

Covering Collapse: Top U.S. Newspapers Offer Uneven Reporting on United Nations Extinction Warning



Acknowledgments

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Introduction

“Nature is declining globally at rates unprecedented in human history—and the rate of species extinctions is accelerating, with grave impacts on people around the world now likely.”

This sentence begins the recent summary report from the United Nations Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES). It is jarring. Released on May 6, a product of 145 experts from 50 countries, the report warns that **one million plant and animal species are at risk of extinction** due to human activity.

A review of the first week of newspaper coverage of this warning reveals that 31 of the top 50 U.S. newspapers did not report, editorialize about, or otherwise mention the U.N.’s staggering finding in their print editions.

Some papers covered the report well, however, and their work provides models for how to deliver this story to readers.

The full report from the IPBES will be released later this year, giving papers another chance to inform their readers about the devastation we are doing to the natural world and ultimately, ourselves. This review provides suggestions on how to cover the full report based on a qualitative analysis of coverage.

Methodology

For this analysis, we searched Nexis for the word “extinction” in print articles from the top 50 U.S. newspapers by circulation. We used Nexis’s “Group Duplicates” feature, set on “High Similarity.” We reviewed the first week of coverage of U.N. report, which was released on May 6, 2019.

The list of the top 50 U.S. papers by circulation was compiled using data from Cision in May 2018 and is limited to English-language, subscription newspapers. Many significant local dailies are not included, such as *The Palm Beach Post* and *The Charlotte Observer*. The same is true of papers that cover Capitol Hill, like *The Hill*, *Politico*, and *Roll Call*.

Key Findings

- Thirty-one of the top 50 papers did not cover the U.N. report in their print editions.
- The remaining 19 papers produced 48 total pieces that at least referenced the U.N. report.
- Among pieces that covered the report, 67 percent connected the possible extinction of one million species to the climate crisis.

- *The Washington Post* produced the most coverage with nine pieces, including three columns and an editorial.
- Twenty-nine percent or 14 of the articles were reprints from other publications or wire services. Eight of these 14 reprinted an *Associated Press* article by Seth Borenstein.
- Eight papers editorialized on the report: the *Houston Chronicle*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Miami Herald*, *The New York Times*, *Newsday*, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, *The Virginian-Pilot*, and *The Washington Post*.
- Forty percent of pieces on the U.N. report discussed how we can prevent such a massive loss of biodiversity, including by mitigating climate change.
- Twenty percent of pieces discussed barriers to saving threatened species, such as efforts by the Trump Administration to weaken the Endangered Species Act.
- Just one mention of the report, in the “Fast Take” section of the *New York Post*, was dismissive of the findings.
- A total of 30 letters to the editor referencing the report were published among 13 of the top 50 papers.

Far Too Few Papers Covered the Summary U.N. Report

Nineteen papers published a total of 48 pieces on the U.N. report, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Number of print pieces on the U.N. report from May 6, 2019 to May 13, 2019, by newspaper

Newspaper	Pieces
The Boston Globe	5
Chicago Tribune	4
The East Bay Times (California)	1
The Houston Chronicle	3
Los Angeles Times	3
The Mercury News (California)	2
The Miami Herald	1
The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel	1
The New York Post	1
The New York Times	3
Newsday (New York)	2
Orlando Sentinel (Florida)	1
The San Diego Union Tribune	3
St. Louis Post-Dispatch (Missouri)	2
Star Tribune (Minneapolis MN)	1
Sun-Sentinel (Fort Lauderdale)	3
Tampa Bay Times	1
The Virginian-Pilot (Norfolk, VA.)	2
The Washington Post	9

Thirty-one papers—far too many—did not print any story, opinion column, or editorial on the report from May 6, 2019 to May 13, 2019:

- The Arizona Republic
- Arkansas Democrat-Gazette
- The Atlanta Journal-Constitution
- The Baltimore Sun
- The Buffalo News
- Chicago Sun-Times
- The Cincinnati Enquirer
- The Columbus Dispatch
- Daily News (New York)
- The Daily Oklahoman
- The Dallas Morning News
- The Denver Post
- Detroit Free Press

