

Scientists' warning on the conservation of subterranean ecosystems

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46 **ABSTRACT**

47 In light of recent alarming trends in human population growth, climate change and other
48 environmental disturbances, a 'Warning to Humanity' manifesto was published in BioScience in
49 2017. This call reiterated most of the ideas originally expressed by the Union of Concerned
50 Scientists in 1992, including the fear that we are "[...] *pushing Earth's ecosystems beyond their*
51 *capacities to support the web of life.*" As subterranean biologists, we take this opportunity to
52 emphasize the global importance and the conservation challenges associated with subterranean
53 ecosystems. They likely represent the most widespread non-marine environments on Earth, yet
54 specialized subterranean organisms remain among the least documented and studied. Largely
55 overlooked in conservation policies, subterranean habitats play a critical functional role in the
56 functioning of the web of life and provide important ecosystem services. We highlight main threats
57 to subterranean ecosystems and propose a set of effective actions to protect this globally important
58 natural heritage.

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60 **Keywords**

61 Biodiversity crisis, Caves, Extinction risk, Groundwater, Nature conservation

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INTRODUCTION

"Human beings and the natural world are on a collision course."

Union of Concerned Scientists' Manifesto – 1992

Building on the manifesto "*World Scientists' Warning to Humanity*" issued in 1992 by the Union of Concerned Scientists, Ripple et al. (2017) recently published a passionately debated paper titled "*World Scientists' Warning to Humanity: a Second Notice*." This novel proclamation, which was endorsed by more than 15,000 cosignatory scientists ("Alliance of World Scientists"), reiterated most of the ideas and concerns presented in the first manifesto, and in particular the fear that humans are "[...] *pushing Earth's ecosystems beyond their capacities to support the web of life*." The second notice highlighted alarming trends in several environmental issues over the last 25 years (1992–2016), including global climate change, deforestation, biodiversity loss, human population increase, and a decline in freshwater resources.

Since its publication, this second notice has been extensively discussed in the scientific literature and social media, stimulating an upsurge of discipline-specific follow-up articles focused on particular biological or social systems (Ripple W.J. [Oregon State University, Corvallis, United States], personal communication, 7 September 2018). As a group of subterranean biologists with a breadth of different expertise and a strong commitment to biodiversity conservation, we take this opportunity to examine some alarming trends underscored by the Alliance of World Scientists from a "subterranean" perspective. We discuss the implications that this Ripple et al. (2017)' manifesto has for the conservation of the subterranean realm, which includes some of the most unique, secluded, understudied, and difficult-to-study environments on our planet. Although subterranean habitats are not at the forefront of one's mind when thinking about global conservation issues, they support exceptional forms of life and represent critical habitats to be preserved and prioritized in conservation policies. While some **conservation efforts have been devoted to protect subterranean ecosystems at a local level, no global assessment has been conducted that explicitly takes these resources into account** (see, e.g., Brooks et al. 2006, Sutherland et al. 2018). Even though there are

106 common conservation concerns that affect all biological systems, many of them are more acute and
107 visible in the subterranean realm and are emphasized in this contribution.

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111 **CHALLENGES OF PROTECTING THE UNKNOWN**

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113 In the era of drones, satellites, and remote sensing technology, most of the accessible places on
114 Earth have been directly or indirectly mapped and explored. A remarkable exception to the
115 geographic knowledge of our planet comes from the subterranean world, which is therefore
116 recognized as one of the most important frontiers of modern explorations (Ficetola et al. 2019).
117 Subterranean ecosystems are likely the most widespread non-marine environments on Earth. For
118 example, more than 50,000 caves have been documented in the United States, with nearly 10,000
119 known from the state of Tennessee alone (Niemiller and Zigler 2013), and some 25,000 caves are
120 estimated solely for the Dinarides, a 60,000 km² European karst region that is considered to be the
121 world's most significant area of subterranean fauna radiation (Zagmajster et al. 2010). However,
122 subterranean ecosystems are by no means restricted to those subterranean voids that we have
123 mapped and listed in speleological cadasters (i.e. caves). In fact:

