

# Extinction of concern

How the media failed to contextualise the IUCN Red List announcement

Every time the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) announces its Red List of Threatened Species, the event is awaited with bated breath by wildlife conservationists worldwide. So it was even this year, given the fact that the situation seems to worsen with every passing year. The current species extinction rate, according to IUCN, is estimated to be anything between 1,000 and 10,000 times higher than the natural or 'background' rate.

The 2008 IUCN Red List of Threatened Species was released at the World Conservation Congress in Barcelona on October 6, 2008. The new study to assess the world's mammals showed that 1,141 of the 5,487 mammals on Earth are known to be threatened with extinction. In all, 76 mammals have become extinct since 1500. But the results also showed that conservation can bring species back from the brink of extinction, with 5 per cent of currently threatened mammals showing signs of recovery in the wild. This was a good occasion to assess how much importance the news media accords to the issue of species extinction.

This **Newswatch** study tracked the news about the IUCN Red List over a three-week period: October 6 to October 26. News items were monitored both through news aggregators like Google News and Yahoo News as well as through websites of individual news outlets. Stories of newspapers were tracked primarily through their websites. The epaper version of a paper, if available, was also checked. The Web renditions were checked both for reasons of convenience, as well as the empirical evidence that there is rarely any difference between the version printed in the paper and the one published online. Websites of television news channels had to be tracked more for the lack of wherewithal to track live news bulletins. In all, 83 news establishments were tracked for the study.

The researchers were able to find only 43 relevant stories from 23 news outlets during the three-week period. This might come as a shock to conservationists, given the fact that arrest of 230-odd people at a rave party in Mumbai (which happened on the same day, October 6) generated 93 stories in the first two days of the incident alone.

The subject of the study had two triggers — the first, obviously, was the IUCN Red List release. The second was a press release issued by the Wildlife Trust of India (WTI) on October 22 about downgrading of the greater one-horned rhinoceros (*Rhinoceros unicornis*) from 'endangered' to 'vulnerable'. With the latter triggering eight stories, it meant that the Red List release generated 35 news items in all.

All the stories spotted in Indian news outlets were filed by three international news agencies — Agence France-Presse (AFP), the Associated Press (AP), and Reuters. There were 12 such stories. There were also some news outlets which republished syndicated stories from foreign newspapers — four in all. There were 13 spin-off stories (all filed by news agencies) as well.

There were only three distinct news items which could be seen as India-centric stories by Indian news outlets. The Press Trust of India (PTI) story about 49 mammals facing grave threats of extinction was carried by three news outlets. The *Hindu* (republished by Zee News) and the *Assam Tribune* published localised stories. So, there were six items in all. Among the spin-off stories was one from Indo-Asian News Service (IANS) which mentioned the Rameshwaram parachute spider being assessed for the first time and listed as Critically Endangered. The story itself was not about the arachnid itself. On the other hand, PTI released a story about the scene of mammals in Australia which was published by two news outlets. The Indian angle, by and large, remained off the news beat.

The WTI statement expressing shock at the downgrading of the greater one-horned rhinoceros in the Red List was released by news agency Indo-Asian News Service (IANS). The story was carried by seven outlets. Only the *Telegraph* carried its own version of the issue describing it as good news for the animal.



A visitor walks past the logo of the IUCN Red List at the World Conservation Congress in Barcelona October 7, 2008. The congress was organised by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). **Pic courtesy:** Reuters / Albert Gea

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Masthead photo: International Rhino Foundation

## Case study: Press Trust of India on Indian mammals facing extinction threat, Assam Tribune on rhinos

### 49 Indian mammal species face gravest extinction threat

Over 49 mammal species in India including tiger, gibbons, bats and deer are facing gravest level of extinction threat resulting from habitat destruction, pollution and poaching, the latest assessment by International Union of Conservation of Nature has revealed. According to the new data, over 124 Indian mammal species are facing different degrees of extinction threat of which 10 are critically endangered, 39 are endangered, 48 are vulnerable for extinction and 27 are showing sharp decline in population.



