ecology are widespread. Often the "balance of nature" is disturbed by environmental fluctuations; this has long been recognised. But often the "balance of nature" is inherently cyclic or irregularly fluctuating, driven by the nonlinear dynamics of its own regulatory mechanisms. We have yet fully to realise the implications of this work for understanding the causes and consequences of biological diversity (May, 1985).

## **Biodiversity**

What is the State of our Knowledge? Against the background of ecological questions sketched above, how well do we know the world of plants, animals and microorganismns with which we share this planet? The answer, by any one of a variety of objective measures, must be: not very well. First, estimates of the number of species that have been named and recorded (a simple factual question, like how many books in the library catalogue) range from 1.4 million to 1.8 million. Second, estimates of the total number of species present on Earth today range over more than an order-of-magnitude, from a low of around 3 million to a high of 30 million or possibly much more. And third, we have even less idea of the rates at which species may currently be going extinct, as result of habitat destruction and other consequences of human population growth.

**Some Personal Estimates.** In this brief overview, I outline my own best guess of the answers to these three questions. For the number of distinct species named and recorded, I emphasise the uncertainties caused by unresolved synonymies. For the likely total number of living species, I set out my reasons for leaning to the lower end of the range of published estimates. And for present and likely future extinctions, I sketch a relatively precise approach, based on comparative rates of extinction, which avoids some of the imprecisions inherent in dealing with total number of species.

Numbers of Named Species: Background. The systematic naming and recording of species began relatively recently, with Linneaus' standard work, which in 1758 recognised some 9,000 species. Today the total number of living species named and recorded has been estimated at around 1.7 to 1.8 million. Amazingly, no centralised catalogue exists. There are synoptic and computerised catalogues for some better-known groups, most notably birds and mammals. But more than half (roughly 56%) of all named species are insects, and the majority of these are still on card catalogues in individual museums and other collections. By one estimate, around 40% of all named beetle species are known from only one site, and many from only one specimen. In short, the amount of taxonomic effort varies very widely from group to group, with roughly one-third of all taxonomists working on vertebrates, another third working on the 10-times more numerous plant species, and the remaining third working on invertebrate animals, which outnumber vertebrate species by at least a factor of 100 (see Table 2).

**Table 2.** The taxonomy of taxonomists: a rough estimate of the distribution of the taxonomic workforce among broad taxonomic groups, in Australia, U.S.A. and U.K. (after Gaston and May 1992).

	Animals				
	Plants	Vertebrates	Invertebrates	Microorganisms	Fossils
Approximate division of workforce (%)	30	25	35	2-3	5
Estimated total number of living species (Thousands)	300	45	3,000 +	?	-

Numbers of Named Species: Problems. Hammond's (1995) assessment for the IUCN of the total number of distinct species that have been named and recorded emphasises the uncertainties caused by synonyms. His survey estimates that around 13,000 new species are currently named each year, but current rates of resolving synonymies—the same species inadvertently given different names by different people in different collections—reduce this number to around 10,000 distinct new species added yearly to the known total. In effect, this corresponds to a synonymy rate of around 20% in named species, a figure elsewhere cited as representative on more direct grounds (Solow et al, 1995). Of course, any such assessment of known synonymy rates must be a lower limit, with other synonyms yet to be uncovered or accumulating in new work. Solow et al (1995) have made a start on this important problem, suggesting the true synonymy rate may be more like 40%.

Numbers of Named Species: A Current Estimate. Allowing for all this, my recent assessment (May, 1999) is that the current global total of distinct eukaryotic species (broadly, plants, animals and fungi) that have been named and recorded is around 1.5 million. This is lower than Hammond's (1995) 1.74 million, but is consistent with Wilson's (1988) estimate of 1.4 million ten years ago (augmented by 0.01 million each year for 10 years). See Table 3.

