

Rapid Pace of Species Extinctions Mounts to a 'Crisis'

GLAND, Switzerland, November 3, 2009 (ENS) - Nearly one-third of all known species of plants and animals are threatened with extinction, finds the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, IUCN, in the most recent update of its authoritative [Red List of Threatened Species](#) issued today.

The updated assessment shows that 17,291 species out of the 47,677 assessed species are threatened with extinction.

"The scientific evidence of a serious extinction crisis is mounting," warns Jane Smart, director of IUCN's Biodiversity Conservation Group.

The IUCN finds that 21 percent of all known mammals, 30 percent of all known amphibians, 12 percent of all known birds, and 28 percent of reptiles, 37 percent of freshwater fishes, 70 percent of plants, 35 percent of invertebrates assessed so far are at risk.

"This year's IUCN Red List makes for sobering reading," says Craig Hilton-Taylor, manager of the IUCN Red List Unit. "These results are just the tip of the iceberg. We have only managed to assess 47,663 species so far; there are many more millions out there which could be under serious threat."

"We do, however, know from experience that conservation action works so let's not wait until it's too late and start saving our species now," urged Hilton-Taylor.

"January sees the launch of the International Year of Biodiversity, said Smart. "The latest analysis of the IUCN Red List shows the 2010 target to reduce biodiversity loss will not be met. It's time for governments to start getting serious about saving species and make sure it's high on their agendas for next year, as we're rapidly running out of time."

The United Nations has declared 2010 to be the International Year of Biodiversity. Countdown 2010, an initiative of the IUCN, will promote the protection of biodiversity and encourage organizations, institutions, companies and individuals to take direct action to reduce the constant loss of biological diversity worldwide.

There is plenty to do to turn the tide of extinctions. Of the world's 5,490 mammals, the IUCN finds 79 species are Extinct or Extinct in the Wild, with 188 Critically Endangered, 449 Endangered and 505 Vulnerable.



Threatened by climate change, the hooded grebe, *Podiceps gallardoi*, of Argentina, was uplisted from Near Threatened to Endangered in 2009. (Photo by James C. Lowen courtesy [BirdLife International](#))

One mammal appears on the IUCN Red List for the first time in the Endangered category. The Eastern voalavo, *Voalavo antsahabensis*, is a rodent found only in Madagascar. This mammal is confined to montane tropical forest and is under threat from slash-and-burn farming.

The tiger now is slipping ever closer to extinction. "Few tiger populations have been estimated with confidence, but compiling national population estimates results in a global population of 3,402 to 5,140 adults," the IUCN Red List states. Other estimates put current wild tiger numbers closer to 3,200.

The global conservation group WWF suggests that the tiger is an appropriate symbol for the failure of the world to meet the target of slowing the loss of biodiversity by 2010.

"Tigers are a symbol of what is happening to many species across the globe, and demonstrate the urgent need for the world to come up with the political will, policies, resources and incentives to maintain a living and diverse planet." said Amanda Nickson, director of the WWF International Species Programme. "The IUCN is frank that its assessments are likely to understate the real extent of the loss of species."



Wild Royal Bengal Tiger in Bandhavgarh National Park, Madhya Pradesh, India (Photo by [Koshy Koshy](#))

Tigers exist in the wild in a wide arc of countries from far eastern Russia to India and Indonesia. Tigers - an apex predator residing at the top of its food chain - occupy less than seven percent of their original range, which has contracted 40 percent from 10 years ago.

As tigers require a large home range, protection of the species and its habitat bring huge benefits to thousands of other species, WWF points out. The organization views an international summit scheduled for 2010 in Vladivostok, Russia as a critical opportunity to reverse the decline in tiger numbers and ensure their survival in the

wild.

At the Global Tiger Workshop in Kathmandu, Nepal last week, more than 250 experts, scientists and government delegates from 13 tiger range countries called for immediate action to save tigers before the species disappears from the wild, citing the urgent need for increased protection against tiger poaching and trafficking in tiger parts.

The Kathmandu Global Tiger Workshop was the first in a series of political negotiations leading up to a final Heads of State Tiger Summit in September 2010, which is the Year of the Tiger.

Conservation International said today the IUCN assessment shows that "species extinctions continue at a shocking pace," and pose "a major threat to the livelihoods and well-being of millions of people" worldwide.

"IUCN's Red List is the best set of data available to gauge the status of ecosystem conservation through species," said Claude Gascon, executive vice president of field programs at Conservation International.

"The numbers released today are profoundly worrying as they show that we are racing along an unsustainable development path that threatens the natural systems that sustain all life on the planet," said Gascon.

Protection of the ecosystems that support biodiversity is one of the most effective means to fight climate change, and is a key source of income for people around the world, Gascon said.

Mammals are not the only class of species suffering deep losses. In total, 469 reptiles are threatened with extinction and 22 are already Extinct or Extinct in the Wild.



Endemic to the island of Panay in the Philippines, the rare Panay monitor lizard lives in large trees in lowland tropical moist forest. (Photo © Tim Laman)

The 165 endemic Philippine species new to the IUCN Red List include the Panay monitor lizard, *Varanus mabitang*, which is Endangered. This highly-specialized monitor lizard that feeds only on fruit is threatened by habitat loss due to agriculture and logging and is hunted by humans for food.

