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If we want to avoid mass extinctions and preserve the ecosystems all plants and animals depend on, governments should protect a third of the oceans and land by 2030 and half by 2050, with a focus on areas of high biodiversity. So say leading biologists in an editorial in the journal Science this week.

It's not just about saving wildlife, says Jonathan Baillie of the National Geographic Society, one of the authors. It's also about saving ourselves.

"We are learning more and more that the large areas that remain are important for providing services for all life," he says. "The forests, for example, are critical for absorbing and storing carbon."

At present, just 3.6 per cent of the planet's oceans and 14.7 per cent of the land is protected by law. At the 2010 Nagoya Conference of the Convention on Biological Diversity, governments agreed to protect 10 per cent of the oceans and 17 per cent of land.