

Conservation: Newspaper Articles

The value of the last

Jeffrey A McNeely (chief scientist at IUCN-The World Conservation Union)

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Just how far should we go to save the last of a species? Jeffrey A McNeely, the chief scientist at IUCN-The World Conservation Union, argues in this week's Green Room that even a little effort can reap huge reward.

Hiking through the vast Wollemi National Park in Australia's Blue Mountains in 1994, David Noble stumbled upon a hidden rainforest gorge.

As a National Parks and Wildlife Officer, Noble quickly recognised that this tiny patch of habitat was very special indeed.

The isolated gorge contained less than 100 mature trees of a species that had long been thought extinct, with fossils stretching back 90 million years.

Now known as the Wollemi pine, it was found to be closely related to the monkey puzzle tree.

Noble's dilemma was whether to simply keep walking and let nature take the tree on its inevitable course towards extinction, or to trumpet this major discovery to the outside world, with the danger that plant fanciers would flock to the gorge and "love the tree to death" by accidentally bringing in new species or diseases.

Or should some of the trees be removed from the wild and put in captivity, where they could be carefully nurtured and protected against any remaining threat?

The latter could prove to be extremely expensive, but to what end?



“ The actions of conservationists to save extremely rare species could be compared to the heroic feats of physicians to keep their patients alive as long as possible ”

Soaring return

Conservationists face these kinds of dilemmas on a regular basis.

One of the strongest arguments for conservation is that every species has a role to play in the great drama of life. But once a species has been reduced to only a handful of individuals, surely the show can go on without these bit players.

After all, we have already lost over 99% of the species that have ever existed, due mainly to natural causes.

So why should we spend our scarce resources to conserve species that are down to their last gasp?

The actions of conservationists to save extremely rare species could be compared to the heroic feats of physicians to keep their patients alive as long as possible.

What portion of a country's health budget should be spent for keeping healthy people healthy, and how much should go to prolonging a life that is already nearing its end?

In the US, for example, about 30% of Medicare's \$250bn annual budget is spent on the terminally ill.

Others can debate the ethical and economic issues of human health budgets, but the point here is to ask whether spending, for instance, \$40m to save the last 22 California condors might have been better spent on species with a higher probability of longer-term survival.

But this investment has led to the recovery of the California condor to the extent that it is now being reintroduced to its habitat of thousands of years ago, in the Grand Canyon in Arizona.

A battle

A key consideration is that a species is not truly extinct until the last one is gone.

Species that are down to their last few individuals are capable of making a remarkable recovery, either on their own or with a little help from their human friends.

As another example, the Arabian oryx was teetering on the verge of extinction when captive breeding steadily multiplied the herd to a sufficient size that some could be re-introduced to establish a wild population in Oman and, one hopes, Saudi Arabia in the near future.

Rhinos, whooping cranes, and black-footed ferrets have similar stories of conservation action leading to recovery.

Some have suggested that conservationists should resign themselves to becoming historians of extinctions rather than soldiers in what might seem a doomed conservation battle.

Yet the many examples of bringing species back from the brink demonstrate that once we know that a species is in trouble, it can often be saved - if we are willing to make the necessary investments.

The Wollemi pine shows that human ingenuity can find solutions to conservation challenges.

Good investment

First, the remote rainforest home of the Wollemi pine was declared off limits except to National Parks and Wildlife staff.

Second, a mass propagation project in a well-protected nursery has produced hundreds of saplings, a reproduction rate far higher than would be seen in the Australian bush.

Even better, their rarity has given them such an outstanding value that when the first available captive-bred Wollemi pines were put on auction at Sotheby's in October 2005, they reportedly earned over US\$1m. Sotheby's Chairman, Justin Millar, stated, "These are really, I'd have to say, up there amongst the most exciting things I've ever sold."

A portion of the funds earned was returned to conserving the remaining trees. And a whole new lucrative industry of captive breeding of this species has been generated in Australia.

This is a remarkable success story for one of the rarest trees in the world, a relic from the time of the dinosaurs that was saved from the brink of extinction and is now earning a healthy income.

It provides a vivid example of why we should invest in saving the last of a species.

After all, we seem to have no problem spending billions of dollars on developing more effective means of destroying each other, let alone prolonging the lives of the terminally ill.

Why not spend the relatively modest amounts needed to help to save the diversity of life on Planet Earth?



Who would question the value of conserving the rhino?

More species slide to extinction

Richard Black

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The polar bear and hippopotamus are for the first time listed as species threatened with extinction by the world's biodiversity agency.

They are included in the Red List of Threatened Species published by the World Conservation Union (IUCN) which names more than 16,000 at-risk species.

Many sharks, and freshwater fish in Europe and Africa, are newly included.

