

Over a fifth of plant species may face extinction threat

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Courtesy of Royal Botanic Gardens Kew
and World Science staff

One in five plant species are threatened with extinction, putting plants on a par with mammals in terms of their risks of dying out, a study has found.

The study was conducted by the Natural History Museum in London, the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, U.K. and the International Union for the Conservation of Nature.

Based on what the scientists called a representative sample of almost 4,000 species, "this study confirms what we already suspected," said Stephen Hopper, director of the Botanic Gardens. "Plants are under threat and the main cause is human-induced habitat loss."

The study was billed as marking the first time that the true extent of the threat to the world's estimated 380,000 plant species is known. The findings were announced as governments are to meet in Nagoya, Japan in mid-October to set new biodiversity targets.

"For the first time we have a clear global picture of extinction risk to the world's known plants," Hopper said. "This report shows the most urgent threats and the most threatened regions."

The study found that plants are more threatened than birds, as threatened as mammals and less threatened than amphibians or corals. The most threatened plants are gymnosperms, group that includes conifers and cycads, the researchers said; the most threatened habitat is tropical rain forest. Conversion of habitats for agriculture or livestock use is mostly to blame for the man-induced habitat loss that underlies the bulk of the threat, investigators concluded.

The study, known as the Sampled Red List Index for Plants, is part of a worldwide effort to create a tool to monitor the changing status of the world's major groups of plants, fungi and animals.

"The 2020 biodiversity target that will be discussed in Nagoya is ambitious, but in a time of increasing loss of biodiversity it is entirely appropriate to scale up our efforts," Hopper said. "Plants are the foundation of biodiversity and their significance in uncertain climatic, economic and political times has been overlooked for far too long."