Table 3. Number of named, distinct species of eukaryotes (in thousands)

Group	Hammond (1995)	May (1999)
Protozoa	40	40
Algae	40	40
Plants	270	270
Fungi	70	70
Animals	<u>1,320</u>	<u>1,080</u>
Vertebrates	45	45
Nematodes	25	15
Molluscs	70	70
Arthropods	1,085	855
(crustaceans)	(40)	(40)
(arachnids)	(75)	(75)
(insects)	(950)	(720)
(other)	(20)	(20)
others	95	95
Total	1,740	1,500

**Total Number of Species Living Today.** The true total of extant species, as distinct from those we have named and recorded, is hugely uncertain. My recent assessment of the evidence and uncertainties led to a guess of around 7 million in total, with a plausible range of 5 to 15 million (May, 1999). This is lower than Hammond's (1995) guess of 12-million eukaryotic species, but higher than other estimates which are as low as 3 million or so species in total. Estimates as low as 3 million, or as high as 100 million or more, can be defended. See Table 4.

**Table 4.** Estimated total numbers of living species (in thousands)

	Hammond (1995)		
Group	High – low	Working	May (1999)
		Figure	
Protozoa	200 – 60	200	100
Algae	1,000 – 150	400	300
Plants	500 - 300	320	320
Fungi	2,700 – 200	1,500	500
Animals	100,000 - 3,000	9,800	5,570
Verts	55 - 50	50	50
Nematodes	1,000 - 100	400	500
Molluscs	200 – 100	200	120
Arthropods	100,000 - 2,400	8,900	4,650
(crust)	(200 – 75)	(150)	(150)
(arachnids)	(1,000 – 300)	(750)	(500)
(insects)	(100,000 – 2,000)	(8,000)	(4,000)
others	800 – 200	250	250
Total	100,000 - 3,500	12,200	6,800
Range	: 100 -	3 million	

Range : 100 - 3 million
Plausible range : 15 - 5 million
Best guess : 7 million

**Total Number of Species: Further Comments.** All such estimates are dominated by insect totals. I favour an estimate of around 4-million insect species in total, partly based on the methods developed by Gaston and Hudson (1994). This is lower than Hammond's 8-million insects species, but higher than other estimates of around 2 million, either of which could be correct. My total also reflects a distrust of the dramatic upward revision of fungal species numbers by Hawksworth (1991) and of marine macrofaunal species by Grassle and Maciolek (1992), amongst other things. For more detailed reviews of these hugely important issues, see May (1990, 1994, 1999).

#### **EXTINCTION RATES**

**The Past.** The history of life on Earth, written in the fossil record over the past 600-million years since the Cambrian explosion in the diversity of multicellular organisms, is one of broadly increasing diversity, albeit with many fluctuations and punctuated by episodes of mass

extinction; see Figure 4. As reviewed in more detail elsewhere (Sepkoski, 1992; May, 1999), the average lifespan of a species in the fossil record, from origination to extinction, is typically a few million years (that is, of the order  $10^6$  to  $10^7$  years); there is, however, much variation both within and among groups, and some groups have lifespans significantly longer or shorter than this; see Table 5. Comparing this few-million-year average lifespan with the 600-million-year fossil record span, we might estimate that 1%-2% of all species ever to have lived are with us today. But, allowing for the fluctuating but steady—very roughly linear—average growth in species diversity since the Cambrian, a better estimate might be 2%-4%. And if we recognise that most of today's species are terrestrial invertebrates (mainly insects), whose patterns of diversification began around 450-million-year ago and whose average lifespan may be characteristically longer than 10-million-year, it could be that today's species represent more like 5%, or conceivably even 10%, of those ever to have graced our planet.