The IUCN says loss of biodiversity is increasing despite a global convention committing governments to stem it.

"The 2006 Red List shows a clear trend; biodiversity loss is increasing, not slowing down," said IUCN director-general Achim Steiner.

"The implications of this trend for the productivity and resilience of ecosystems and the lives and livelihoods of billions of people who depend on them are far-reaching."

Overall, 16,119 species are included in this year's Red List, the most detailed and authoritative regular survey of the health of the plant, fungi and animal kingdoms.

This represents more than a third of the total number of species surveyed; the list includes one in three amphibians, a quarter of coniferous trees, and one in four mammals.

"The more species we assess, the more threatened species we find," commented Jean-Christophe Vie, deputy co-ordinator of IUCN's species programme.

"And because it is such a massive effort to assess a species, to gather all the data, get it all peer-reviewed and so on, 16,000 is a massive underestimate of the true problem," he told the BBC News website.

WHAT ARE THE THREATS?

Human activities threaten 99% of Red List species

Habitat loss and degradation are the main threats, affecting more than 80% of listed birds, mammals and amphibians

Climate change is increasingly recognised as a serious threat

Other issues relating to human activity include introduction of alien species, over-exploitation and pollution

Climate and hunting

Polar bears are particularly affected by loss of Arctic ice, which the IUCN attributes to climatic change.

They need ice floes in order to hunt seals and other prey; without it, their food supply will decline. There is also evidence that the snow caves where they raise their young are melting earlier in the year.

Polar bears are listed as Vulnerable to Extinction based on forecasts that their population will decline by 50% to 100% over the next 50 to 100 years.

In the tropics, the common hippopotamus has entered the Red List for the first time because the population in the Democratic Republic of Congo has declined spectacularly - by about 95% in a decade.

The country's turbulent political situation has allowed unregulated hunting for meat and for the ivory in their teeth.

"Regional conflicts and political instability in some African countries have created hardship for many of the region's inhabitants, and the impact on wildlife has been equally devastating," said IUCN chief scientist Jeffrey McNeely.

The common hippo's decline in DRC has led to a Vulnerable listing even though other African populations including the largest, in Zambia, have held up well.

The much less well known pygmy hippo has suffered from illegal logging and poor protection in several West African nations, leading to an upgrade in its status from Vulnerable to Endangered.

Marine misery

For the first time, this year's Red List includes a comprehensive region-by-region assessment on some groups of marine animals.

It shows that sharks and rays - members of the elasmobranch group of fish - are disappearing at an unprecedented rate across the globe.

About 20% of the 547 species surveyed merit inclusion on the Red List.

Some of these are fish which were once common on dinner plates in the UK and surrounding countries. The angel shark has been declared Extinct in the North Sea and Critically Endangered globally, while the common skate's status has also been upgraded to Critically Endangered.

The IUCN says that with fisheries extending into ever deeper zones of the ocean which are largely unregulated, populations of many species are set to decline sharply.

"The desperate situation of many sharks and rays is just the tip of the iceberg," said Craig Hilton-Taylor of the IUCN Red List Unit.

"It is critical that urgent action to greatly improve management practices and implement conservation measures, such as agreed non-fishing areas, enforced mesh-size regulations and international catch limits is taken before it is too late."

In the Mediterranean, freshwater fish are faring even worse than their sea-going counterparts.

Fifty-six percent of the 252 species endemic to the Mediterranean are threatened with extinction, the IUCN says; while in East Africa, a quarter of freshwater fish are at risk, which could carry important consequences for a human population highly dependent on fish for protein.

Limited success

It is not all doom and gloom. The first optimistic note is that the overall number of species in this Red List is not significantly higher than in the last edition published in November 2004, which numbered 15,589 species on the brink.

And the number of species believed to have gone extinct over the last 500 years has not changed, a reflection of the fact that conservation efforts tend to intensify as final oblivion approaches.

The IUCN notes some marked conservation successes among the much more frequent stories of a slide towards oblivion.

The number of white-tailed eagles has soared in many European nations, and the bird's status has been downgraded from Near Threatened to Least Concern.

A recent decision by the Indian government to phase out a veterinary drug which was poisoning the common vulture, causing numbers to fall by 97%, is also cited as a simple measure which can bring great success.



The white-tailed eagle is a rare conservation success, says IUCN

But the overall message is that biodiversity continues to decline, despite the UN Biodiversity Convention which commits governments to halt the trend by 2010.

Jean-Christophe Vie believes there is a vast gap between what governments have promised and the action they are taking.

"Everything we find shows that it doesn't happen," he said, "and there is very little chance to achieve this goal unless there is a drastic change and governments decide to tackle the roots of species extinction."