- Honolulu Star-Advertiser
- The Indianapolis Star
- The Kansas City Star
- Las Vegas Review Journal
- Omaha World-Herald
- Orange County Register (California)
- The Oregonian
- The Philadelphia Inquirer
- Pittsburgh Post-Gazette
- The Plain Dealer
- Sacramento Bee
- The San Francisco Chronicle
- The Seattle Times
- St. Paul Pioneer Press (Minnesota)
- The Star-Ledger (Newark, New Jersey)
- Times - Picayune (New Orleans)
- USA Today
- The Wall Street Journal

It is important to note that this analysis covers only print, and these papers may have provided coverage on their websites. As one example, we used Media Cloud's database of "top" digital U.S. news to spot-check *USA Today*. We found six pieces there, despite none appearing in Nexis's database of print articles.

How to Cover the United Nations Report on the Impending Loss of One Million Species

Although many papers neglected to print anything on the summary report, those that covered it offered good models for how to do so effectively. And everyone else will have another chance when the full report is published later this year.

Use Multiple Voices and Reporting Styles

Over the course of a week, *The Washington Post* reported, opined, editorialized, and published readers' letters to the editor on the report. Columnists can synthesize information and explain the implications of events in ways that straight reporting doesn't allow. *Post* columnist and associate editor Eugene Robinson summarized the findings of the report this way:

It sounds melodramatic to say that we're killing the planet, but that's what the scientific evidence tells us. And ignorant, shortsighted leadership makes optimistic scenarios elusive.

When a paper publishes multiple reported articles and opinion pieces on a topic, it also signals to readers that it views the story as important, both on its own facts and as a matter for public discussion.

Editorialize

Editorials allow papers to take positions on issues. They are intended to generate discussion and, in some cases, to persuade readers to act. And again, they signal to readers what is important.

Eight of the top 50 newspapers editorialized on the report during the time covered by this review: the *Houston Chronicle*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Miami Herald*, *The New York Times*, *Newsday*, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, *The Virginian-Pilot*, and *The Washington Post*.

Here is what they told their readers:

- Wake up, Houstonians. Wake up, Texans. Wake up, Earthlings. The alarm bells will warn for only so long. Our chance to act is now. (*Houston Chronicle*)
- This report warns in no uncertain terms that we face an existential threat of our own making. It's humankind's to fix, and the urgency of doing so can't be overstated. (*Los Angeles Times*)
- As Pogo famously said a generation ago, "We have met the enemy, and he is us." (*Miami Herald*)
- Few of the Democratic presidential hopefuls who have spoken about climate change and jumped with varying degrees of enthusiasm on the Green New Deal bandwagon have commented on the biodiversity report, despite biodiversity's obvious connections to climate. They should read it, and make it part of their post-2020 agenda. (*The New York Times*)
- Make no mistake, our fate is tied to theirs. We have to get this right, because our future is also on the line. (*Newsday*)
- Americans, like humans everywhere else, must start viewing the other living things on our planet not as mere scenery, products or impediments - but as partners that we literally cannot live without. (*St. Louis Post-Dispatch*)
- But how much evidence is needed for society to open its eyes, confront reality and begin to make sweeping changes to our habits in order to protect our habitat? (*The Virginian-Pilot*)
- Business as usual is not acceptable. (*The Washington Post*)

Use Humor

Humor can be useful in communicating difficult information in ways that audiences won't find threatening. It also can help audiences grapple with hypocrisy and other barriers to change.

And carefully disguised as fun, humor can smuggle new ideas into people's heads.