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- 125 i) most subterranean voids have no entrances that are accessible to humans (Curl 1958);
- 126 ii) the small and non-accessible network of underground voids and fissures is almost limitless and
127 this network (rather than caves) represents the elective habitat for most specialized subterranean
128 biota (Howarth 1983);
- 129 iii) groundwater, i.e. water in the voids in consolidated and unconsolidated rocks, comprises 95% of
130 global unfrozen fresh water and hosts organisms specialized to survive at limits of life (Fišer et al.
131 2014), as well as more numerous species that are important to maintaining groundwater quality
132 (Griebler et al. 2014);
- 133 iv) anchialine ecosystems, represented by coastal, tidally influenced, subterranean estuaries located
134 within crevicular and cavernous terrains, represent a specialized habitat straddling the border
135 between subterranean freshwater and marine environments and host a specialized subterranean
136 fauna (Bishop et al. 2015);

137 v) a variety of superficial underground habitats, collectively termed shallow subterranean habitats,
138 support an extensive array of subterranean biota (Culver and Pipan 2014); and
139 vi) if one would be keen to account also for microbial life, a large amount of continental prokaryotic
140 biomass and as yet an unknown prokaryote diversity is hidden within these systems (Magnabosco et
141 al. 2018).

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143 Paradoxically, although habitats beneath the Earth's surface are more widespread and
144 diversified than is usually perceived, most of them cannot be mapped and directly studied, either
145 because they are too deep or because they are hardly accessible to humans due to their millimetre
146 scale resolution. Consequently, specialized subterranean organisms remain among the least
147 documented fauna on our planet. This impediment, recently termed "Racovitza shortfall" (Ficetola
148 et al. 2019), poses a thorny question: if the real extension of the subterranean domain is unknown,
149 and the biota we observe in a cave are just the "tip of the subterranean biodiversity iceberg", what
150 can we practically do to protect the full extent of subterranean habitats and their inhabitants?

151 To make sound decisions for the conservation of the subterranean world, there is first an
152 urgent need to accelerate scientific research, aiming at exploring subterranean biodiversity
153 altogether with the abiotic and biotic factors that drive its distribution patterns across space and
154 time. Available estimates (Culver and Holsinger 1992; Zigmajster et al. 2018) suggest that most
155 obligate subterranean species worldwide have not yet been described (i.e., the Linnean shortfall). In
156 the epoch of sixth mass extinction crisis, many of these species may face extinction before they are
157 discovered and formally described—a phenomenon described by Wilson (1992) as 'Centinela
158 extinctions'. Moreover, several other knowledge gaps impede our ability to protect and conserve
159 subterranean biodiversity (Table 1). The distribution (i.e., the Wallacean shortfall) and the life
160 history of most described subterranean species in particular, are virtually unknown. Acquiring basic
161 knowledge about biological and functional diversity of subterranean organisms (i.e., the
162 Raunkiaeran shortfall), their phylogenetic relationships (i.e., the Darwinian shortfall), their
163 interactions within different subterranean communities (i.e., the Eltonian shortfall), as well as their
164 sensitivity to environmental perturbations (i.e., the Hutchinsonian shortfall), represent pivotal steps
165 toward consolidating scientific knowledge to support conservation planning (Cardoso et al. 2011a;
166 Diniz-Filho et al. 2013; Hortal et al. 2015) and further emphasizing the ecosystem services that the
167 subterranean fauna provide.

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169 **IMPORTANCE OF SAFEGUARDING SUBTERRANEAN BIODIVERSITY**

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171 The first argument emphasizing the importance of protecting subsurface ecosystems emerges when
172 considering the fascinating evolutionary changes many animals have undergone to become adapted
173 to underground life. Subterranean species are astonishing and bizarre outcomes of evolution (Figure
174 1), and subterranean habitats represent sources of unexpected, oftentimes serendipitous, scientific
175 discoveries. The study of these remarkable species allows us to travel outside the limits of our own
176 imagination, exploring unique biological adaptations (e.g., Soares and Niemiller 2013, Yoshizawa
177 et al. 2014, 2018a), learning about fundamental ecological and evolutionary processes (Juan et al.
178 2010, Mammola 2018), and even gaining insights into human health (e.g., Riddle et al. 2018,
179 Yoshizawa et al. 2018b).