The sail-fin water lizard, *Hydrosaurus pustulatus*, enters the Red List in the Vulnerable category, threatened by habitat loss. Hatchlings are collected both for the pet trade and for local consumption.

There are now 1,677 reptiles on the IUCN Red List, with 293 added to the assessment this year.

Simon Stuart, who chairs IUCN's Species Survival Commission, says the picture of reptile extinction may be much worse than it appears, but the IUCN lacks the funds to find out.

"We need an assessment of all reptiles to understand the severity of the situation but we don't have the \$2-3 million to carry it out," Stuart said.

Of the world's 6,285 amphibian species, the IUCN Red List update shows that 1,895 are in danger of extinction, making them the most threatened group of species known to date. Of these, 39 are already Extinct or Extinct in the Wild, 484 are Critically Endangered, 754 are Endangered and 657 are Vulnerable.

A deadly fungal disease, in combination with other stressors, continues to wipe out amphibians. The Kihansi spray toad, *Nectophrynoides asperginis*, has moved from Critically Endangered to Extinct in the Wild. The species was only known from the Kihansi Falls in Tanzania, where it was formerly abundant with a population of at least 17,000. Its decline is due to the construction of a dam upstream of the Kihansi Falls that removed 90 percent of the original water flow to the gorge. The fungal disease chytridiomycosis was probably responsible for the toad's final population crash, the IUCN says.



The Kihansi spray toad was formally declared Extinct in the Wild on the IUCN Red List of 2009. (Photo © Tim Herman)

The fungus also affected the Rabb's fringe-limbed treefrog, *Ecnomiohyla rabborum*, which enters the Red List as Critically Endangered. It is known only from central Panama. In 2006, the chytrid fungus was reported in its habitat and only a single male has been heard calling since. This species has been collected for captive breeding efforts but all attempts have so far failed.

Of the 12,151 plants on the IUCN Red List, 8,500 are threatened with extinction, with 114 already Extinct or Extinct in the Wild.

The Queen of the Andes, *Puya raimondii*, has been reassessed and remains in the Endangered category. Found in the Andes of Peru and Bolivia, it only produces seeds once in 80 years before dying. Climate change may already be impairing its ability to flower and cattle roam freely among many colonies, trampling or eating young plants.

There are 7,615 invertebrates on the IUCN Red List this year, 2,639 of which are threatened with extinction. Scientists added 1,360 dragonflies and damselflies, bringing the total to 1,989, of which 261 are threatened.

Scientists also added 94 molluscs, bringing the total number assessed to 2,306, of which 1,036 are threatened. All seven freshwater snails from Lake Dianchi in Yunnan province, China, are new to the IUCN Red List and all are threatened. These join 13 freshwater fishes from the same area, 12 of which are threatened. The main threats are pollution, introduced fish species and overharvesting.

There are now 3,120 freshwater fishes on the IUCN Red List, up 510 species from last year. Although there is still a long way to go before the status all the world's freshwater fishes is known, 1,147 of those assessed so far are threatened with extinction.

The brown mudfish, *Neochanna apoda*, found only in New Zealand, has been moved from Near Threatened to Vulnerable because it has disappeared from many areas in its range. Roughly 85-90 percent of New Zealand's wetlands have been lost or degraded through drainage schemes, irrigation and land development.

"Creatures living in freshwater have long been neglected," says Jean-Christophe Vié, deputy head of the IUCN Species Programme.

"This year we have again added a large number of them to the IUCN Red List and are confirming the high levels of threat to many freshwater animals and plants. This reflects the state of our precious water resources," says Vié, urging a wiser use of water resources.

Not all the news is bad. The status of the Australian grayling, *Prototroctes maraena*, a freshwater fish, has improved as a result of conservation efforts, the IUCN finds. Now classed as Near Threatened instead of Vulnerable, the population has recovered due to fish ladders which have been constructed over dams to allow migration, enhanced riverside vegetation and the education of fishermen, who now face heavy penalties if found with this species.



Numbers of Lear's macaws are rising. (Photo © [Andy and Gill Swash](#))

Lear's macaw, *Anodorhynchus leari*, is now increasing in numbers due to intensive conservation action and this resulted in the species being downlisted from Critically Endangered to Endangered in 2009. The population size is now considered to have been more than 250 for at least five years. Two colonies are known, at Toca Velha and Serra Branca in Brazil. Hunting for food and wildlife products still threaten the species.

The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species is widely recognized as the most comprehensive, objective global approach for evaluating the conservation status of plant and animal species.

Launched in 1994, the Red List is compiled by staff members of the IUCN Species Programme working with partners the IUCN Species Survival Commission, BirdLife International, the Center for Applied Biodiversity Science at Conservation International, NatureServe, and the Institute of Zoology at the Zoological Society of London.

They consult with a network of scientists and partner organizations working in almost every country in the world, who collectively hold what IUCN says is likely the most complete scientific knowledge base on the biology and conservation status of species.