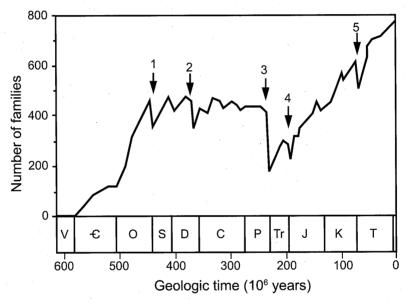


Figure 4. The history of the diversity of marine animal families, as shown by the fossil record over time. The curve connects 77 discrete data points, each giving the total number of well-skeletonized families from a particular stratigraphic stage. The arrows indicate the Big Five episodes of mass extinction. The length of the various geological epochs are indicated on the time axis (V, Vendian;  $\leftarrow$ , Cambrian; O, Ordovician; S, Silurian; D, Devonian; C, Carboniferous; P, Permian; Tr, Triassic; J, Jurassic; K, Cretaceous; T, Tertiary).

**Table 5.** Estimated lifespans, from origination to extinction, of various taxa in the fossil record (measured in millions of years). The first part of the Table is after May *et al* (1995), whereas the second part is a new compilation by Robin Cocks (Natural History Museum, London).

TAXON	Date of estimate	Average lifespan (million years)
Part I : References in May et a	al (1995)	
All invertebrates Marine invertebrates	Raup (1978) Valentine (1970)	11* 5 – 10
Marine animals	Raup (1991)	4
Marine animals All fossil groups Mammals	Sepkoski (1992) Simpson (1952) Martin (1993)	5* 0.5 – 5
Cenzoic mammals Diatoms	Raup and Stanley (1978) Van Valen (1973)	1 – 2
Dinoflagellates Planktinic foraminifers	Van Valen (1973) Van Valen (1973)	13 7
Cenozoic bivalves Echinoderms	Raup and Stanley (1978) Durham (1970)	10 6
Silurian graptolites	Rickards (1977)	6-7
Part II : Information compiled I	by R. Cocks	
Silurian graptolites	Koren and Rickards (1996)	0.2
Cambrian trilobites	Davidek et al, in press	0.4
Brachiopods Rodents	R. Cocks, pers. comm. R. Cocks, pers. comm.	0.5 0.3 – 1.0
Perrissodactyls	R. Cocks, pers. comm.	0.5 = 1.0
Insectivores	J.J. Hooker, pers. comm.	3
Corals (tertiary-recent)	Budd et al, (1996)	0.2 – 7 (average 4)
Forams	Buzas and Culver (1984)	14 – 16
Coccoliths	J.R. Young, pers. comm.	c. 10

**Recent Extinctions.** Over the past century, rigorously documented extinctions in well-studied groups—primarily birds and mammals—have run around one species per year. Because tropical species typically receive less attention, true extinction rates of birds and mammals are undoubtedly higher. But even one per year among the roughly 13,000 species of birds and mammals translates to expected species' lifetimes, based on documented recent extinction rates, of around  $10^4$  years. Although seemingly long, this is shorter by a factor of order  $10^{-2}$  to  $10^{-3}$  than the background average lifespan of  $10^6$  to  $10^7$  years seen in the fossil record. That is, recent extinction rates in well-documented groups have run one-hundred to one-thousand times faster than the average background rates.

Guesses About Tomorrow. Looking toward the immediate future, four different approaches to estimating impending rates of extinction suggests species' life expectancies of around a few hundred to one-thousand years. One of these approaches is based on the abovementioned species-area relations, coupled with assessments of current rates of tropical deforestation or other habitat loss (if tropical forests are being lost at the rate of 1%-2% each year, the species-area relation implies this commits 0.25%-0.5% of their species to extinction, which inverts to a rough estimate of species' lifetimes of roughly 200-400 years). Two other methods are based in different ways on the International Union for the Conservation of Nature's (IUCN's) current catalogue of "endangered" or "vulnerable" species. As reviewed elsewhere (May et al, 1995), one of these estimates the average rate at which species in better-studied groups (birds, mammals, palm trees) are climbing the ladder of IUCN categories of endangerment; this suggests expected species' lifetimes in the range 100 to 800 years in these groups. A more precise variant of this approach uses species-by-species assessments of extinction probability distributions as functions of time. Using 10 vertebrate groups (3, 4, 3 orders or families of reptiles, birds and mammals, respectively), Mace (1994) estimates average species' lifetimes in the range 100 to 1,000 years, and mainly in the 300- to 400- year range for mammals and birds. The fourth method uses models for branching processes in phylogenetic trees, along with recent data for bird and mammal orders, to project average times to extinction within bird and mammal orders (McKinney, 1998); under a range of assumptions about branching processes, these models suggest species' lifetimes again of the order of a few-hundred years (characteristically shorter for mammals than birds). Thus, all four of these methods, each of which is unreliable in its own distinctive way, agree in suggesting a further shortening of expected species' lifetimes, to around 10<sup>2</sup> to 10<sup>3</sup> years.

