

COMMENT

HUMANITY IS AT RISK

A landmark assessment by the UN of the state of the world's environment paints the bleakest picture yet of the planet's well-being. The warning is stark: humanity's future is at risk unless urgent action is taken. Over the past 20 years, almost every index of the planet's health has worsened. At the same time, personal wealth in the richest countries has grown by a third.

The report, by the United Nations Environment Programme (Unep), warns that the vital natural resources which support life on Earth have suffered significantly since the first such report, published in 1987. However, this gradual depletion of the world's natural "capital" has coincided with unprecedented economic gains for developed nations, which, for many people, have masked the growing crisis.

Nearly 400 experts from around the world contributed to the report, which warns that humanity itself could be at risk if nothing is done to address the three major environmental problems of a growing human population, climate change and the mass extinction of animals and plants.

The report is the fruit of five years' work by leading scientists and is the fourth in a series since the publication in 1987 of 'Our Common Future' by an international commission into the state of the global environment chaired by the former Norwegian prime minister Gro Harlem Brundtland.

Achim Steiner, the executive director of Unep, said that the objective of the latest report was not to present a "dark and gloomy scenario" but to make the case for an urgent call to action. However, the dire state of almost every aspect of the planet's wellbeing points to 20 years of missed opportunities.

Meanwhile, the political response to the growing emergency has been limited.

The fourth Unep report since the seminal 1987 report of the Brundtland Commission reveals a stark continuation in the environment's decline. The environmental "footprint" of humanity has increased dramatically in 20 years, with a rising population and increased use of energy, land and other natural resources.

Unep's Global Environment Outlook (GEO-4) states that the human demand on the planet now means people are living beyond their means. The present footprint is equivalent to 22 hectares per person, whereas the natural carrying capacity of the Earth is less than 16 hectares per person, the report says.

The world economy has at the same time boomed, with the global GDP per capita rising from about \$6,000 (£2,920) to just over \$8,000. But this increased wealth has been geared towards the developed world and has come at an enormous cost to the environment.

Species of animals and plants are estimated to be going extinct at a rate that is about 100 times faster than the historical record, largely as a result of human activities. Biologists have now classified 30 percent of amphibians, 23 percent of mammals and 12 percent of birds as threatened.

A growing human population, which is expected to reach nine billion by the mid-century, will place increasing pressure on land, water and biodiversity. Land

will have to be more intensively farmed, or more land will have to be cultivated. "Either way, biodiversity suffers," the report says.

Since 1987, when the landmark UN report 'Our Common Future' (overseen by Gro Harlem Brundtland) warned of the need for concerted action to secure humanity's future, the state of the global environment has declined in numerous ways. □□□