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Inherit the Dust by Nick Brandt, exhibition opening speech

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Will dust be all that remains of us?

Nick Brandt's impressive panoramic photographs of the changing environment and endangered animals in East Africa evoke strong feelings. The living conditions of both animals and people are compromised in areas that used to be the kingdom of animals. Will dust be all that we pass on?

If we don't change our current course, the answer is yes.

A lot of attention has been given to climate change and its gravity recently. A prime example of this is the unprecedented number of panel discussions held over climate change in connection with the upcoming elections in Finland this year. Climate change is becoming a central topic in policy-making.

The fact that the climate crisis requires urgent solutions in order to avoid catastrophic consequences to mankind, economy and nature has been understood.

Nick Brandt's exhibition reminds us of another major challenge: the crisis of nature.

The painful truth is that the loss of biodiversity, extinction of species and deterioration of habitats make the future of mankind at least as unstable climate change does. This, however, has not yet been understood.

For example, the distinguished Stockholm Resilience Centre institute has estimated that we have surpassed the world's limits of sustainability due to the loss of biodiversity far beyond the impact of climate change.

The abrupt loss of biodiversity is occurring so fast that it can be viewed in the context of the lifespan of a single human being. The future of a multitude of organisms is uncertain. Not only animals and plants are in danger. People are also affected by the deterioration of nature to an increasing extent.

Let me illustrate this fact with a few examples.

According to WWF's Living Planet Report published in autumn 2018, the number of vertebrates living in the wild has declined significantly. The populations of vertebrate animals have declined on average by 60% over the past 40 years.

Vertebrate animals include mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians and fish. On average, six out of ten of these animals have disappeared from the face of the Earth over the past 40 years.

Biodiversity and the number of vertebrates have declined the most in low income countries in the southern hemisphere.

South Africa has experienced the most abrupt change. On average, we have lost nine out of ten vertebrates in South Africa over the past 40 years.

The average decline in the number of vertebrates is 2% a year and, unless we act urgently, the pace is not likely to slow down.



Nick Brandt's exhibition forces the audience to think about the status of vertebrates and the crisis nature is facing.

The exhibition focuses on large African mammals. They are among the species that have experienced the most dramatic decline in their numbers.

Here are some concrete examples:

- In the past 100 years, we have lost approximately 95% of all rhinoceroses in the world.
- In the past 50 years, we have lost 50% of all African elephants.

The most significant threats faced by these iconic species in East Africa and other species all around the world include land-use change and excessive consumption of natural resources.

Land-use changes lead to the loss and deterioration of habitats.

For example, the global pace of deforestation corresponds to the area of one football field every two seconds. The remaining forests are also fragmented at a rapid pace. 70% of the world's forested land is less than one kilometer from a forest edge.

The most common reasons behind the loss and fragmentation of habitats of wild animals living on land, that is to say, forests, are unsustainable farming, felling of forests, traffic, commercial or residential construction, energy production and mining.

These actions, in turn, are caused by population growth and the pressures caused by it. Not only the population growth in the southern hemisphere is to blame, but also the northern hemisphere's increasing demand for the resources from the south is causing these phenomena.

Thus, we who live in the wealthy industrial countries in the northern hemisphere are also guilty for causing the land-use changes and the environmental crises in the southern hemisphere.

The importation of natural resources to high income countries has grown steadily. This is how us, the peoples of high income countries, have outsourced the loss of biodiversity and its impacts in low income countries.

For instance, the demand for soy has increased significantly due to the amounts of pork and poultry we eat, and the area covered by pastures has grown larger because of the increasing demand for beef. 83% of the agricultural area in the world is used for animal production. This form of production exerts intense pressure on the land.

The portion of all mammals in the world used for production is so large that these animal weigh 14 times more than all wild mammals.

And how do we Finnish people impact the nature outside our nation's borders? Food, once again, provides the simplest example.

93% of the impacts of food consumed by people based in Finland on biodiversity lie abroad, and 40% of the farmlands used to produce agricultural products consumed by us are outside Finland.