180 Furthermore, being intimately interconnected with both the soil and surface systems,
181 subterranean systems play a critical role in the regulation and provision of ecosystem services and
182 in the functioning of the web of life. Therefore, the survival of humankind is likely to be more
183 dependent on maintenance of healthy subterranean environments than generally recognized. For
184 example, the riparian surface communities and the life cycles of cave-dwelling organisms such as
185 bats, critically depend on intact connections with the underlying subterranean compartments.

186 Over 20% of all living mammals on earth are bats ($n \sim 1,300$), with a huge number of species
187 considered as ‘cave-dependent’ (e.g., *ca.* 46% bat species North America; 70% Europe; 45%
188 Mexico; 77% China); bats use caves as day-roosts, maternity colonies, hibernation sites, and as
189 swarming/mating locations (Furey and Racey 2016, Medellin et al. 2017, Teeling et al. 2018). Their
190 heir persistence depends on the occurrence of natural caves, which can also limit their occurrence
191 on the landscape (Furey and Racey 2016). For example, the charismatic, enigmatic and endangered
192 bumble-bee bat (*Craseonycteris thonglongyai*), which is considered world’s smallest mammal, is
193 strictly restricted to the karst landscape region $\sim 2,000$ km² straddling the Thai-Myanmar border
194 (Puechmaille et al. 2011). As major arthropod predators, bats have been shown to be keystone
195 species ensuring optimal ecosystem functioning across multiple trophic levels (Kunz et al. 2011).

196 They provide vital ecosystem services including insect pest suppression, pollination and
197 seed dispersal of forest plants and trees, and pollination of important food crops. As many bat
198 species feed on crop pests, the cost of managing and controlling these arthropod pest species in the
199 U.S. without bats, is estimated between \$3.7 and \$53 billion/year (Boyles et al. 2011). Many
200 insectivorous bat species feed on disease vector biting-insects that plague humans and livestock,
201 including mosquitoes known vectors of numerous life-threatening human and livestock diseases
202 including Malaria, Zika and West Nile virus (e.g., Caraballo and King 2014, Boyer et al. 2018), as
203 well as aphids that spread plant pathogens (Ng and Perry 2004), and botflies that parasitize both

204 humans and livestock. Bats, including many cave roosting species, are documented as both
205 pollinators and seed dispersers in forests, mangroves and deserts (e.g., Valiente-Banuet et al. 1996,
206 Medellín and Gaona 1999, Azuma et al. 2002, Kunz et al. 2011). Cave-roosting nectar-feeding bats
207 in the southwestern U.S. and northern Mexico are primary pollinators for columnar cacti, including
208 the iconic Saguaro cacti (*Carnegiea gigantea*), which are considered keystone species of the
209 Sonoran Desert (Valiente-Banuet et al. 1996). Additionally, cave roosting nectar-feeding bats have
210 coevolved to pollinate agave, also a keystone species in Mexican deserts and scrub forests and a key
211 ingredient in tequila – production of this beverage employs 70,000 people and garners 1.2 billion
212 dollar/ year in exports alone (Trejo-Salazar et al. 2016). Another lucrative multimillion dollar
213 industry, the durian fruit of southeast Asia is primarily pollinated by a cave roosting bat species
214 (Bumrungsri et al. 2009, Stewart and Dudash 2017). Therefore, bats' role in maintaining the quality
215 of recreational outdoor areas, limiting disease transmission to humans, livestock and agricultural
216 crops, as well as ultimately enhancing human well-being through maintaining ecosystems and
217 agribusiness, is immense. Cave-roosting bat populations and their habitats must be protected to
218 ensure these key ecological services to humans continue (Medellín et al. 2017).