Two columnists, Alexandra Petri of *The Washington Post* and Rex Huppke of the *Chicago Tribune* tackled the U.N. report with humor:

- To save the rich and glorious tapestry of species that makes life possible on Earth, there is nothing you would not do, except alter the way you live in even the slightest bit or be mildly inconvenienced for a very brief time. –Alexandra Petri
- “It’s not like we rely on plants and critters for food or oxygen or to sustain delicate balance of life on Earth. Nah, the fewer of them around the more room there will be for us! #GoTeamHumans, am I right? –Rex Huppke

Connect It to the Climate Crisis

The overheating of the planet is not the main culprit threatening our biodiversity. But it is among the three largest threats, along with land use and the impacts of pollution and overfishing on the oceans. And the report's authors call on governments to slow warming.

Sixty-eight percent of pieces covering the report cited the role of the climate crisis in the possible extinction of one million species.

It is becoming increasingly evident that climate change plays a role in many of the crises we now face globally, from the loss of biodiversity to forced migration and the spread of disease. The media must report on these topics accurately, connecting them to climate. If they fail to do so, it is much less likely that the U.S. public will be well-informed about the greatest challenge of our time—or that Americans will demand that the U.S. government respond at a scale commensurate with the crisis.

Make It Resonate

Some reporters have said that they struggle to make the enormity and complexity of the climate crisis resonate with their audiences.

A report that one million unnamed plant and animal species might soon disappear bears some reporting challenges common to climate coverage: The problem can sound abstract. The causes are complex. The solutions require large-scale global action. And the failure to respond adequately would invite grave and disastrous consequences for everyone.

Much of the coverage reviewed for this analysis consisted of straight-forward reporting—pieces relating the report's findings, detailing the process that produced it, and quoting the report's authors. Reporters then used a few different approaches to go beyond those basics.

Several discussed threats to local and regional biodiversity:

Lee Bergquist of the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* detailed the threat of species and biodiversity loss to the Badger State: “The list of plants, animals and fish that are considered endangered or threatened total more than 150 species, according to the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources.”

Anna Phillips of the *Los Angeles Times* notes that South America, Africa, and parts of Asia are “in particular danger,” but there are “signs of struggle everywhere, notably in California.” She then discusses “more than 300” endangered species in the state.

Michael Dobie from *Newsday* put the report into context for his readers by discussing the impact of biodiversity loss on modern medicine:

But many among us find it hard to muster outrage about the continued existence of plants and lesser-known animals, especially from remote places, that don’t seem to have any impact on our lives. But they do, as countless patients who have benefited from chemotherapy could confirm. That’s the lens through which we should see the U.N.’s report.

A handful of reporters worked the report into other stories to illustrate the relationship between biodiversity loss and other issues.

Juliet Eilperin of *The Washington Post* referenced the report in a story about the Trump administration weakening wildlife protections to reopen a coal mine in West Virginia:

A United Nations panel warned in a report Monday that human activities have pushed one-eighth of the world’s species to the brink of extinction and urged governments to protect them. Meanwhile, the emails show that the Trump administration has moved in the opposite direction: Federal, state and industry officials bypassed the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to win approval for operations near sensitive habitat.

It is worth noting that report’s authors were mindful of the challenges in getting coverage—and in getting the public to heed their warnings. As Brad Plumer noted in *The New York Times*, the writers “spent a lot of effort trying to frame biodiversity loss as an urgent issue for human well-being.” Their point? “When we destroy nature, they concluded, we undermine our own quality of life.”

Report on Solutions

In his May 6 *Washington Post* column, Eugene Robinson noted that the report’s “findings will be widely noted and lamented; its recommendations, I fear, widely ignored.” Maybe. But failing to discuss solutions alongside the problem certainly makes them easier to disregard.

We don’t mean to pick on Robinson. He’s written many great pieces on the climate crisis, including ones that support ambitious solutions like the Green New Deal. But overall, only 40 percent of pieces on the U.N. report discussed how we can prevent such a massive loss of biodiversity, including by

mitigating climate change. Further, when solutions are included, the discussion often consists only of a few sentences toward the end of a piece. On existential threats like the climate crisis and mass extinctions, solutions are a critical part of the story—and they should be reported that way. Strong reporting on solutions can reduce the dread and anxiety that devastating environmental news can provoke, and it informs people who are concerned about a problem what they can demand from policymakers.