People and wildlife jostle for land in East Africa

Rodrique Ngowi, Amboseli National Park, Kenya

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http://www.mg.co.za/articlePage.aspx?articleid=262114&area=/insight/insight_africa/

Elephants, buffaloes and other wild animals drink water from one side of a swamp, while Maasai warriors watch hundreds of cattle graze on another side as the tropical sun sears the parched land of the wildlife sanctuary.

Wildlife officials recently bent stringent conservation regulations to allow cattle into this national park -- the only permanent source of water in the region -- to help the Maasai save precious livestock from a punishing drought.

Conservation workers warn that Amboseli's delicate swamps and streams face a severe threat from government plans to hand over management of the park to the local county council, a move that will likely result in the granting of rights to Maasai for collection of firewood and water in the sanctuary and to graze their cattle there regularly.

Competition for pastures and water could drive wildlife out of this tiny sanctuary and intensify conflict between animals and people in a region already scarred by clashes over scarce resources, said Connie Maina, spokesperson for the Kenya Wildlife Services (KWS).

While the prolonged drought has yet to kill any animals in wildlife sanctuaries, it has already started to push elephants to leave national parks and game reserves to search for food and water near human settlements -- triggering conflicts between pachyderms and people.

Dwindling wildlife would discourage tourists from visiting Amboseli, Kenya's second-highest earner of tourism revenues. That would hurt the local community that uses the earnings for education, health services and digging wells, said deputy senior warden Thomas Mailu.

Conservation groups have sued the government to stop the handover to Olkejuado county council, whose predecessor ran the sanctuary from 1961 until environmental degradation caused by mismanagement and internal wrangling prompted the central government to take over in 1974.

Local and international conservation groups say the county council politicians lack the ability, experience and qualified personnel to conserve wildlife and their habitat, maintain roads and provide security for tourists and animals in a border region troubled by armed banditry.

Going ahead

Still, government spokesperson Alfred Mutua said the government will go ahead with plans to hand over the park to the council.

"The government is empowering the local community so that they can benefit

directly from the resources in their area," Mutua said.

Amboseli is essentially a huge salt lake that fills with water during the rainy season and dries up completely in arid months, except for the swamps and streams that provide water for wild animals, migratory birds, people and cattle.

The water comes from rain and melting snow that seeps from Kilimanjaro -- Africa's tallest mountain that dominates the skyline from neighbouring Tanzania.

Amboseli's new status "is going to be absolutely suicidal as far as the management of wildlife is concerned" because the removal of stringent conservation controls could lead to the drying up of water sources, Mailu said.

The Maasai, however, said they are happy that they will be able to set new priorities over access to water and pastures for cattle and wildlife once the sanctuary is handed over. They plan to press their councillors to open up more parts of Amboseli to livestock.

"We could negotiate with them because they are our people. If it is cows, they have cows like these, so they are people that we could talk to and they could listen to us," nomadic cattle herder Saiyanka Mollel said after washing a herd of 400 cows that later grazed in Amboseli.

"Cows are our life," Mollel said as two elephant calves pressed heads together and used their trunks to fight in the distance.

Amboseli is the second-highest earner of revenues among Kenya's 59 national parks and reserves. Only six of these make a profit and finance conservation in others. Taking Amboseli from the KWS would hurt the less popular sanctuaries, said the KWS's Maina.

But local tourist guide Saitoti Saibolob said the new arrangement is fairer to residents who would get a bigger portion of revenues since they share the land with wildlife and often lose cattle to wildlife.

Other countries

Kenya is not the only East African nation struggling to ensure wildlife and people share water and land. Ethiopian authorities have relocated members of local ethnic groups from the Nech-Sar National Park and handed over its management to a private firm.

The Netherlands-based African Parks Foundation is also expected to take over Ethiopia's Omo National Park, home to the Mursi, towering nomads famous for huge clay plates inserted into the lips and ear lobes of their women.

Government plans to evict them "would severely disrupt their present economy, a semi-nomadic mix of cattle herding, riverbank cultivation following the Omo flood and bushland cultivation following the main rains", Survival, a London-based group that helps tribal people, said on its website.

One official, however, said Ethiopia needs to develop the tourism industry, which is

Africa's second-largest source of foreign exchange, after oil.

"For the last 40 years we have totally neglected our conservation areas and wildlife," said Tadesse Hailu, head of the Ethiopian Wildlife and Conservation Department.

In Tanzania, conservation workers are concerned that officials are studying an application by a Dubai-based businessman to build a hotel on the route of the annual migration of more than 1,5-million wildebeest, zebras and other herbivores -- the world's most spectacular wildlife sight.

The planned hotel in the Serengeti National Park would violate stringent conservation rules that ban the construction of permanent structures inside national parks. -- Sapa-AP