"This is the first exhaustive assessment of mammals which includes all the species found in the country.

Prominent mammals include several species of primates, especially the many langur species earlier thought to be one single species is now 7 species," said Sanjay Molur, who contributed Indian data for the listing process. Most of the threatened land mammals are concentrated in the eco-sensitive zones of Western ghats, north-eastern states and Andaman which have rich biodiversity, high endemism and are facing the brunt of increased human activity.

About 17 of the total 49 mammal species listed as critically endangered and endangered are from North-eastern India and 16 are found in Western Ghats.

"Western Ghats are facing extreme pressure of human activities thus increasing the threat on the species found here. After the killing of Veerappan, police became relaxed giving a kind of free hand to poachers who are still active in the area," said Tito Joseph, Program Manager Wild Life Protection Society of India.

The enlisted mammals range from flagship species like Tiger, Asian Elephant and Rhinos to lesser known ones like Dhole -- a wild dog, White toothed Shrew-a mouse like mammal to hares and bats.

"Small mammals which do not get much attention in the conservation efforts are important part of the food chain and necessary for maintaining ecological balance," said Ramesh Pandey, Deputy Director, Wildlife Crime Control Bureau.

IUCN has also expressed concern about the proposed Ganga-Brahmaputra canal link and Dam projects in Arunachal Pradesh which may deplete the south Asian river dolphin by 50 per cent till 2016.

"The list is important because such assessment helps in bettering conservation efforts. It is time the government gave impetus to wildlife conservation. Lax attitude of enforcement agencies in the protected areas may mean doom for biodiversity of the country," Joseph said.

- Three days after the IUCN Red List was released, the Press Trust of India (PTI) did a story about 49 mammal species facing grave threats of extinction. It quoted two wildlife conservationists and localised the issue of conservation in the Indian context. The story, however, was carried by only three of the publications that were tracked.



**NEW ENTRY:** The Rameshwaram Parachute Spider (*Poecilotheria hanumavilasumica*) is a species of Indian tarantula assessed for the first time and listed as Critically Endangered. **Pic courtesy:** M. Siliwal / IUCN

### World's mammals face extinction threat

The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species has announced that the world's mammals face serious threat of extinction with almost one in four species at risk of disappearing forever. It has been stated that at least 1,141 of the 5,487 mammals across the globe are "known to be threatened with extinction."

In this backdrop, conservationists in Assam, a global biodiversity hotspot, have called for renewed efforts to protect the flora and fauna of the region, taking a scientific approach.

Although the number of some flagship species like the one-horned rhino and elephants are considered somewhat stable in their habitat, other issues which could impact on ecosystems require more focused initiatives, they believe.

Dr Bibhab Talukdar, standing committee member of National Board of Wildlife said that although the rhino population has increased in Kaziranga, they continue to be threatened in Orang National Park, and translocation in Laokhowa-Burhachapori is yet to start.

Dr Talukdar said that invasive species-weeds like Mimosa, Leea species, Mikania and Ipomea has threatened the rhino habitat in Assam, which could seriously jeopardise the future population prospect of the species if urgent measures are not taken.

Referring to the status of the elephant in Assam, he said that the population of 5,200 faces rapid loss of habitat as well as corridors. "Unless good habitat is protected

and key lost corridors and elephant habitat are restored, the elephant may get exterminated from some small pocket habitats in Sonitpur and Golaghat districts."

Government should develop a strong plan to restore elephant habitats and should look at long-term conservation measures rather than opting for short-term make shift measures, which may not benefit elephant in long run, he noted.

Referring to another mammal species, the swamp deer, the conservationist said that population of the

species in Kaziranga fluctuates due to impact of flood. Currently about 650 swamp deer are present in Kaziranga, which is the only viable population in Assam.