The Sixth Wave of Extinction. Such figures correspond to likely extinction rates of a factor of ten thousand, give or take at most an order of magnitude, above background, over the next century or so. This represents a sixth great wave of extinction, fully comparable with the Big Five mass extinctions of the geological past, but different in that it results from the activities of a single other species rather than from external environmental changes.

A Calculus of Biodiversity? As we face this future, we must ask: does it matter more if we lose 25% of all mammal species than if we lose 25% of the vastly more numerous insect species? Or does it matter equally? Or less? There is need not only for more taxonomic information, but also for a "calculus of biodiversity" based on this information. Such a calculus should, ideally, quantify the taxonomic uniqueness, or amount of independent evolutionary history, inherent in individual species (Vane-Wright et al, 1991; Nee and May, 1997). I would like to see such quantification, along with more explicit recognition of constraining political, economic and social realities, replace emotion in assigning conservation priorities and places on the Ark (although emotional elements should, certainly, also be part of such a quantification). For further review and remarks on this topic, see May *et al* (1995).

# Why Value Biological Diversity?

A Narrowly Utilitarian Argument. One argument for the preservation of biological diversity is narrowly utilitarian. It correctly emphasises the benefits already derived from nat-

ural products, as foods, medicines and so on. Currently, 25% of the drugs on the shelves in the pharmacy derive from a mere 120 species of plants. But, throughout the world, the traditional medicines of native peoples make use of around 25,000 species of plants (about 10% of the total number of plant species); we have much to learn. More generally, as our understanding of the natural world advances, both at the level of new species and at the level of the molecular machinery from which all organisms are self-assembled, the planet's genetic diversity is increasingly the raw stuff from which our future can be constructed. It seems a pity to be burning the books before we can read them, and before we can create wealth from the recipes on their pages.

A Broadly Utilitarian Argument. Another class of arguments is more diffusely utilitarian. The interactions between biological and physical processes created and maintain the earth's biosphere as a place where life can flourish. With impending changes in climate caused by the increasing scale of human activity, we should be worried about reductions in biological diversity, at least until we understand its role in maintaining the planet's life support systems. The first rule of intelligent tinkering is to keep all the pieces.

An Ethical Argument. For me, however, a third class of argument is the most compelling. It is clearly set out by the U.K. Government in *This Common Inheritance* (HMSO, 1990, ch 1.14): it is "the ethical imperative of stewardship ... we have a moral duty to look after our planet and hand it on in good order to future generations."

#### Conclusion

The previous century has seen more advances in our understanding of the natural world than has all previous human history. We have applied this scientific understanding to improve lives in both developed and developing countries. We are, however, now beginning to realise some of the unintended adverse consequences of well-intentioned actions: arguably the most significant is the accelerating loss of biological diversity. What happens to our world, and to us and the creatures we share the world with, in the future depends on the actions we take now. As a new century dawns, our greatest challenge remains to ensure that necessary increases in global productivity are achieved in a sustainable and environmentally friendly way.

I believe these are matters of concern for all of us. But effective action must be based on good scientific understanding of the underlying causes, and likely consequences, of loss of biological diversity.

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