

Making peace with nature is urgent

Nearly 200 nations this week signed off on a United Nations agreement that sets clear targets to halt and reverse the damaging decline of nature. About a million species are threatened with extinction because of mankind's activities and large areas of the planet are fully or partially degraded. The Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, which was agreed to at the COP15 talks in Montreal, will hopefully reset humanity's relationship with nature – the complex web of life on which mankind is deeply dependent for food, water, clean air, resources and much more.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres hailed the accord, saying: "We are finally starting to forge a peace pact with nature." The peace pact is urgent and nations must spare no effort in putting it into action to achieve its 2030 targets. Despite the immense value that nature brings, humanity has long taken advantage of its bounty, stripping the planet of its resources in the quest for economic growth, material goods, food and profits. Wild animal populations have plunged since 1970 and almost a third of the world's tree species are at risk of extinction. Plastic pollution is also taking a heavy toll on marine life.

One of the framework's keystone targets – there are 23 in all – is for nations to conserve and manage at least 30 per cent of the world's lands, inland waters, coastal areas and oceans by 2030.

Governments must also recognise indigenous and traditional territories and practices – important since indigenous lands contain a large portion of the planet's natural treasures. At present, 17 per cent and 10 per cent of the world's terrestrial and marine areas are under protection, meaning that huge amounts of money, manpower and expertise will be needed, especially for poorer nations, to scale up conservation efforts. This is where the private sector has a major role to play as investors.

For land-scarce and highly urbanised Singapore, 30x30 is a challenge. Protected areas include four nature reserves, which constitute nearly 5 per cent of the nation's land area. The Government has also created a network of nature parks as well as ecological corridors that strengthen connectivity between green spaces, and there is an ongoing programme to plant a million trees. Investments and expertise to help biodiversity-rich nations conserve nature can be one way Singapore can play a wider role. Another is encouraging companies to monitor and report their impact on nature and assign clear financial values to ecosystems. The deal agreed to in Montreal is timely and nations have just eight years to achieve its targets. Failure risks accelerating loss of nature, greater impact on humanity, and compounding damage from climate change.