219 Even more important is the role of subterranean systems as freshwater reservoirs.
220 Subterranean environments store and transmit groundwater through the void spaces created by the
221 fracturing and dissolution of (carbonate and other) rocks and unconsolidated sediments that fill river
222 valleys and large basins. It is estimated that one quarter of the human population is completely or
223 partially dependent on drinking water from aquifers (Ford and Williams 2007) and groundwater
224 also largely supports agriculture and industry (Griebler and Avramov 2015).

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226 MAIN GLOBAL THREATS TO SUBTERRANEAN BIODIVERSITY

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228 Subterranean environments and their biota are only superficially known (pun intended). Yet, we do
229 know that most of the threats highlighted by Ripple et al. (2017) in their manifesto are directly
230 affecting the subterranean domain *tout court*, because subterranean ecosystems are inextricably
231 linked to surface processes. For example, they depend on allochthonous energy supplies, which may
232 consist of flood detritus, guano deposition from bats, birds and crickets, or dissolved organic
233 materials in waters percolating from the surface. Thus, when humans adversely change the surface
234 environment, subterranean ecosystems will respond to those changes. Most notably, deforestation
235 (Trajano 2000, Souza-Silva et al. 2015), urbanization, agricultural, industrial, and mining activities
236 (Trajano 2000; Reboleira et al. 2011, Souza-Silva et al. 2015, Sugai et al. 2015), heavy metals and

237 agrochemicals pollution (Reboleira et al. 2013, Di Lorenzo et al. 2015, 2018), non-native species
238 introductions (Howarth et al. 2007, Wynne et al. 2014), tourism (Moldovan et al. 2013), and global
239 climate change (Mammola et al. 2018) negatively affect both biodiversity and subterranean
240 ecological processes. In the following sections, we briefly discuss what we consider the most
241 challenging global threats affecting subterranean ecosystems.

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243 **Habitat loss**

244 Subterranean habitat loss and degradation are occurring in many regions. In several cases, the
245 disturbance of subterranean habitats is direct, although often spatially localized. For instance,
246 quarrying and mining activities often result in removal of the karst substratum, sometimes leading
247 to removal of whole karst hills (Whitten 2009). In this respect, the open pit mining for lignite
248 provides a striking example. Worldwide about 1 billion tons of lignite are produced each year. Only
249 in Germany, one of the largest lignite producers worldwide (170 million tons/year), opencast
250 mining has altered about 200,000 hectares of land including the removal of the aquifer. Moreover,
251 as a prerequisite of opencast mining, the groundwater table in the region needs to be lowered by
252 hundreds of meters to below the mining level and consequently groundwater ecosystems are
253 systematically dewatered for entire districts or even federal states accounting for billions of m³ of
254 groundwater pumped and thousands of km² (Grünewald 2001); a destruction of groundwater
255 habitats at an incomparable dimension. Last but not least, subsequent to mining activities,
256 dewatered zones that re-saturate characteristically bear highly acidic groundwater as a consequence
257 of long-term pyrite oxidation (Wisotzky and Obermann 2001). The impact of mining activities is
258 also evident in ferruginous landscapes in Brazil, one of the largest extractive areas in the world,
259 where hundreds of caves have been destroyed by quarrying and mine excavation and groundwater
260 has been polluted by mineral waste, heavy metals, and other contaminants (Souza-Silva et al. 2015,
261 Sugai et al. 2015).

262 Furthermore, construction activities can directly threaten subterranean ecosystems.
263 Construction of infrastructure and tunnel drilling can entirely or partially destroy subterranean
264 habitats. For example, road construction within karst areas of Slovenia has resulted in the discovery
265 of more than 350 caves, with many being completely destroyed (Knez and Slabe 2016).
266 Development along rivers and streams, such as channelizing, regulating, and damming, can result in
267 major hydrological changes and loss of habitat, especially in the hyporheic zone and the subjacent
268 aquifers (e.g., Piegay et al. 2009). Modified river flow channels interrupt the connectivity between
269 surface and subterranean water and can lower the water table; similarly, diverting river flow may

270 result in both flooding or desiccation within subterranean systems, which results in direct loss of
271 habitat.

