Catastrophe looms with a fifth of plant species facing extinction

London

More than a fifth of the world’s plant species face the threat of extinction, a trend with potentially catastrophic effects for life on Earth, according to research issued yesterday.

Australian-born Professor Stephen Hopper, director of the Royal Botanic Gardens in Kew, London, said the report on plant loss was the most accurate mapping yet of the threat to the planet’s estimated 380,000 plant species.

“This study confirms what we already suspected, that plants are under threat and the main cause is human-induced habitat loss,” Professor Hopper said.

“We cannot sit back and watch plant species disappear – plants are the basis of all life on Earth, providing clean air, water, food and fuel. All animal and bird life depends on them, and so do we,” Professor Hopper said.

The study comes ahead of a meeting in Nagoya, Japan, from October 18 to 29, at which members of the UN’s Biodiversity Convention will set new targets to save endangered wildlife.

Craig Hilton-Taylor of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature said he hoped the Nagoya meeting would set the goal of preventing the extinction of any known threatened species by 2020.

“We want to make sure that plants will not be forgotten,” he said.

In their study, researchers assessed almost 4000 species, of which 22 per cent were classed as threatened.

The greatest peril came from human-induced habitat loss, mostly the conversion of natural habitats for crops or livestock.

Kew researcher Neil Brummitt said human activity accounted for 81 per cent of the threats.

Plants were more threatened than birds, as threatened as mammals and less threatened than amphibians or corals, it said.

Meanwhile, a study by two Australian authors issued earlier this week revealed that fewer mammal species than believed may be extinct, especially those animals threatened by habitat loss.

Diana Fisher and Simon Blomberg of the University of Queensland said they had identified 187 mammals that had been “missing” since 1500, 67 species of which had subsequently been found again.

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