

Viewpoint



All WUR scientists should pay more attention to biodiversity

Liesje Mommer, the head of the Wageningen Biodiversity Initiative and professor of Belowground Ecology, comments on some recent disheartening news reports. Text Marieke Enter • Photo Shutterstock

The Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency (PBL) recently reported that the Netherlands' climate and nature plans are nowhere near enough to achieve the statutory targets for the climate, nature and the environment. The Red List of endangered animals, plants and fungi has got longer again. And coral reefs have probably passed the tipping point beyond which recovery is impossible, whatever humans do now.

Don't news items like this make you despair?

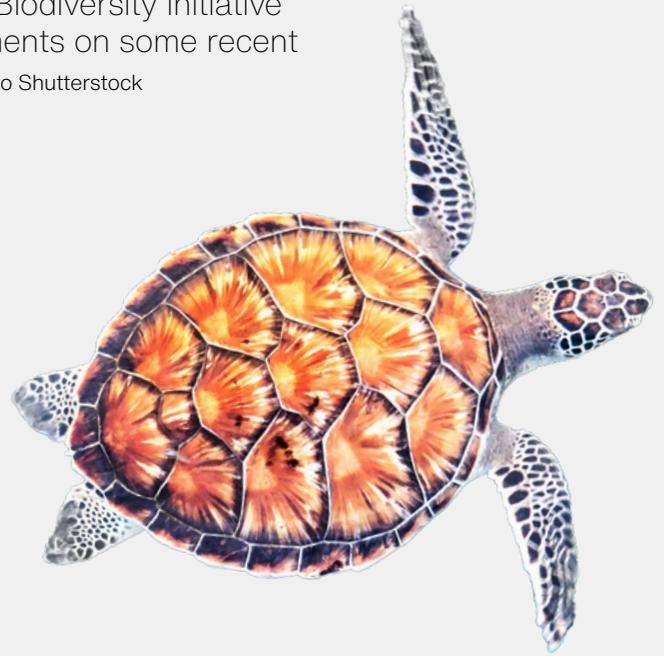
'No, quite the opposite — they make me want to fight back. I am deeply concerned. All the scientific reports are saying the metaphorical Jenga tower of biodiversity is starting to wobble. But humans can't survive without nature. It's our greatest ally in producing food and in providing clean water and air and fertile soil. And let's not forget its importance for our health and the fight against climate change. I think that WUR, as a leading institute in agriculture, food and the environment, has a huge task in helping to come up with solutions.'

How do you see that task?

'In all our domains, we should pay more explicit attention to the consequences of our proposals for biodiversity. We should also consider how we can improve the situation and resolve any unintended consequences of a certain policy or technology. That implies that scientists should look at issues not just from the perspective of their own discipline but also by involving other disciplines — even when pressure is put on them, for example when reports have to be written based on a rather restrictive research question.'

Wouldn't that be overambitious of WUR?

'This is exactly what WUR ought to be doing! The issue is incredibly complex; the decline in the number of species involves a lot of factors in which humans play a



role. We need to find the right balance: how can we deal with the landscape in a way that is healthy for humans and for the planet? If even we at WUR are unable to figure out what steps need to be taken and in what timeframes, how can we expect politicians to do that?'

Are you then failing to allow for the reality of a high workload, tightly worded research assignments and increasing pressure on funding?

'That's tough, yes — but it's something we still need to do. I like to quote Jane Goodall: "What you do makes a difference. You have to decide what kind of difference you want to make." You make choices every day. I realize it's often difficult, but taking this extra step is so worthwhile. I'd also like to mention one small, positive aspect. I've been leafing through the report on the Red List and a few things are improving. To give an example, the green sea turtle, an iconic species, is doing much better now. So nature conservation does work and recovery is not impossible. But humans need to get their act together, and soon too. As far as I'm concerned, that applies to us here in Wageningen as well.' ■