News
EarthBeat



Activists check the vital signs of an inflatable Earth at the COP17 United Nations biodiversity summit in Yerevan, Armenia. (UN Biodiversity/Mike Muzurakis)



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Countries are lagging in their efforts to halt and reverse the increasing loss of Earth's biodiversity, with 1 million species at risk of extinction this century due to human activities.

That was a central topic of a United Nations summit in Armenia in late October that assessed countries' national blueprints to take significant steps to preserve and restore nature this decade. Agreements reached at the summit, known as COP17, sought to enhance and accelerate those efforts, but like other international environmental pacts it faces the challenge of turning plans into action while there's still time to do so.

"Frustration is real because we have the science, because we know what we need to do [and] the trajectory that we're on," said Amy Echeverria, international coordinator for justice, peace and integrity of creation for the Missionary Society of St. Columban who attended the two-week gathering.

COP17 took place Oct. 19-31 in Yerevan, the capital of Armenia, a landlocked country between the Black Sea and Caspian Sea in western Asia.

It was the second biodiversity summit since nearly 200 nations in 2022 reached a landmark agreement on nature conservation in Montreal. Known as the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, or GBF for short, that pact established four goals and 23 targets to halt biodiversity loss and restore natural ecosystems around the globe. A key target commits countries to designate at least 30% of lands and waters for conservation by 2030. Another called for reforming and redirecting $500 billion in subsidies for activities, like extracting fossil fuels, that are environmentally damaging.

"We know what needs to change. We cannot protect nature while continuing to finance its destruction," Astrid Schomaker, executive secretary of the U.N. Convention on Biological Diversity said in a statement.



The United Nations biodiversity summit, known as COP17, took place Oct. 19-31 in Yerevan, Armenia. The conference sought to accelerate global action to halting and reversing increasing losses of species and ecosystems. (UN Biodiversity/Mike Muzurakis)

Among the 9,400 participants in Yerevan were more than 125 religious leaders and 50-plus faith-based organizations, including Catholics. Most engaged the proceedings through two coalitions, Faiths for Biodiversity and Faith for Oceans.

Their role at the U.N. summit, Echeverria said, was to inject moral considerations into scientific and technological debates and discussions.

"One of the valuable components of our work is really reminding parties and the whole process that this is more than just a scientific, technocratic issue for the world to care about," she told EarthBeat.

That includes raising moral urgency about the erosion of ecosystems and increasing rate of species loss taking place today. Some scientists believe the present staggering loss of biodiversity amounts to the planet's sixth mass extinction event,

with the last one wiping out dinosaurs 65.5 million years ago. A 2019 U.N. report found that more than 1 million animal and plant species face the threat of extinction by the end of this century.



Activists hold photos of environmental defenders killed over conservation efforts in a demonstration Oct. 26 at the COP17 United Nations biodiversity summit in Yerevan, Armenia. (UN Biodiversity/Mike Muzurakis)

Unlike prior periods of mass extinction, the current one has been triggered by human activity. Rising temperatures, driven by burning fossil fuels, have altered climates around the globe and harmed ecosystems on land and water, especially coral reefs. Activities such as deforestation, mining and agricultural expansion have further strained lands and waterways, pushing some of the most critical biomes toward dangerous, irreversible tipping points.

"The social injustice caused by natural disasters and the loss of biodiversity must be reversed in order to achieve a just ecological transition, that places the environment and people at the center," Pope Leo XIV said in a June 2025 message to the U.N.

Food and Agriculture Organization.

COP17, led by the U.N. Environment Program, marked the halfway point in countries' efforts to meet the 2030 goals set in the global biodiversity framework.

A report on the state of biodiversity action, issued ahead of COP17, found nations significantly behind in meeting the 23 targets set four years ago.



The Green Zone at the COP17 United Nations biodiversity summit in Yerevan, Armenia (CBD COP17 Yerevan Armenia)

Nearly 90% of 196 countries have established national biodiversity targets — an increase from prior pacts — but less than half are on track to be met and many do not fully address the goals in the global framework. Roughly 5,000 additional commitments to protect biodiversity have come from Indigenous peoples and local communities, subnational governments, businesses and civil society groups.

On the target of preserving 30% of lands and seas by 2030, "current ambition and implementation remain insufficient," the report said. Presently, 18.4% of lands and

inland waters are protected, and just 10% of oceans. If met, current commitments add up to approximately 27.5% of land and inland waters protected. While a majority of countries with biodiversity plans have set targets for protected areas, only a small portion address whether those areas are critical ecosystems, the report said.

Restoration efforts are also expanding, though not to the degree needed, according to the report. Countries are also lagging in mobilizing financing, reducing pollution and addressing indirect drivers of biodiversity loss related to business practices and related subsidies.

The United States, which along with the Holy See has not signed onto the 1992 U.N. Convention on Biological Diversity, set its own 30x30 conservation target under President Joe Biden. The Trump administration halted the initiative in the first days after retaking the White House in 2025.

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At COP17, countries adopted the Yerevan Pathway that identifies areas for increased focus and accelerated action, among them nature-harming subsidies, implementation of the global biodiversity framework and financial and scientific support for developing countries.

Developed countries, which fell short of a 2025 goal to mobilize at least $20 billion annually for nature conservation purposes, pressed for contributors to nature funds to expand to include growing economies like China, India and Saudi Arabia. In the end, the final agreement invited countries to contribute to biodiversity financing.

The Faiths for Biodiversity coalition joined Indigenous, women and youth constituencies in pressing countries to recognize human rights and validate the scientific findings of the assessment report in COP17's final decisions and to advance financing mechanisms for biodiversity efforts.

They also advocated implementation of a major agreement reached in November 2024 to establish a permanent advisory body for Indigenous peoples to have greater engagement in negotiations. Countries reached agreement on the body's structure and how it will function but pushed back decisions on its membership to COP18 in 2028 in Quito, Ecuador.

During the fortnight in Armenia, the faith coalitions issued two reports, one on faith conservation partnerships and one on issues in global seafood supply chains. Members also met with Schomaker, the U.N. biodiversity chief.

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As in past biodiversity summits, COP17 included a faith hub that offered a full daily program of events as well as a space for delegates to seek reprieve and prayer.

Throughout the proceedings, frustrations emerged with the U.N. process that requires consensus for any agreement, meaning a single country's objection can block a deal. Russia and Saudi Arabia objected in several instances, including on eliminating environmentally harmful subsidies.

Despite stunted progress, the faith coalitions maintained hope that countries will raise ambition and achieve the goals set out in the global biodiversity framework.

"We just don't have the luxury of despair," Echeverria said.

The Columban official added that while the U.N. is a regular target of criticism, increasingly in the U.S., it remains the only space for global conversations on biodiversity and other global issues to take place.

"We will not be deterred," she said. "We have to keep showing up."