

April 21, 2020

His Excellency
António Guterres
Secretary-General of the United Nations
United Nations Headquarters in New York
405 East 42nd Street
New York, NY, 10017, USA

Your Excellency,

Today, on the 50th anniversary of Earth Day, as if the earth's incessant rotation had slowed and stopped, coronavirus has created an unprecedented challenge. It connects us all in our fragility and the intimate connection we have with our planet and with nature.

Whether confined at home or struggling to be distanced from each other in other ways, or heroically treating the ill and dying, or continuing to provide essential public services, all at personal peril – we all ask how have we come to this?

That is why, at this epochal moment in human history, we need your leadership at the helm of our United Nations. The health of our planet, our ecosystems, our economies, indeed ourselves, cry out now for the General Assembly to recognize our universal right to live in a healthy natural environment – guaranteed by public policies and governed by sustainability and the best scientific and traditional indigenous knowledge.

We invite you – we implore you – to call for an addition to the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights: to enshrine a new article 31, one that recognises the right to a healthy environment. Starting now, by putting it on the agenda of the UN General Assembly meeting in September and the Summit on Biodiversity, this could be achieved by December 2023, to mark the 75th anniversary of the adoption by the General Assembly of the Universal Declaration.

We know that we will eventually, in grief and pain, and economically devastated, emerge from coronavirus. Once we reach the brink of the galloping twin crises of climate and biodiversity, however, we will not escape. We can already see how our lack of care for the planet infringes other established universal human rights, such as the right to life, liberty and security.

The science is clear now. In this critical “Decade of Action”, we must take the necessary decisive actions to save the ecosystems of the planet from collapse. The effects of global warming, and the loss of biodiversity on people's health and their economies, if left unaddressed, will be irreparable.

The initial declaration of human rights was forged out of the ashes of the conflagration of the Second World War. Now we too must rise to the challenge of finding a better way to conduct ourselves on our spinning home. The inspiring and determined Greta Thunberg, and the global youth movement she has pioneered, put the faces of the future viscerally on what it means to fail to secure the planet's health. Indeed, we risk making a mockery of and undermining the Sustainable Development Goals and the 2030 Agenda.

We know that adding to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is a profound act. Sacred even. But we are convinced that at this moment of crisis your courage and leadership is needed to address the collapse of ecosystems and the irreversible overheating of the planet which loom with such menace. Our magnificent Earth is equally sacred, and there has perhaps never been a more important moment to enshrine a human right that would oblige us all to respect it, for the benefit of all.

At BirdLife International, a family of scientists, conservationists and local people from over 100 countries, founded in 1922 shortly after the League of Nations, we believe we share this historic responsibility. As a United Nations-recognized civil society observer, we therefore humbly urge you to raise this issue at the next UN General Assembly in September.

We appreciate your urgent attention to this matter and stand ready to move forward and mobilize the planet's citizens, across all continents, seas and oceans, to back such a vital call and support your leadership.

Yours sincerely,



Patricia Zurita
Chief Executive
BirdLife International
on behalf of the BirdLife International Partnership