272 Other large-scale human activities result in a more generalized and pervasive degradation of
273 the subterranean environment, especially in those areas where deforestation, urbanization, and
274 industrial activities are increasing—including, but not limited to, vast portions of Southeast Asia
275 and South America. Deforestation, in particular, represents one of the major ecological threats to
276 subterranean habitats (Jiang et al. 2014), especially in tropical areas (Trajano 2000). In fact, loss of
277 surface vegetation can quickly result in habitat alterations (e.g., desertification), that may alter
278 subterranean hydrological regimes and nutrient inputs from the surface. The resultant degradation
279 of the subterranean environment can either reduce populations of subterranean species or result in
280 the extinction of endemic animal populations.

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282 **Groundwater overexploitation and contamination**

283 The decline in freshwater resources was highlighted as one of the most critical negative trends that
284 humanity is facing (Finlayson et al. 2019, Ripple et al. 2017), which can be considered a clarion call
285 to increase global efforts to halt and reverse the ongoing degradation of groundwater resources.
286 Anthropogenic impacts in groundwater aquifers include local and diffuse sources of contamination
287 (e.g., Schwarzenbach et al. 2010, Lapworth et al. 2012), overexploitation of groundwater resources
288 (Wada et al. 2010, Gleeson et al. 2012), and climate change (see next section). Maintaining healthy
289 groundwater communities appears to be a critical component of reducing anthropogenic impacts,
290 given the potential ecosystem services provided by most of these organisms (Griebler and Avramov
291 2015). Indeed, the eventual collapse of groundwater communities would in turn hinder the self-
292 purifying processes provided by these organisms, thus accelerating the degradation of this precious
293 resource.

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295 **Climate change**

296 Climate change represents one of the most complex and challenging issues in the Anthropocene
297 (Ripple et al. 2017), and while its effects are already visible on the surface, the impacts on
298 subterranean systems are poorly understood. In the medium- to long-term, climate change is
299 expected to modify both deep terrestrial (Pipan et al. 2018) and aquatic subterranean ecosystems
300 (Taylor et al. 2013). Given that deep subterranean habitats are typically characterized by
301 environmental stability, it has been proposed that most subterranean-adapted organisms have a
302 reduced ability to cope with significant variation in temperature (Novak et al. 2014, Raschmanová

303 et al. 2018), resulting in these species being potentially highly sensitive to climate change
304 (Mammola et al. 2018). However, it seems there is extensive variability in thermal tolerance among
305 species related to evolutionary history and degree of subterranean adaptation (Novak et al. 2014,
306 Rizzo et al. 2015, Raschmanová et al. 2018). In addition to thermal stability, relative humidity
307 deficit is another important factor for subterranean-adapted species. High water saturation of the
308 atmosphere is essential for the survival of most terrestrial subterranean organisms (Howarth 1983).
309 Desiccation of terrestrial habitats due to global environmental change is expected to have severe
310 negative impacts on subterranean communities (Shu et al. 2013); some taxa may be forced to retreat
311 to greater depths, where energy sources are usually scarcer, while others may go extinct. Moreover,
312 climate change likely will cause indirect effects underground, such as promoting colonization and
313 establishment by alien species (Wynne et al. 2014) and variations in external trophic inputs. Strong
314 inference-based predictions concerning the effects of climate change on organisms dwelling in
315 climatically stable environments represent a challenging and largely unstudied field of inquiry
316 (Mammola 2018); because the planet is already changing due to global climate change, in-depth
317 studies are needed to understand how these changes are affecting subterranean habitats.

