

# Sixth Extinction

## Pre-Reading Questions

Think about the following questions.

1. In what ways do humans cause damage to the planet?
2. Do you think that humans are in danger of becoming extinct? Why or why not?
3. What are some things we can do to help prevent the extinction of a species?

## Vocabulary Preview

Match each word or phrase with the correct definition.

- |            |   |
|------------|---|
| 1. alien   | a. specific kinds of plants or animals            |
| 2. extinct | b. no longer existing                             |
| 3. grim    | c. from another place                             |
| 4. habitat | d. belonging to a particular place                |
| 5. native  | e. gloomy; somber                                 |
| 6. species | f. an environment where something lives and grows |

# Sixth Extinction



Most species of plants and animals that have ever lived on Earth are now extinct. Though most have become extinct slowly, some have been almost completely wiped out in a sudden, massive, **catastrophic** event. These mass extinctions have happened at least five times in the history of the Earth. The first mass extinction occurred about 450 million years ago, when sudden changes in sea level, caused by melting **glaciers**, killed most **marine** species. The most recent mass extinction was 65 million years ago, when most scientists believe an **asteroid** struck the Earth in Mexico and extinguished the dinosaurs.

Now scientists claim a "Sixth Extinction" is underway. This extinction is not caused by one big event but by a series of human actions that disrupt the environment. Edward O. Wilson, a Harvard University scientist, estimates that human harm will cause half of all species of life to be extinct by 2100. Scientists say that human activities are causing biological extinction at a rate hundreds of times faster than ever before.

Humans cause damage to the Earth in three primary ways. The first is **exploitation**. Humans hunt animals for food, clothing, and sometimes just for fun. They also collect plants and insects---such as butterflies---for recreation. The second way humans impact the Earth is by putting alien plant or animal species in new environments. In Africa, for example, some fisherman put perch from Egypt's Nile River into Lake Victoria. Nile perch like to eat other fish. Since they came, more than 200 native species of fish have disappeared from the lake. The third way humans cause damage is by destroying



- 4 catastrophic --- violent and destructive
- 6 glacier --- a large body of ice
- 7 marine --- relating to the sea
- 8 asteroid --- a large rock floating in space
- 17 exploitation --- using something for your own purposes



- 30 tropical --- relating to warm climates
- 36 status --- state or condition
- 38 verge --- brink or threshold
- 39 amphibian --- an animal with characteristics of fish and reptiles
- 40 coniferous --- cone-bearing

natural habitats. They clear trees from forests to build houses, farms, cities, and roads. One of the most terrible instances of habitat destructions is the cutting  
30 down of the **tropical** rainforests. It is estimated that these rainforests, which cover less than 10 percent of the Earth, contain almost half of all the world's plant and animal species.



Human activity has had a devastating effect on the natural environment.  
35 Each year, an international organization of scientists releases a special “red list” that updates the **status** of more than 44,000 animal and plant species. In 2008, the organization reported that 25 percent of our planet's 5,487 mammals are on the **verge** of extinction. It also claimed that almost 40 percent of all species are “threatened” with extinction, including 33 percent of all **amphibians**, a quarter of  
40 the Earth's **coniferous** trees, and about 12 percent of all birds. Of all threatened species on the red list, about 3,000 are “critically endangered,” which means they could disappear soon.

What would happen to people if the “Sixth Extinction” takes place? Scientists say life on Earth would be grim. There would not be enough food to eat, and water  
45 would be too polluted to drink. New species of pests and plants would invade the natural areas that remain. These invaders could carry new kinds of germs, causing diseases that human bodies cannot resist. Without plants to help cool the sun, the ice at the North and South Poles could melt, causing sea levels to rise and wash away coastal cities. By wiping out other species, human beings might be paving  
50 the way for the greatest extinction of all: their own.

547 words

## Reading Comprehension

**A** Mark each statement as either true (T) or false (F) according to the reading.

1. \_\_\_\_\_ Some scientists estimate that half of all species will be extinct in the next century.
2. \_\_\_\_\_ The Earth is facing its third mass extinction in history.
3. \_\_\_\_\_ A higher percentage of bird species face extinction than coniferous trees.
4. \_\_\_\_\_ Forty percent of all mammals are threatened with extinction.

**B** Choose the best answer.

1. How many ways does the reading passage indicate that humans harm the environment?
  - a. One
  - b. Two
  - c. Three
  - d. Four
2. Which is NOT an outcome of mass extinction of life on earth?
  - a. Rising of sea levels
  - b. Food shortages
  - c. Lack of fresh water
  - d. Natural disasters
3. Which kind of animal is the Nile perch?
  - a. amphibian
  - b. fish
  - c. bird
  - d. mammal

**C** For the next two questions, look for the answers in the passage and write them on the lines provided.

1. Why are rainforests important to the planet?

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2. How can mass extinction of living species lead to the extinction of humans?

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## Summary

Fill in the blanks with the phrases from the list. Use each phrase only once.

being destroyed  
continues unchecked

introduce alien plants  
numerous species

kills native species  
cutting down forests

Human activity is a primary reason why 1 \_\_\_\_\_ are now extinct and many more are endangered. The problem is that habitats are 2 \_\_\_\_\_ not by one single event, but by a series of actions. One example is when people 3 \_\_\_\_\_ or animals to a new environment where they have no natural predators. This risks disrupting the ecological balance in the area and 4 \_\_\_\_\_. Humans also damage the Earth by 5 \_\_\_\_\_ for development and agricultural purposes. If this trend 6 \_\_\_\_\_, the future of the planet will be a grim one indeed.

## Vocabulary Extension

Here are six words that are related to the topic but are not in the reading. Fill in each blank with the best word from the list. Use each word only once.

brink    ecosystem    magnitude    deforestation    conserve    wildlife

1. Earthquakes are measured on a scale ranging from minor to great depending on their \_\_\_\_\_.
2. With a population of less than 350, the California Condors are on the \_\_\_\_\_ of extinction.
3. One of the main reasons for the destruction of the rainforest is \_\_\_\_\_.
4. An \_\_\_\_\_ is a community of living and non-living things that work together.
5. It is important to \_\_\_\_\_ water when living in the desert.
6. It is far easier to see \_\_\_\_\_ in rural areas than in the city.

