



The State of the Planet's Wildlife



Introduction

There's a place in the world where a lush rainforest — with open meadows, bamboo thickets and fresh running streams — provides a safe haven for a group of endangered lowland gorillas. In this jungle sanctuary highly threatened animals survive without fear of being stalked by local poachers. It's a place where the affects of Africa's extreme poverty and civil unrest seem a world away.

But what really makes this patch of wilderness so extraordinary is the fact that that it's not located in a remote part of Africa. It's in New York City.

The Wildlife Conservation Society's Bronx Zoo gorilla exhibit is one of the city's most popular attractions, providing visitors with a rare and intimate glimpse of the natural world. However realistic the experience seems to be, much of the food the gorillas eat comes from local markets, most of the trees are made of metal and epoxy, and the forest that lies behind these thick walls of protective glass is essentially an environmental illusion.

But what is not an illusion is the fact that the zoos of the future may have no choice but become urban sanctuaries for our planet's animals. Scientists now tell us that as much as a half of the world's wildlife may completely disappear during our lifetime.

"Every kind of species, every broad type of species, every broad type of habitat is under threat now in a way that wasn't true in all of past human history."

— *Robert Engelman, Population Action International*

Once, not so very long ago, the Earth was a place of great and unspoiled diversity, a rich tapestry dominated by the elegance of the natural world. Our world encompassed vast stretches of uninhabited and protected wilderness areas. Our polar regions supported an abundance of sea and land mammals and the biodiversity of oceans were healthy and over-flowing.

Once, not so very long ago, our tropical rainforests supported an almost infinite variety of species and the savannahs and grasslands of the world sustained great herds of wild and migrating animals.



But now scientific research has discovered that something is terribly wrong with our environment and that much of our planet's wildlife is in danger of going extinct.

Wildlife extinctions are not a new phenomena. On at least five occasions during our planet's long geological history, catastrophic events wiped out vast numbers of species. The last great extinction happened sixty-five million years ago when a giant asteroid crashed into the Earth. The ash sealed the fate of the dinosaurs along with over seventy-five percent of the world's plants and animals. But today, the threat of what scientists call "the sixth extinction" won't come from outer space or a volcanic eruption. The next extinction will be the result of human activities.

The urgency to avoid a sixth extinction presents us with enormous challenges. What we need now are the efforts of people everywhere — all those who are willing to find ways to strike the right balance — between what we want — and what our planet's wildlife can endure.



Explore the program chapters:

- The Sixth Extinction
 - We're one of perhaps a hundred million species on the planet, but we're the first species ever to have the control of the fates of other species in our hands.
- China & The Amazon
 - There is a link between population pressures and the loss of wildlife habitat. An increase in the appetite for meat means more land is needed to raise livestock, which in turn leads to the environmental destruction from overgrazing and deforestation.
- South Africa
 - South Africa is home to the oldest grassland habitat on the planet. The grasslands are a natural reservoir that soaks up water during the rainy season and slowly releases it during the long dry season. Along the edge of the grasslands, hundreds of thousands of acres have been turned into tree plantations, which consume nearly 40% of available rainwater – water needed to maintain the delicate ecosystem.
- The Everglades
 - Florida's Everglades seems like a forbidding primordial wilderness – an unspoiled breeding ground and nursery for plants and animals – offering sanctuary to millions of migrating birds. Urban sprawl has drained more than 50% of Florida's original wetlands placing the dependent wildlife in deep peril.



- **Poverty & Poaching**
 - Each year millions of animals are killed so the poor can earn enough for the bare necessities of life -- while the world's tigers are going extinct. Each year millions of animals are killed to feed the hungry -- while the world's primates are going extinct. Each year millions of animals become trophies for the wealthy -- while their body parts are turned into remedies and tonics. Each year hundreds of millions of animals are caged and sold as exotic pets.
- **Zambia**
 - The Luangwa Valley was a 3,000 square mile protected sanctuary for about 90,000 elephants. But when drought and famine overwhelmed the local farmers, the valley became less like a wildlife preserve and more like a war zone. The elephant population was hunted for food and tusks. Despite a ban on the sale of ivory -- their numbers dropped to fewer than 15,000. And as poverty deepened, elephants continued to be slaughtered -- at the rate of over a thousand a year.
- **Climate Change & Wildlife**
 - The polar bear's frozen habitat is rapidly warming and the Arctic Ocean could be ice-free within decades. Without ice floes to hunt seals from -- the polar bear will surely become extinct. Though the bears can swim non-stop for as long as a hundred miles, many are drowning from sheer exhaustion in their desperate search for sea ice.
- **Montana**
 - Two hundred years ago the west was home to more than 100,000 bears. Today, there are about a thousand. Human development has turned their feeding grounds into suburban backyards -- and public sentiment threatens to exile the grizzly bear to isolated wildlife preserves.



Points of View:

Lester Brown, Earth Policy Institute

We've kind of taken over the planet and there's just not much room left for many of the other species. So we're seeing these extraordinary drops in populations.

Steve Osofsky, Wildlife Conservation Society

Right now we know that at least 25 percent of the world's 4000 or so mammal species are threatened or endangered. Two out of three bird species are in decline worldwide. I would say that the state of the planet's wild life is precarious and I think the decisions we make in the next few years will be very important in terms of determining which way things go.



Liz Bennett, Wildlife Conservation Society

We're one of perhaps a hundred million species on the, but we're the first species ever to have the control of the fates of other species in our hands. The state of the planet's wildlife, at the moment, is very alarming. Some species are going so fast and we either need to do something about it very quickly or we're going to start seeing some pretty massive extinctions of species that we really care about.

Charles Kennel, Scripps Institute of Oceanography

There were always side effects from human activities, but they were always small compared to the scale of nature and now we are altering the surface of the Earth. You have to be realistic about the size and scope of the problems. They are unprecedented. My optimism is that we will eventually see the nature and the global scale of these problems and at that point people will insist on developing and really working on solving the problem.

Robert Cook, Wildlife Conservation Society

And while there have been other extinction crises this will be a dramatic alteration that will fundamentally threaten the future of humanity because we are all linked. We are all part of this web of life. But it's going to be a horse race between those changes that will be irreparable and our ability to do good and alter the way that we use the resources on our planet.

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