



Endangered Species

In the U.S., nearly 500 animal species and over 700 plant species are listed as threatened or endangered. Worldwide, over 1,000 animals are endangered. A species classified as “threatened” is at risk of becoming endangered in the foreseeable future. A species is classified as “endangered” if it is in immediate danger of becoming extinct throughout, or within a significant portion of, its native range.

What does this mean to humans? Why should we care? The answer is quite simple: We humans share our environment with plants and other animals. The loss of one species may have a negative effect upon the entire ecosystem.

This is especially true of keystone species. A “keystone” species plays an integral part of the food chain within a certain ecosystem. Therefore, extinction of a keystone species may ultimately lead to the extinction of other species in that environment.

Habitat loss and/or degradation, most of which can be traced to human population growth, are the primary reasons that species become endangered. For example, grasslands, forests, and wetlands get converted to agricultural purposes in order to support the increasing number of humans. Logging eliminates forest habitats while providing lumber, paper products, etc., to meet the growing human demand. Rivers are dammed or channelized to accommodate agriculture and/or urbanization.

The introduction of invasive, non-native species into environments is the second leading reason that species become endangered. These plants or animals may be introduced by design (e.g., in an effort to produce a heartier, more-heat-resistant grass for his cattle, a rancher might bring in an African grass) or by accident (e.g., insects, rodents, or plant seeds may be in the feed or hair of imported animals). Either way, the results may be both economically and environmentally devastating.

Another threat to worldwide biodiversity is pollution. We continuously assault our land, air, and water by using gas-powered lawn mowers and automobiles, by attempting to increase agricultural production via the use of pesticides and fertilizers, and by utilizing dangerous chemicals for industrial production and/or natural resource extraction and dumping the resulting by-products and waste directly into the environment.

Finally, some species have become endangered simply as a result of over fishing or over hunting. Others continue to be endangered, even while they are under federal protection, due to poaching. Still others have been, and continue to be, deliberately destroyed under predator elimination programs.

The brown bear (also called a grizzly) is no longer found in Arizona (or in most of the continental U.S.) and the Mexican gray wolf, a native of Arizona, nearly became extinct, due to predator elimination programs. Of the 39 animals native to Arizona that are threatened or endangered, 20 are fish. This is a direct result of the destruction of the majority of the state's natural riparian areas.

The bald eagle, Mexican spotted owl, and desert tortoise are some of the Arizona natives that are considered threatened. Endangered Arizona species include: the southwest willow flycatcher, the jaguar, the ocelot, the Sonoran pronghorn, the pygmy owl, and, of course, the Mexican gray wolf.

Worldwide, species are becoming extinct, endangered, or threatened at an alarming rate. "Recovering" a species, or bringing a threatened or endangered species' natural population back to a self-sustaining level, is extremely time consuming and expensive.

As the human population of the Sonoran desert continues to grow—it is one of the fastest developing areas in North America—it would seem to be in our best interest to take note of the sage observation of one of our founding fathers: "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure." Frugal Benjamin Franklin would certainly have advocated a proactive approach to the preservation of biodiversity, as it is much less expensive, fiscally and environmentally, in the long run.