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319 **Intrinsic vulnerability of the subterranean fauna**

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321 While the global issues discussed above represent the main threats to ecosystems, their impact is
322 more profound on subterranean organisms owing to their intrinsic vulnerability. There are several
323 reasons why subterranean fauna is vulnerable, including:

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325 i) most subterranean species are short-range endemics with extremely restricted distributions
326 (Trontelj et al. 2009, Eme et al. 2018). Due to this range restrictedness, geographically
327 localized threats are much more likely to have a global effect on biodiversity, as a result of
328 irreversible species loss, than is the case in surface systems;

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330 ii) energy limited and stable subterranean environments have selected for long-lived species
331 with low basic metabolisms and fecundity (Voituron et al. 2011, Fišer et al. 2013). Thus,
332 population growth is slow resulting in population instability due to catastrophic or stochastic
333 events;

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335 iii) subterranean species often have a low tolerance for shifts in abiotic conditions, and even
336 small alterations in the environment may have major consequences (Novak et al. 2014,
337 Raschmanová et al. 2018); and

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339 iv) it is considered that there is little redundancy in subterranean communities (Gibert and
340 Deharveng 2002). Simple communities with few species and often no redundancy of
341 functional roles in turn exhibit a low ecological resilience and are more vulnerable to
342 perturbations and disturbance.

343

344 **PROPOSED ACTIONS TO ILLUMINATE RESEARCH, CONSERVATION AND** 345 **EDUCATIONAL NEEDS**

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347 Ripple et al. (2017) proposed several effective steps that humanity can implement to create a
348 transition to sustainability. Their recommendations for surface environments would also aid in the
349 preservation of the subterranean world, i.e., reversing most of the ongoing negative trends in surface
350 ecosystems will have an immediate positive influence on the preservation of subterranean
351 ecosystems. From a discipline-oriented perspective, subterranean biologists can identify the key
352 requirements for the protection of subterranean habitats and also work to increase the awareness of
353 the subterranean natural heritage amongst the general public; this hopefully will increase political
354 commitment (see Dror 2018). General effective measures are provided below:

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356 i) collecting the much needed information on life history, ecology, distribution, and
357 sensitivity to environmental alterations of subterranean restricted species (see Table 1), as
358 well as external species that depend on subterranean ecosystems, like cave-roosting bats;

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360 ii) expanding efforts to document and monitor subterranean diversity through the use and
361 evaluation of standardized sampling techniques (e.g., Dole–Olivier et al. 2009; Wynne et al.
362 2018), as well as vulnerability assessments (with adaptive management protocols) to
363 determine threat levels to subterranean ecosystems and sensitive species populations (e.g.,
364 Di Lorenzo et al. 2018, Tanalgo et al. 2018);

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366 ii) renewing efforts to implement direct conservation measures, prioritizing communication
367 with political powers and public institutions to develop well-funded and well-managed

368 networks of protected areas for a significant proportion of the world's subterranean hotspots
369 of diversity. Insofar as funds invested in conservation will be limited, special efforts are
370 needed to define priority principles and criteria for channeling conservation actions (Rabelo
371 et al. 2018);

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373 iv) renewing efforts in the threat assessment of subterranean species using the International
374 Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List criteria. Currently very few subterranean
375 species have been assessed (*ca.* 850 species), and the subjectivity in applying the criteria
376 across a large diversity of taxa assessed separately by various specialists has led to
377 numerous inconsistencies. The standardization of interpretation of criteria and
378 implementation of clear guidelines applicable across taxa can greatly improve the current
379 situation (Cardoso et al. 2011b), a process in which the involvement of the IUCN SSC Cave
380 Invertebrate Specialist Group will be fundamental. Through these steps, we can improve our
381 ability to assess the conservation status of subterranean species, as a sound basis for global
382 and local conservation policy, as well as for designing efficient species and site conservation
383 plans;

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385 v) developing models to quantify the effects of global climate change on subterranean
386 communities. Although climate change is one of the most pervasive global impacts (Ripple
387 et al., 2017), studies on the effects of climate change on cave ecosystems are few, and their
388 results are often inconclusive. There is an urgent need to achieve an in-depth understanding
389 of the global change issue from a subterranean perspective, through the analyses of
390 empirical data (Pipan et al. 2018), experiments (Rizzo et al. 2015), modeling (Mammola &
391 Leroy 2018), and simulation studies;

