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Global Climate Change Report Underscores Need for Action, says IWU Biologist

Jeff Hanna
Illinois Wesleyan University

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CONTACT: Jeffery G. Hanna

Global Climate Change Report Underscores Need for Action, says IWU Biologist

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. — A study that predicts the extinction of more than 1 million plant and animal species if current global warming trends continue underscores the need for politicians to take the issue seriously, says Illinois Wesleyan University biologist Given Harper.

In this week's edition of *Nature*, an international team of scientists reported on its study of 1,103 animal and plant species in Mexico, Australia, Europe, the Amazon, the Brazilian Cerrado and South Africa. The study is considered the first authoritative attempt to gauge the potential impact of climate change on wildlife.

"What distresses me the most is that our politicians are not even discussing this issue," said Harper, who is associate director of Illinois Wesleyan's environmental studies program. "This is going to be the most important issue of this century. The decisions that we make now and in the next few decades are going to be critical."

Many scientists attribute the trend in global warming to emissions of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases in the burning of fossil fuels. Harper said that scientists are already observing the effects of climate change on plants and animals. "Birds are nesting earlier than normal," he said. "Flowering plants are blooming earlier than they have traditionally done."

The extreme temperature change from the global warming, said Harper, will occur over the next 100 years. That short time frame is unprecedented for such a dramatic change. "From an evolutionary perspective, whether many organisms will be able to adapt in this short time frame is very unlikely," he said.

According to Harper, the global climate change will cause organisms living at certain latitudes in both hemispheres to migrate toward their respective poles in order to live in the proper climatic conditions. "Some organisms may be able to do that," he said. "But if you look in the United States, for example – with all our development – some organisms will be prevented from moving and others move so slow that they're not going to be able to survive."

To arrange an interview with Harper, contact either Ann Aubry or Jeff Hanna at 309/556-3181.