

Risks and limits from a securitisation framing of nature and biodiversity crises: Lessons from climate change

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A UK Government report on *Global biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse and national security* published in early 2026 raises an important and timely issue: the security implications of accelerating ecological degradation [1]. Climate change, biodiversity loss and ecosystem collapse are undeniably profound global risks. Indeed the Intergovernmental Panel for Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) Nexus Assessment [2] highlights the strong linkages between climate change, biodiversity, food and health and their common causes and synergistic solutions. The adoption of a security lens through which one views nature and biodiversity change (as encapsulated by the UK Government Global biodiversity loss report) is increasingly frequently deployed in academia, policy and the media. However, attempting to galvanise action by framing any environmental issue as a security threat in an instrumental manner to elicit positive action creates its own risks; relies on ethically questionable foundations; and is often based on overly deterministic models and simplified evidence.

We have been here before with the securitisation of climate change. Securitisation is a term referring to the framing of any contested political issue (from animal health to migration to trade policy) as requiring national security responses, often shifting authority towards border management and defence [3]. The appeal to security is commonly motivated by the wish to elevate the policy issue to the highest level of political discourse. Climate change has been framed as a security issue - from debates on climate change within the UN Security Council, through to the assertions of the potential for violent conflict and even inter-state wars. The security framing of climate change is widespread in every world region, and appeals to governments for many reasons - as documented by Vogler [4]. Yet Warner and Boas [5] and others show that the motivation of climate advocates for action through securitisation debates often backfire, leading less to positive climate action, and more often to political retrenchment.

We illustrate those points here by focussing on claims in the UK Government Global biodiversity loss report's treatment of human mobility, particularly migration. We judge it to have significant conceptual, evidentiary, and methodological shortcomings that undermine both its analytical rigour and its policy relevance.

Climate change and, increasingly, biodiversity loss are commonly portrayed among academics, policy makers and activists as twin apocalyptic crises which are a key security issue or threat multiplier for national and regional security. While environmental degradation can contribute to systemic and compound risks, particularly through interactions with climate change and livelihoods, the growing securitisation of nature often rests on limited empirical evidence about how environmental change translates into social instability. Existing research shows that security-oriented narratives tend to rely on simplified and linear assumptions, implicitly treating environmental change as a direct driver of conflict, migration, or societal disruption. In other words, they portray social outcomes as environmentally determined [6].

In the Global biodiversity loss report, environmentally-linked migration is translated directly into security impacts for the UK. Current evidence does not support this assumption. Empirical research consistently shows that most mobility associated with environmental stressors is local or regional, frequently occurring within national borders or neighbouring countries [7]. Long-distance or intercontinental migration remains the exception rather than the norm, shaped by legal, financial, and political constraints. Without a

clearly articulated causal pathway linking biodiversity loss to migration and onward movement to the UK, such claims remain speculative at best. From a policy standpoint, distinguishing between plausible risks and hypothetical downstream effects is essential for prioritisation and resource allocation.

The focus on state and national security acts to situate specific actors centrally and spotlights political instability, resource scarcity, and territorial integrity as the overriding issues of concern. This creates conditions whereby ministries of defence and other key security agencies exert a large influence over the identification of risks and responses at the expense of other institutions better placed to work collaboratively and in partnership between and across state actors. An artefact of this framing are baseless claims of mass displacement and the prioritisation of solutions concerning border integrity and the focus on supporting states to invest in measures to reduce irregular international migration [4].

We see these issues implicit within the Global biodiversity loss report which asserts that migration will increase as development gains slow or reverse, citing evidence that ultimately derives from studies examining links between poverty, conflict, and refugee outflows. These studies do not examine biodiversity loss as a direct driver of migration, nor do they support generalised claims about migration trends under conditions of stalled development. This is a critical gap. A substantial body of migration research shows that mobility often increases with development, as households acquire the resources, information, and networks required to move [8]. Conversely, when livelihoods deteriorate sharply without corresponding increases in opportunity, populations are often constrained in place [9]. Policy assessments that assume a linear relationship between declining development and increased migration risk overstate mobility outcomes while underestimate risks associated with immobility, vulnerability, and localised instability.

The Global biodiversity loss report also elevates a quantitative claim that “a one percentage point increase in food insecurity compels 1.9 percent more people to migrate” (p.9) to a high-impact national security risk. This claim rests on a weak evidentiary chain and a mischaracterisation of the underlying evidence. The cited source is a non-peer-reviewed policy report [10], which in turn relies on a World Food Programme (WFP) study from 2017 [11]. The original WFP analysis does not examine migration as a general phenomenon. Instead, it focuses explicitly on refugee outflows associated with armed conflict, modelling food insecurity as a factor that increases the likelihood and intensity of conflict, which then drives refugee displacement. The reported 1.9 percent elasticity refers to refugee outflows per 1,000 population, conditional on conflict dynamics, not migration overall. In addition, the qualitative components of the WFP study draw on focus group discussions and household surveys conducted exclusively among refugees in host countries. While valuable for understanding forced displacement, these data do not support generalised claims about migration responses to food insecurity, biodiversity loss, or development reversal in non-conflict settings.

Environmental degradation does lead to increased food insecurity (as commonly measured by household expenditure on food or calorific intake): drought, salinity and other mechanisms amplify fragility in food production systems and agricultural economies (e.g., [12,13]). But does increased food insecurity lead to increased out-migration from resource-dependent places? Studies across food insecure places in Africa confirm standard migration theory: that food insecurity may increase the aspiration for migration, but suppresses the ability to actually move due to the high resource cost of moving [14]. In addition, prior migration has been shown to have some protective effect on food insecurity – through remittance flows and even return migration [15].

Thus, the Global biodiversity loss report relying on a single co-efficient for international migration flows appears at odds with the established patterns of evidence on this mechanism. By drawing on a secondary, non-peer-reviewed source and abstracting a conflict-specific refugee finding into a general claim about migration and national security, the Global biodiversity loss report overstates the evidence base. Given the sensitivity of migration–security narratives and their influence on strategic policy thinking, this level of source engagement and evidentiary precision is inappropriate.

Biodiversity loss and ecosystem collapse are rightly recognised as serious global risks. However, relying on a securitised framing to drive policy change and increase public awareness has significant downside risks. Overemphasising speculative risks such as migration narrows the policy response to downstream and often unlikely outcomes, while obscuring the structural pathways through which biodiversity loss undermines security. The most significant risks to the UK associated with biodiversity loss lie in the erosion of livelihoods and food systems, the intensification of governance pressures in environmentally-stressed regions, and the growing vulnerability of populations with limited capacity to adapt or move (as has been emphasised in consecutive Climate Change Risk Assessments). These dynamics are already unfolding and pose direct challenges to stability, development, and conflict prevention. Policy attention should focus on protecting and restoring ecosystems critical to food security, supporting governance and adaptive capacity in vulnerable regions, and investing in early warning systems that track livelihood and ecological stress. They should avoid unfounded claims about mass displacement.

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