



Humans are destroying the natural world. The [Living Planet Report 2022](#), published by the WWF, talks of an average decline of 69% in species populations worldwide since 1970.

On 9 March 2022, *Daily Maverick* published an article by an eminent professor [of global ecology](#), Corey Bradshaw, headlined: “[The sixth mass extinction is happening now, and it doesn’t look good for us](#)”

If you haven’t read it, I strongly recommend that you do. Professor Bradshaw writes that we are losing species at a rate that would qualify as a mass extinction, and there are now about [1 million species](#) threatened with imminent extinction due to [massive population declines](#).

Worst of all, the extinction rate is accelerating. He concludes that the future looks “ghastly”. And then, there is the climate crisis.

So, why are we humans so complacent in the face of being told by scientists that we are killing other species and, ultimately, ourselves?

Jeremy Lent, in his book [The Web of Meaning](#), says that Joni Mitchell got it wrong in “*Big Yellow Taxi*” when she sang, “You don’t know what you got ’til it’s gone.”

The truth is that once something is gone, we humans soon forget it was ever there. It’s the “shifting baseline syndrome” identified by [Daniel Pauly](#).

Pauly saw from records in the fishing industry he was studying that the size of the catch had declined by 97% since written records began. But the fishermen seemed unconcerned. To them, the size of the catch when they started fishing was their baseline and they only saw a small change; they were unaware that their catch was smaller than their fathers’ catch, which was smaller than their grandfathers’ catch, and so on.

They didn't experience the creeping impoverishment of the seas.

On 18 October 2022, South Africa's Minister of Mineral Resources and Energy, Gwede Mantashe, opened African Energy Week in Cape Town. He quoted the statistic that 43% of the population of Africa does not have access to electricity and urged those present to address this challenge.

I agree with Minister Mantashe that this is a tragedy that must be addressed with urgency. The question is how to address it. It is not obvious that we should therefore produce more oil and gas. After all, Nigeria is one of Africa's biggest producers of oil and gas, and has been producing since the 1950s, yet more than [60% of the population lacks access to electricity](#).

More importantly, energy systems based on fossil fuels are prime drivers of the climate crisis and extinction of species. Some argue that since Africa currently has low emissions, we have the right to increase those emissions.

Imagine your neighbour gets rich selling a drink made from a plant growing in his garden. At first, it wasn't understood that the drink contained something harmful, but it gradually became clear that, at high levels of concentration, it was slowly killing people. Imagine you now find the same plant in your garden. Could you argue that since your neighbour got rich selling that drink, you should have the opportunity to sell that drink, too?

It is not as if we don't have options. The [World Bank](#) says that Africa has enough wind to meet its electricity demand 250 times over, and that its wind potential is geographically widely distributed.

It is true that renewable energy also damages the environment, but it doesn't compare to the scale of oil and gas. Just spend 10 minutes reading about the Niger Delta and you will be convinced.

And fossil fuels impose legacy pollution on future generations. In South Africa, we have acid mine drainage from coal mines. In the US, Washington has just created a [\\$4.7-billion fund](#) to plug abandoned oil and gas wells because of concerns about toxic chemicals entering the water system and methane silently leaking into the atmosphere.

That's taxpayers' money cleaning up the oil and gas industry's mess.

[Gwede Mantashe](#) said that "new natural resource discoveries – oil, minerals of the future and gas – offer a new source of revenue for advancing human development".

However, much of the revenue will be taken out of Africa by the multinational oil and gas companies continuing on the path of colonial extraction. In addition, I would say that it is not adding wealth; it is taking one class of asset – the class of natural assets – and converting it into another type of asset.

It is taking the distributed revenue of many who live from natural assets and putting it in the hands of a different group of people.

Many African people live close to the land – subsistence or small-scale farming is their livelihood. Many others live from fishing in rivers, lakes and in coastal waters. When people proclaim the jobs that the oil and gas industry will bring, they never truly count the jobs, the land and the water that will be destroyed.

Look at the small-scale fisher folk in South Africa who are fighting for their way of life against oil and gas exploration in their waters. Look at the communities who are fighting against the 1,440km east African crude oil pipeline. Nearly a third of the pipeline will run through the basin of Africa's largest lake, Lake Victoria, which more than 40 million people [depend](#) on for water and food production.

These communities, their children and their children's children will be robbed of their ecological wealth. Will they join the homeless in the cities and be despised by the urban elite? And will African countries get richer?

[World Bank research](#) estimates that sub-Saharan Africa could forgo close to 10% of its GDP annually by 2030 “if vital ecosystem services, such as pollination, timber provision from forests, and food from marine fisheries, collapse”.

And we haven't begun to talk about the climate warming that will happen if we lock in oil and gas as Africa's energy path, or the accelerated loss of species which is bringing about the “ghastly” future to which Corey Bradshaw refers.

That is why Extinction Rebellion Cape Town joined other [Don't Gas Africa](#) campaigners outside the African Energy Week Conference in Cape Town, holding banners saying “no” to oil and gas.

The multinational companies can never pay enough for the oil and gas they will extract to compensate us for the loss of livelihoods, the loss of ecosystems, the loss of species, the loss of the natural heritage of Africa and the climate destabilisation to which they will add, which is already killing Africans.

They can never pay enough – because the price is life on Earth. **DM**

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