

were a thousand times more than normal? We would be flooded. What if snowfall were a thousand times more than normal? We would never dig out. What if rates of disease transmission for malaria or HIV/AIDS were a thousand times higher than they are now? Millions would perish. But that is what is happening to plant and animal biodiversity today."

This is not just a problem for zoos. We have no idea how many natural cures, how many industrial materials, how many biological insights, how much sheer natural beauty, and how many parts and pieces of a complex web of life we barely understand are being lost.

"The biodiversity of the planet is a unique and uniquely valuable library that we have been steadily burning down—one wing at a time—before we have even cataloged all the books, let alone read them all," said John Holdren, the Harvard and Woods Hole environmental scientist.

Imagine if the trend toward rapid and widespread extinction continues and accelerates. Imagine a world with little or no biodiversity—a stainless-steel-and-cement world stripped bare of every plant and animal, every tree and hillside. Not only would such a world be barely livable, from a biological point of view—it would be a world we would barely want to live in.

From what landscapes or flowerbeds would future painters draw their inspiration? What would move poets to write their sonnets, composers to craft their symphonies, and religious leaders and philosophers to contemplate the meaning of God by examining his handiwork up close and in miniature? To go through life without being able to smell a flower, swim a river, pluck the apple off a tree, or behold a mountain valley in