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393 vi) promoting research into the biology and ecology of groundwater organisms so that they
394 may act, when appropriate, as sentinel species of clean waters in water quality monitoring
395 activities. In addition, the use of most widespread contaminants that accumulate in
396 subterranean aquifers, e.g., fertilizers and pesticides in agricultural landscapes, should be
397 limited and a sustainable use of groundwater promoted (Danielopol et al. 2004);

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399 vii) in recognition of the interconnectivity of surface and subterranean compartments, it is
400 important to implement conservation measures bridging these environments. Fostering
401 interdisciplinary scientific cooperation will be critical, i.e., by designing specific studies

402 involving broad collaborations with taxonomists, ecologists, biologists, conservation
403 biologists, ecotoxicologists, geologists, hydrologists, and soil scientists, who typically work
404 in surface environments;

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406 viii) developing educational programs for both primary and secondary students and the lay
407 public to heighten awareness regarding the sensitivity of subterranean organisms, as well as
408 emphasizing the connection between surface and subsurface ecosystems. We recommend,
409 together with local communities and caving associations, developing classroom curricula,
410 subterranean-themed public exhibitions, guided and regulated outdoor activities to karst and
411 other natural terrains (like rivers) sustaining rich subterranean habitats, and other outreach
412 activities in areas where communities both reside and are reliant upon the subterranean
413 environments. More broadly, social media campaigns using internet, television, radio, and
414 print media, will heighten public awareness of subterranean environments and the unique
415 animal communities they harbour; and

416

417 ix) empowering local and indigenous communities in decision-making and management of
418 caves, watersheds, and geological formations that contain subterranean systems, making
419 them aware of the natural heritage of their territory.

420

421 **EPILOGUE**

422

423 Although we represent a small group of scientists within the large and heterogeneous community of
424 subterranean biologists, we aimed to provide a multifaceted view of the global issues affecting the
425 subterranean world. As we have experienced during the writing of this work, the perspective from
426 which these issues are observed by the different authors can be quite diverse. Yet, we all agreed on
427 the fact that these systems are poorly recognized as conservation priorities, that they provide vital
428 ecosystem services to humankind, and that they represent a true research frontier. Most importantly,
429 we reached a full consensus in highlighting the high vulnerability of the subterranean world and the
430 seriousness of the threats affecting it, as well as the need of making this information available to
431 stakeholders and the general public. Indeed, although the conservation issues we discuss are well
432 understood within our community and partially covered in the specialised literature, they have never
433 been formalised in a scientific publication written for a broader audience. As with most ecosystems
434 important to supporting both diversity and providing ecological services, we reaffirm that it is our

435 duty to humankind and toward sustainable stewardship of our planet to develop strategies to achieve
436 their preservation.

437

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759 **Table 1.** The eight knowledge shortfalls of subterranean biodiversity (Hortal et al. 2015, Ficetola et
760 al. 2019) and specific problems related to subterranean biology and the conservation of
761 subterranean species.

