

Lake Victoria biodiversity under threat, warns report

The lake, which stretches into Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda and whose catchment also touches Burundi and Rwanda, is known for its unique biodiversity.

Three quarters of freshwater species endemic to East Africa's Lake Victoria basin face the threat of extinction, conservationists said on Monday, warning the biodiversity there was being "decimated".

A fresh report backed by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) assessed the extinction risk of 651 freshwater species like fish, molluscs, dragonflies, crabs and aquatic plants native to Africa's largest lake.

It found that a full 20% of these species were threatened with extinction.

The picture was, however, far darker when looking only at the freshwater species endemic to the area — 204 of those assessed, according to the report titled "Freshwater biodiversity in the Lake Victoria Basin". "Three-quarters (76%) of these endemics are at risk of extinction," IUCN warned in a statement.

In its report, the IUCN pointed out that freshwater species are important sources of food, medicine and construction material for the millions of people living in the area surrounding the lake. The lake, which stretches into Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda and whose catchment also touches Burundi and Rwanda, is known for its high-level of unique biodiversity.

The report pointed for instance to the African Lungfish, a long eel-like fish, which it said has seen its numbers dwindle due largely to overfishing, poor fishing practices and environmental degradation as wetlands are converted to agricultural land. Industrial and agricultural pollution, over-harvesting and land clearance are among the main threats to biodiversity in the region, the report said.

It also pointed to a significant impact of climate change, noting that freshwater fish have "high sensitivity (and) seemingly poor adaptive capacity" to climatic shifts.

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The reef is a critical national asset, contributing 6.4 billion dollars a year to the country's economy.

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