

ENDANGERED SPECIES

It is estimated that there could be as many as 14 million species of plants and animals in the world, although only around 2 million have been officially recorded so far. More than 12,000 species of animals and plants now face extinction, due largely to human activities. Some will die out before they have even been discovered.



WHY ARE SO MANY ANIMALS IN DANGER?

Habitat destruction

Tropical rainforests are the world's richest natural habitats, housing more than two-thirds of all plant and animal species on earth. Sadly, the rainforests are being destroyed at an alarming rate – with more than half already gone – for timber, and cleared so that the land can be used to graze farmed animals or to provide housing for expanding human populations. If rainforests disappear, all the plants and animals living there will be lost forever.

Six species of great ape who live in the tropical rainforests – the eastern and western gorilla, chimpanzee, bonobo, Sumatran and Bornean orang-utan – now face extinction. This is due to habitat destruction, and hunting.

Pandas live in the bamboo forests of China, another habitat that is being destroyed to make way for a rapidly growing human population. The panda population has been reduced to 1500.

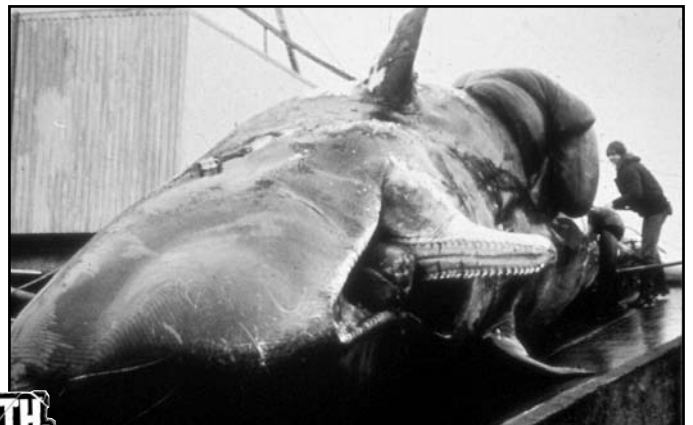
Hunting and trapping

People kill animals for their fur (to make coats and rugs), for their bones and horn (to make medicine or ornaments), for their flesh, and, sometime, sadly, simply for the fun of it. Many animals are also trapped in the wild to supply the pet trade, or for use in circuses, zoos and aquaria. Others – in particular, primates – are captured and sold to research laboratories to be used in experiments.

The Tiger is just one of many species of wild cat now facing extinction because of hunting and habitat loss.

At the beginning of the 20th century, there were more than 100,000 tigers. Today, it is estimated that between 5000 and 7000 tigers remain in the wild. Three of the eight sub-species (the Bali, Caspian and Javanese) are already extinct. In the past, tigers were hunted for their skins (to make coats and rugs) and for sport. Today, tigers are still being killed for traditional Asian medicine. Virtually all of their body parts, including bones, eyes and whiskers, are used. Many Asian countries have recently signed up to the conservation agreement known as CITES (see *box overleaf*) and have agreed to ban the trade in tiger parts. Enforcing the law, however, is difficult and costly, while the profits made from the illegal trade are so great that some people feel it is worth the risk.

Whales have been ruthlessly hunted for centuries and, as a result, several species – including the giant blue whale – have been driven to the brink of extinction. This prompted the International Whaling Commission (IWC) to impose a moratorium (ban) on all commercial whaling in 1985. Norway, Japan and Iceland have continued to kill some species of whales (see *Whale and Dolphin factsheet*).





Rhinos have roamed the earth for more than 40 million years, but after only a few centuries of intensive hunting they are now severely threatened. The world population of all five species is fewer than 15,000 animals.

Rhinos are killed for their horn, which is ground up and used in

traditional Asian medicine. This slaughter continues despite a CITES ban on the trade.

African elephants, the world's largest land animals, have also suffered a catastrophic decline. A century ago there were 10 million animals, 20 years ago there were one million, but today there are only about 300,000 African elephants left. Most were killed for their ivory tusks, which are made into trivial trinkets and jewellery. In 1990, CITES banned the sale and trade in ivory and other elephant products but many elephants are still illegally shot by poachers.



CITES (The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species)

CITES is a United Nations agreement that protects endangered species by regulating or banning their trade. Unfortunately, not all countries belong to CITES, and enforcement efforts vary among those that have signed up. Even when someone is prosecuted, the punishments are usually trivial – ranging from minimal fines to short jail sentences, and are therefore little deterrent.

Wildlife trafficking is one of the major forms of smuggling in the world, along with drugs and weapons.

Pollution

Rivers, seas and lakes are being poisoned with sewage, oil and toxic chemicals from industry. Human refuse also pollutes the environment and kills wildlife. Crops are sprayed with chemicals to kill bugs and insects, which in turn harm the animals who feed on them. Global warming and climate change caused by, amongst other factors, air pollution, also threatens lots of species with extinction.

In 2004, researchers identified 146 dead zones around the world's coastlines, areas where the dissolved oxygen levels are so low that no marine life can be sustained.

The animals who live in the oceans, particularly those at the top of the food chain, absorb these poisonous chemicals (including pesticides and industrial waste). For example, the bodies of seals, whales and dolphins and even Arctic polar bears have been found to contain high levels of toxic chemicals, which damage their ability to reproduce.

Why does it matter?

Some people say that we should conserve animals and plants because they might be useful to us in the future. It is also argued that, in the long term, our own survival may depend on maintaining the planet's ecosystems. This means preserving other species and maintaining the planet's biodiversity – or variety of life.

Animal Aid believe quite simply that we have a responsibility to protect animals for their own sake and especially those species which are at risk because of our actions.

Solutions

Conserve the world's natural habitats. Keeping alive endangered species in zoos is not a solution, because it becomes enormously difficult and expensive to repatriate them to their natural habitat. If we carry on polluting and destroying these habitats, repatriation becomes literally impossible. Only through protection of their habitats will wild animals survive.

Ban the international trade in products made from endangered species and enforce the laws that already exist to protect wildlife.

Educate people to help stop the trade in animal products.

Stop polluting the environment with poisonous wastes.

WHAT YOU CAN DO!

- **Educate others about the plight of endangered species, and, if you go abroad, don't buy products made from them.**
- **Contact the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers (www.btcv.org) and help manage local nature reserves.**
- **Write to your MP (to find your MP, visit www.locata.co.uk/commons) and ask them to support legislation to protect natural habitats.**
- **Avoid polluting packaging, and don't buy products made from tropical hardwood. Always look for the 'FSC' symbol to ensure that wood is from a sustainable source.**
- **Join Animal Aid's youth group Youth4animals, and help campaign to save endangered species.**