The swamp deer population in Manas has almost been wiped out and currently less than 10 swamp deer are present in the national park. He underlined the need to translocate about 30-40 animals from Kaziranga to Manas to re-build the Manas population to maintain at least two swamp deer habitats in Assam.

Conservation efforts need to be strengthened for several endangered species in Assam, said Goutam Narayan of Ecosystems India. "Conserving them is good not just for the animals, but because some of them are indicator species, ultimately for the natural landscapes and human beings thy support. Species like the critically endangered pigmy hog need well thought out interventions if they have to survive in the wild, he added.

Among those mammals, which could face a dark future is the Gangetic dolphin, an endangered species which number less than 300 in the Brahmaputra river. According to Wakid Abdul of the conservation group Aaranyak, the population faces very serious risks because of fishing and habitat loss. "Many Gangetic dolphins die after getting entangled in fishing nets, and poaching has also contributed to their decline," he said.

## The Assam Tribune



**LOCAL ISSUE:** The Assam Tribune was the one of two Indian newspapers which carried a story on the Red List with localisation in mind. It quoted experts and put the issue of conservation in perspective. **Pic courtesy:** Bibhab Talukdar



## Triggers and consequent coverage

The subject of the study had primarily two news triggers — the first, obviously, was the release of the IUCN Red List in Barcelona at the World Conservation Congress on October 6, 2008. The second was a press release issued by New Delhi-headquartered Wildlife Trust of India (WTI) on October 22 on the exclusion of the

Indian rhinoceros from the list.

The stories in Indian news outlets were filed by three international news agencies — Agence France-Presse (AFP), the Associated Press (AP) and Reuters. All three, needless to say, pegged their stories differently (see Chart 1).



Altogether, there were 12 such stories.

There were also some news outlets which republished syndicated stories from foreign newspapers (see Chart 2). There were four such stories in different publications.

### Chart 1: News agency stories about Red List release (12)

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| <b>Agency:</b> Agence France-Presse (AFP)<br><b>Peg:</b> Half the world's mammals are declining in population and more than a third probably face extinction, said an update on Monday of the "Red List," the most respected inventory of biodiversity.<br><b>News outlet(s) (6):</b> Economic Times, Howrah News Service, Times of India, Telegraph, NDTV, NewsX  |
| <b>Agency:</b> Associated Press (AP)<br><b>Peg:</b> Conservationists have taken the first detailed look at the world's mammals in more than a decade, and the news isn't good. "Our results paint a bleak picture of the global status of mammals worldwide," the team led by Jan Schipper of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature in Gland, Switzerland, concluded.<br><b>News outlet(s) (3):</b> Times of India, Hindu, Freshnews.in |
| <b>Agency:</b> Reuters<br><b>Peg:</b> A quarter of the world's mammals are threatened with extinction, an international survey showed on Monday, and the destruction of habitats and hunting are the major causes.<br><b>News outlet(s) (1):</b> Yahoo News  |
| <b>Agency:</b> Rephashed from multiple agencies<br><b>News outlet(s) (2):</b> Zee News, CNN-IBN  |

### Chart 2: Syndicated stories about Red List release (4)

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| <b>Syndication:</b> Guardian<br><b>Peg:</b> Nearly a quarter of the world's land mammal species, including some in southern India's Western Ghats, are at risk of extinction. And many others may vanish before they are even known to science, according to an extensive survey of global wildlife.<br><b>News outlet(s) (2):</b> Hindu, Deccan Herald                      |
| <b>Syndication:</b> Los Angeles Times<br><b>Peg:</b> At least one-quarter of the world's mammals in the wild are threatened with extinction, according to a recently released international survey that blames the loss of wildlife habitat, hunting and poaching for the steep declines.<br><b>News outlet(s) (2):</b> expressbuzz.com (New Indian Express), Indian Express |

There were three stories of India-origin which were India-centric. The Press Trust of India (PTI) story was carried by three news outlets. The *Hindu* (republished by Zee News) and the *Assam Tribune* published localised stories (see Chart 3) — six in all.