The U.N. report recommends a wide range of actions, including less intrusive and lower-impact land-use policies, greater conservation of ecological diversity, localization of agricultural food chains, stronger marine protections and, in urban areas, a commitment to more sustainable development.

Give the Political Context

The *Houston Chronicle* suggested the report summary “should land like a bucket of ice water on anyone napping in the face of disaster.” It should. But a handful of reporters pointed out existing policies and ideologies that serve as barriers to the action needed to preserve our natural world—specifically, policies and actions by the Trump Administration.

In its May 7 editorial, the *Los Angeles Times* aptly summarized what we are up against:

In the U.S., we’re saddled with an administration that seeks to increase the production and use of fossil fuels rather than reduce them, and to roll back environmental regulations. Republicans also have targeted the Endangered Species Act, apparently believing that the need to protect threatened species is less important than economic development and giving industries free rein to exploit natural resources.

Twenty percent of pieces on the report discussed barriers to saving threatened species.

Implementing solutions requires political will. Giving readers a political context in which change must occur provides a more complete understanding of the issue and helps inform readers’ political choices.

The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* drives the point home:

The election choices Americans make will have a direct influence on the next steps taken to ensure humanity’s survival. Dismissive leaders who regard a golf course stroll as “getting back to nature” are neither intellectually equipped nor politically motivated to lead the nation through the coming challenges.

Reprint Good Coverage

News outlets that want to inform their audience about critical issues but lack the resources to do them justice can level the playing field by reprinting or repackaging content from the news wires or other outlets.

Twenty-nine percent or 14 of the articles covering the U.N. report were reprints from other publications or wire services. The majority, or 8 of the 14 reprints, were of an [Associated Press article by Seth Borenstein](#). Three newspapers reprinted coverage from *The Washington Post*. Two reprinted pieces from *The New York Times*. And one carried a syndicated column called Diary of a Planet that discussed the release of the U.N. report.

Listen to Readers

The “Letter to the Editor” section is one of the most widely read parts of a newspaper. Letters from readers give insight into public views of an issue, as well as the paper’s coverage of it. They also can give voice perspectives that otherwise might go missing.

Thirty letters to the editor referencing the U.N. report were published by 13 papers, which suggests that hundreds may have been submitted. On Saturday, May 11, the *Los Angeles Times* shared a breakdown of [the mail it received that week](#):

With 35 letters, the U.N. report on mass extinction was the second most-discussed topic of the week, just behind congressional subpoenas and Trump.

One theme that emerged among all the letters published about the report is that citizens understand the relationship between this global crisis and their local community, as these excerpts illustrate:

As a New York commercial beekeeper for over 50 years, I’ve witnessed the decline of bees and other pollinators, which contribute over \$1.2 billion to the agricultural economy in our state.

–James Doan, Hamlin (*New York Post*, May 12).

With this report in mind, the L.A. County Board of Supervisors must reverse its approval of the Tejon Ranch Co.’s Centennial development. Any project that will gobble up precious acres of open space and commit workers to long commutes must be stopped.

–Sarah Tamor, Santa Monica (*Los Angeles Times*, May 11)

Conclusion

“UN: Nature in worst shape in human history”

“We’re in trouble”

“Life as we know it”

“Extinctions put humans at grave risk, report warns”

“Earth’s terminal illness”

Headlines from the week’s coverage of the U.N. report expressed the extreme urgency and the high stakes of mass extinction. But with few exceptions, the volume of coverage among the country’s top newspapers did not. The collapse of biodiversity, like the overheating of our planet, impacts all of us. But large pockets of the U.S. population still are not getting vital information about these developments.

On the bright side, the response of some papers—and many readers—suggests there’s an appetite for more public discussion of the breakdown of our ecosystems and climate.