762

Shortfall	Knowledge gap	Specific problems in subterranean biology
Linnean	Species taxonomy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Lack of recent estimation of subterranean diversity (see Culver and Holsinger 1992) – High prevalence of cryptic species (Delić et al. 2017) – Bias favouring studies on large versus subterranean microscopic animals (e.g., meiofauna), or certain taxonomic groups against others (Zagamajster et al. 2010)
Wallacean	Species distribution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – High prevalence of endemic species (Culver and Pipan 2009) – High prevalence of cryptic species (Eme et al. 2018) – Lack of global dataset of subterranean species distribution (Culver et al. 2013)
Prestonian	Species abundance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Lack of reliable estimations due to habitat inaccessibility (see Racovitzan shortfall) – Intrinsic bias of most available methods due to low population densities – Difficulties on designing capture-mark-recapture experiments due to the lack of knowledge on life cycles (see Raukiæran shortfall)
Darwinian	Evolutionary patterns	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Unknown relationships between many subterranean and surface lineages (Juan et al. 2010) – High range of variation in diversification patterns across different lineages (Juan et al. 2010) – Difficulty to date diversification events and distinguish among diversification mechanisms (Morvan et al. 2013)
Hutchinsonian	Species abiotic tolerance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Small population available for experiments – Breeding species for experiment purposes is often challenging
Raunkiæran	Species traits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Lack of databases of functional traits allowing to predict effect of impacts on ecosystem level – Lack of life cycles in most species due to difficulties in monitoring species populations in its habitats – Lack of biological traits predicting potential to disperse and colonize new habitats (e.g., presence of larvae) in freshwater and anchialine aquatic species (Kano and Kase 2004, Gonzalez et al. 2017)
Eltonian	Biotic interactions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Lack of knowledge on the structure of ecological networks that help unravel the mechanisms promoting and maintaining subterranean biodiversity (Mammola 2018) – Lack of network analyses to calculate the resilience of subterranean environments upon anthropogenic perturbations
Racovitzan	Habitat extension	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – The majority of subterranean habitats are not accessible/explorable, unless by indirect means (Culver & Pipan 2014, Ficetola et al. 2019, Mammola 2018) – Subterranean habitats accessible to humans (e.g., caves) are often challenging to explore, requiring knowledge on caving techniques and specific equipment (Zagamajster et al. 2010, Wynne et al. 2018)

763

764

765 **FIGURE CAPTIONS**

766

767 **Figure 1.** Examples of the diversity of life in subterranean habitats. **a)** *Leptodirus hochenwartii*
768 Schmidt, 1832 (Coleoptera), the first obligate subterranean invertebrate ever described; **b)** The
769 subterranean specialized silverfish *Squamatinia algharbica* Mendes & Reboleira, 2012
770 (*Zygentoma*). **c)** *Troglocladius hajdi* Andersen et al., 2016 (Diptera), the only specialized
771 subterranean species that have retained functional wings; **d)** A specialized subterranean microwhip
772 scorpion in the genus *Eukoenia* Börner, 1901 (Palpigradi)—palpigrads are one of the most
773 enigmatic and understudied orders of arachnids in the world; **e)** A specialized *Troglocheles*
774 Zacharda, 1980 (Acari) hunting on a water puddle in a cave; **f)** A specialized subterranean
775 harvestman in the genus *Giupponia* Pérez & Kury, 2002 (Opiliones); **g)** An eyeless spider *Hadites*
776 *tegenarioides* Keyserling, 1862 (Agelenidae); **h)** The specialized subterranean giant pseudoscorpion
777 *Titanobochica magna* Zaragoza & Reboleira, 2010 (Pseudoscorpiones); **i)** A specialized
778 subterranean crustacean in the genus *Spelaeogammarus* da Silva Brum, 1975 (Amphipoda); **j)** An
779 undescribed subterranean isopod from the family Cirolanidae—due to the remarkable
780 depigmentation of this species, internal organs are clearly visible; **k)** A blind crustacean belonging
781 to the genus *Morlockia* García-Valdecasas, 1984 (Remipedia)—Remipedia is the latest described
782 class of crustaceans, so far having representatives exclusively in anchialine systems; **l)** *Marifugia*
783 *cavatica* Absolon & Hrabe, 1930 (Annelida)—the only freshwater cave-dwelling tube worm in the
784 world; **m)** The blind tetra, *Stygichthys typhlops* Brittan & Böhlke, 1965 (Characidae), one out of the
785 nearly 250 cavefishes described in the world; **n)** The olm, *Proteus anguinus* Laurenti, 1768
786 (Amphibia), the first subterranean animal ever described; **o)** Lesser horseshoe bats *Rhinolophus*
787 *hipposideros* Bechstein, 1980 (Rhinolophidae) hibernating in a cave—bats provide critical
788 ecological services and are keystone species in several ecosystems. Photo credits/by courtesy of: **a)**
789 Dražina T; **b, h)** Reboleira ASPs; **c,l)** Bedek J; **d)** Chiarle A; **e)** Tomasinelli F; **f,i,j,m)** Ferreira RL;
790 **g)** Rožman T; **k)** Strecker U; **n)** Krstinić B; **o)** Biggi E.