Phytoplankton. Images copyright Smithsonian Environmental Research Center.

People tend to pay a lot of attention to large animals and plants, which we find interesting and attractive. We know that bias affects policy decisions; we preferentially protect “charismatic megafauna.” But the big appealing creatures wouldn’t exist without the tiny, uncharismatic ones that form the base of the food web.

And those little things may be disappearing unnoticed. A new study in *Nature* (subscription required) by Boris Worm and colleagues at Dalhousie University concludes that phytoplankton (the tiny photosynthetic organisms in the ocean), which account for roughly half of the earth’s primary productivity, have been declining at a rate of about 1% per year in most of the world’s oceans since 1899. There is a lot of short-term variability, but they conclude that long-term global decline is “unequivocal.” They link that long-term decline to increasing sea surface temperatures.

If you can’t access the paper itself, *New Scientist*‘s Short Sharp Science blog has a brief story about it.