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Human actions could lead to “sixth mass extinction” – UCT professor

New course sheds light on how planet has been shaped by biodiversity

With 17 animals classified as critically endangered by the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and another 28 classified as in danger of becoming extinct in the wild, we really need to consider the impact of our actions on our planet’s ecosystems, says University of Cape Town palaeobiologist Professor Anusuya Chinsamy-Turan. Throughout Earth’s history there have been five major mass extinction events, and many biologists believe that we could experience a “sixth mass extinction event” in our lifetime.

Because of human activities, it is likely that iconic animals such as the Sumatran tiger, mountain gorilla and the giant panda, and plants such as cycads, as well as other types of organisms, could become extinct in the wild in the near future.

In the massive open online course (MOOC), Extinctions: Past and Present, Professor Chinsamy-Turan delves into the rich biodiversity that unfolded on our planet through 3.8 billion years. During this time five mass extinction events wreaked havoc on life on our planet. Professor Chinsamy-Turan speaks to a number of leading scientists about their research into these past extinction events and/or the threats that modern ecosystems currently face. Extinctions: Past and Present aims to raise awareness about the threats our planet is facing and what we can do to be better protectors of Earth’s biodiversity and fragile ecosystems.

Professor Chinsamy-Turan is an accomplished scientist with a strong commitment to stimulating interest in science. She was South African Woman of the Year in 2005 and the 2013 recipient of The World Academy of Science’s Sub-Saharan Prize for the Public Understanding and Popularization of Science. She has an impressive track record of academic publications, as well as many popular articles and two popular-level books.

This free, popular-level course starts on 20 March 2017 and is open for registration on <https://www.futurelearn.com/courses/extinctions-past-present>. Extinctions: Past and Present is created by UCT and was filmed on location at UCT, Iziko South African Museum, West Coast Fossil Park, Kirstenbosch National Botanical Gardens, and Table Mountain National Park.

ENDS

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