The WTI statement was released by news agency Indo-Asian News Service (IANS). The story was carried by seven outlets. Only the *Telegraph* carried its own version of the issue.

### Chart 3: India-centric stories of Indian origin (6)

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| <b>Agency:</b> Press Trust of India<br><b>Peg:</b> Over 49 mammal species in India including tiger, gibbons, bats and deer are facing gravest level of extinction threat resulting from habitat destruction, pollution and poaching, the latest assessment by International Union of Conservation of Nature has revealed.<br><b>News outlet(s) (3):</b> Hindu, Daily News & Analysis, ITV News |
| <b>Peg:</b> Number of plants and animals endemic to Kerala in Red List.<br><b>News outlet(s) (2):</b> Hindu, Zee News (reproduction)   |
| <b>Peg:</b> Assam conservationists views in perspective.<br><b>News outlet(s) (1):</b> Assam Tribune   |

### Chart 4: Spin-off news agency stories (13)

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| <b>Agency:</b> Indo-Asian News Service (IANS)<br><b>Peg:</b> More than 7,000 species in the world - 35 per cent of birds, 52 per cent of amphibians and 71 per cent of warm-water reef-building corals - are likely to be particularly susceptible to climate change, the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) has said in a study.<br><b>News outlet(s) (4):</b> Economic Times, Times of India, BombayNews.net, smashits.com  |
| <b>Agency:</b> Indo-Asian News Service (IANS)<br><b>Peg:</b> Indian tarantulas, hairy and large spiders, are now in the Red List of species threatened with extinction, according to a leading global environmental network as it unveiled its latest global study of threatened species.<br><b>News outlet(s) (7):</b> Economic Times, Times of India, Thaindian.com, News24, India eNews, Freshnews.in, smashits.com   |
| <b>Agency:</b> Press Trust of India<br><b>Peg:</b> Australia has been rated as the worst-hit among the developed nations witnessing the extinction of mammals on the earth. A survey carried out on 5,487 species of land and marine mammals has shown the country at the sixth position sharing with Jamaica and Puerto Rico for real or likely demise of 6 per cent of all known mammal species on the planet, 'The Australian' newspaper reported today.<br><b>News outlet(s) (2):</b> Economic Times, Times of India |

### Chart 5: WTI press release on rhino exclusion (8)

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| <b>Agency:</b> Indo-Asian News Service (IANS)<br><b>Peg:</b> A UN body for nature conservation has demoted the one-horned rhinoceros from its Red List of endangered species, officials said. Besides the rhino, the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) has removed humpback whales and African elephants, among others, from its Red List of endangered species, NGO Wildlife Trust of India (WTI) said in a statement.<br><b>News outlet(s) (7):</b> Economic Times, Times of India, News24, India eNews, Freshnews.in, BombayNews.net, smashits.com |
| <b>Peg:</b> There is good news for fans of the greater one-horned rhino (Rhinoceros unicornis): the "endangered" tag that it carried for long has been dropped. It now falls in the "vulnerable" category, according to the 2008 International Union for Conservation of Nature Red List of Threatened Species, because of improvement in its population count and successful conservation measures.<br><b>News outlet(s) (1):</b> Telegraph  |

## Case study: Examples of contextualisation of the IUCN Red List: 'New Zealand Herald' and 'The Australian'

The New Zealand Herald  
nzherald.co.nz

### NZ marine mammals join critical list

New Zealand species are among the world's mammals at risk of extinction, according to a major survey of global wildlife released yesterday.

At least 1141 of the 5487 known mammal species are threatened worldwide, with 188 listed in the highest risk "critically endangered" category.

The "Red List" assessment, issued by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, said one in three marine mammals were also threatened and the World Wildlife Fund said this was a warning for the survival of New Zealand's marine mammals.

WWF New Zealand's marine programme manager Rebecca Bird said nearly all of New Zealand's native mammals were found at sea.

They include many threatened with extinction, including the blue whale, fin whale, sperm whale and New Zealand sea lion.

