

ENDANGERED SPECIES

Our world is rapidly changing. There are many, many plants and animals on the endangered or threatened species lists today. Wildlife and wild places are facing numerous threats—the greatest being loss of habitat. Currently extinctions are not usually natural, but are instead man induced.

Certain factors can predispose a species to becoming threatened or endangered. Some of those factors are:

- ❖ Large body size. A large animal takes up more space than a smaller one and requires more food within its habitat.
- ❖ Economically valuable body parts. When body parts such as fur (all of the spotted and striped cats are endangered because of the fur industry), ivory (elephants are threatened due to the ivory trade), internal organs (tigers and bears are hunted for internal organs), etc. are worth a lot of money to humans, that animal is more likely to be killed.
- ❖ Hunting and trapping. If appropriate hunting limits are not set, it is possible to hunt an animal to extinction as was done with the passenger pigeon.
- ❖ Restricted distribution. When a species lives in a very limited area it is more likely to be susceptible to disasters, whether natural or man-made.
- ❖ Migration across international boundaries. Many animals live in international waters where there is no legal protection and some animals migrate across national borders where one country may protect the species and another may not.
- ❖ Intolerant of man or confrontation with man. Numerous species have been eliminated throughout a part or all of its natural range because that species was seen as a threat to humans or human activity. There used to be grizzly bears in Texas, but with the coming of people, livestock and ranches, the bears were eliminated.
- ❖ Long gestation (pregnancy) and/or low birth rate. Some animals cannot reproduce fast enough to stand up to much pressure. Example: a female gorilla may only have 4-5 offspring in her lifetime and naturally in the wild mortality within the first year may be as high as 50%.
- ❖ Pet trade. Animals taken as pets often die before they even reach the pet shop or die due to lack of knowledge on the part of the caretaker. The biggest problem is that whenever an animal is taken from the wild, its natural habitat, it is not out there reproducing and ensuring that there will always be animals of its kind in the wild. Example: If each of you picked up a native turtle and took it home when you found one, there soon will be no more turtles left in East Texas.

- ❖ Niche taken over by an introduced species. Whenever a non-native species of animal is released into an area, it will claim a space for itself, often usurping a niche formally occupied by a native animal.
- ❖ Pollution. Chemicals in the air, water and food sources as well as noise can disturb animals that are non-adaptive to today's world. The national bird—the bald eagle—faced extinction because of the pesticide DDT. With the banning of the use of the chemical, the bald eagle is making a comeback and is now listed as a threatened species.

With all the bad news about endangered species, there is also some good news. There are species that are making a comeback. Once thought to be extinct, the most endangered mammal in North America, the black-footed ferret, is being raised in captive situations in zoos and released back into the wild. Golden lion tamarins', beautiful little primates, numbers were greatly reduced due to the pet trade and loss of rainforest habitat, but today zoos are raising tamarins and reintroducing them back into the rainforest.

Laws help endangered species. The United States has made it illegal to import elephant ivory and spotted and striped cat furs. When people cannot buy these items, their monetary value drops drastically.

It is important for youngsters (as well as adults) to know that every one of us can make a difference for endangered species. One of the most important conservation activities is to read and learn about wildlife and wild places. Then if we tell others what we know, we can spread the conservation message, and with knowledge comes more responsible decision making both in our everyday lives and at the ballot box. Each of us should think about what we buy. Did it harm wildlife and/or wild places? With simple activities such as recycling, turning off water and electricity when not in use or even writing letters to governmental officials even the youngest of us can help wildlife and wild places.