In addition to land-use changes, unsustainable or illegal hunting also poses a major threat: For example, approximately 55 elephants are killed every day in Africa for their tusks.



The demand for these commodities comes from Asia instead of East Africa covered by Nick Brandt's exhibition. Poaching and the trade of parts of poached animal, such as elephant tusks or rhinoceros horns is a criminal activity that has the extent of the drug business. Parts of these animals are used as decorations or remedies for erectile dysfunction or hangover. The key to this solution is to influence the markets in Asia and highlighting the importance of live rhinoceroses and elephants to the local peoples for boosting eco-tourism.

Nick Brandt's exhibition features impressive photographs from far away countries. Of course, it would be nice to relax and take comfort in how everything is so brilliant here in Finland, where nature is blossoming.

Unfortunately, we also have a lot of room for improvement.

In the Rio de Janeiro Earth Summit in 1992, Finland, among other countries, committed to stopping biodiversity loss by 2000. This target was not met, however, and a new deadline was set for 2010. The participating countries failed again to meet their objective, and yet another deadline was set for 2020.

This goal will not be reached in Finland or globally, either.

The deterioration of habitats has not slowed down in Finland, either. Instead, the pace is increasing. Nearly 80% of our forest-like biotopes are endangered.

On a species-specific level, the willow tit is worthy of a mention, as it is not a migratory bird, and its endangerment cannot be blamed on the controversial Italian habit of considering small birds to be a treat.

No, the blame lies with the low amount of decayed wood in our forests. The willow tit, once familiar to us all, is now critically endangered. The number of willow tits has declined by 40% in the past 10 years! Our forests will be silenced if we do not change the practices applied in forestry.

There are also endangered mammals, such as the wolverine, for which hunting licences have been issued despite their status.

There is a crisis in the Finnish nature, too.

The truth can be shocking.

We are going through a historical moment in the existence of our 4.5 billion year old planet.

The first extinction of species caused by mankind is currently in progress, and it is occurring at an unprecedented pace.

From time to time, we get asked why the existence of different types of species or certain species matters to our lives. Why do we need different types of species?

First and foremost, the species' right to exist must be respected in the same way as people's rights. Nevertheless, our existence is also dependent on the existence of different species.



This issue does not only concern the environmental crisis, but it also affects us people, for example, our food and water security, health and ability to pursue economic activities.

The loss of biodiversity and climate change will increase social instability and the occurrence of conflicts and lead to the mass migration of hundreds of millions of people by 2050.

The loss of biodiversity and the impacts of climate change caused by developed countries in the northern hemisphere are particularly strong in the areas covered by Nick Brandt's exhibition and other poor countries.

Nick Brandt's exhibition will surely make us all think about whether there is any hope for our planet and its nature and people?
Could it be possible for all people in the north and the south to live fair and equal lives?

These are important questions to which I do not have any ready answers.

However, it would be immoral to throw in the towel and quit the efforts for the good of mankind, nature and climate, or in other words, our planet.

It is obvious that we are unable to rescue everything we want to. Nevertheless, much more has been conserved than without any efforts at all.

Positive examples give us power. In Finland, for example, the white-tailed eagle has been saved from the brink of extinction, and the species is not endangered anymore. The conservation of the Saimaa ringed seal is going wonderfully, and the lynx has been removed from the list of endangered species.

The number of endangered mountain gorillas has increased in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Uganda and Rwanda. The increased number speaks volumes about the successes in the conservation work, as the status of the species was still deplorable in the 1980s. According to calculations made in the Virunga National Park, the number of mountain gorillas has risen from 480 in 2010 to 604. We have been engaged in cooperation with a variety of parties in the conservation of mountain gorillas.

Another positive development is that all the solutions to mitigating climate change and biodiversity loss, including the required expertise and technology, have been identified. Now, it is only a matter of willpower and making the right choice.

Yes, we are the generation that caused this problem, but also the last generation that has the ability to solve the problem. We need to act now if we want future generations to inherit more than mere dust!