The list also includes the Hector's dolphin, though the critically endangered Maui's dolphin - internationally recognised as the world's rarest marine dolphin - is not listed separately because it is recorded as a North Island subspecies.

The past three decades of fishing with nets had been killing the dolphins faster than they could breed, Ms Bird said.

The Hector's dolphin population of about 30,000 in the 1970s had dwindled to just 7270.

The Maui's dolphin population situation is even more drastic with research indicating that only 111 individuals remain - a decrease of 93 per cent of its



**ENDANGERED:** The New Zealand Sea Lion also known as Hooker's Sea Lion. Pic courtesy: wildlife.co.nz

population size since 1970. Researchers for the Red List note that there may currently be as few as 28 breeding Maui's females in existence.

"Hector's and Maui's dolphins only range within our coastal waters, so their survival depends entirely on how we as a nation choose to respond," said Ms Bird.

Globally the Red List survey, by 1700 experts in 130 countries, has confirmed the devastating impact of forest clearing, hunting, fisheries, pollution and climate change on the populations and ranges of the world's most studied class of animals.

The figures are likely to be a conservative estimate, because scientists have insufficient data on 836 species to even classify how threatened they are.

Ms Bird said nearly half NZ's marine mammals on the Red List were now in the "data deficient" category, including the orca, Bryde's whale and dusky dolphin.

 **THE AUSTRALIAN**  
ONLINE NEWSPAPER OF THE YEAR

### All ours ... and they're almost gone

AUSTRALIA has the worst record of mammal extinctions and near extinctions of any developed nation in the world.

It shares sixth place with Jamaica and Puerto Rico for presiding over the real or likely demise of 6 per cent of all known mammal species on earth.

The damaging assessment comes from a survey of the world's 5487 species of land and marine mammals released last night by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature at its world congress in Barcelona.

The IUCN's Red List of Threatened Species reveals that no other developed nation rates a mention on the extinction league table until 20th place, where Italy, France, the US and Japan join nine other nations cited for overseeing the loss of less than 1 per cent of all mammal species.

Chris West, chief executive of Zoos South Australia and an expert in biodiversity at Flinders and Adelaide universities, said: "The solemn news is that we're still up there in terms of endangered mammals."

Professor West was disappointed that Australia had not moved down from sixth place since the last IUCN Red List was released in 2004.

Since then, the blue-grey mouse had become extinct and Professor West said three other small native mammals now classed as critically endangered might be extinct.

The Tasmanian devil was not on the 2004 Red List but it is now listed as vulnerable -- one step below critically endangered -- due to a population decline of 60 per cent in 10 years caused by a fatal transmissible facial tumour. "I think of them all as our near dodos," Professor West said.

Environment Minister Peter Garrett acknowledged

the risk to native species and said the Government intended to tackle the problem through several mechanisms, including its new \$2.25 billion Caring for our Country initiative and expansion of the National Reserve system.

The worst national offender is Haiti (18 per cent), followed by the Dominican Republic (16 per cent), Cuba and Mauritius (9 per cent each) and Reunion (7 per cent).

The new IUCN Red List was compiled by more than 1700 experts in 130 countries.

The overall survey finding -- to be detailed later this week in the journal Science -- was that one in four of the world's land mammal species and one in three marine mammal species faced extinction.

Primatologist and conservationist Jane Goodall, currently touring Australia, said: "It's a tragedy that the list is still growing."

She said that among the animal groups at most risk were humanity's primate cousins: chimpanzees, orangutans, gorillas and monkeys. Species of whales, dolphins, manatees and dugongs also faced extinction.

The IUCN report found that the primary dangers to land mammals were habitat loss and over-hunting, while in the oceans, pollution and indirect effects of fishing did most harm.



**TINY LITTLE DEVIL:** The Tasmanian devil Pic courtesy: Fizzics Education

**PROJECT CREDITS:** Study supervisor: Subir Ghosh; Research assistant: Priyanka Mittal

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