

U.N. urges 'unprecedented' steps on environment

Report says human actions are rapidly degrading the Earth and its ecosystems.

By EMILY TAMKIN *Washington Post*

The United Nations released its sixth Global Environment Outlook report on Wednesday. Its main message, delivered across 740 pages, is straightforward: Human behavior is degrading the Earth and its ecosystems, and conditions will worsen if people do not take "unprecedented action" to try to reverse the situation.

Those actions, according to the report, include reducing land degradation, limiting pollution, improving water management and mitigating climate change. The report also calls for environmental considerations to be "mainstreamed" into all social and economic decisions — so that the environment, in other words, is viewed not as its own issue, but central to all policymaking at all governmental levels. If drastic action is not taken, the report warns that, among other things, millions could die prematurely from air pollution and from deadly infectious diseases from water pollution by 2050.

The report stresses that "unsustainable human activities globally have degraded the Earth's ecosystems, endangering the ecological foundations of society."

The first Global Environment Outlook report was released in 1997. Its sixth iteration was released in time for this year's U.N. Environment Assembly, now taking place in Nairobi. But it also comes on the heels of another U.N. report, issued in October, which said that the international community has 12 years to limit the disastrous effects of climate change.

That climate report and Wednesday's report on the environment both address the question of whether humans can continue business as usual and have enough clean air to breathe, water to drink and nourishing food to eat by 2050. Their answer is a resounding "no."

Whether political leaders and policymakers will decide to heed the warnings is another question. President Donald Trump pulled the United States out of the Paris agreement on climate change, and his nominee to replace Nikki Haley as U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, Kelly Knight Craft, is on record as saying she believes "both sides" of the climate change debate.