

Going...Going...Gone. Too Many Species at Risk

A recent article in National Wildlife caught my eye. The subtitle of the article is, “A surprising number and variety of North American wildlife species are quietly disappearing.” The fact that the total number of species of plants and animals is declining is not news and is certainly not news to me as I have often read about and attended many meetings where this was discussed in the past decade or so.

But a number of facts in the article were surprising to me and none of it is good news. The North American Bird Conservation Initiative recently released a report that more than one third of North America’s 1,154 bird species are “in trouble”. The report lists 432 species that are “most at risk of extinction without significant action.” And these are not obscure, uncommon birds. Some on the list are the common nighthawk and the eastern meadowlark.

And it is not just birds that we are losing, but plants and all the other groups of animals including insects, fish, amphibians, and reptiles. One estimate is that about a third of all U.S. species are at risk—which means we are talking about more than 8,500 species! This is not really new information to the experts and professionals in the field. Back in the 1980s, the National Research Council, working with renowned biologist and naturalist E.O. Wilson, hosted a forum on the acceleration of global species loss and how the Earth was entering the sixth mass extinction event. (The fifth mass extinction event was 65 million years ago when the dinosaurs disappeared).

It is not all bad news. In North America, a number of charismatic species have been at least regionally protected or restored, such as the bald eagle, wild turkeys, elk, white-tailed deer, gray wolves and grizzly bears. But every time a species is lost, the level of biodiversity declines.

So why are we losing so many species? Biodiversity decline and species loss is mostly caused by one kind or another of habitat loss. Examples include destruction of native habitat for human use (“development” such as subdivisions, roads, parking lots, shopping centers), clearing of forests or rangelands for farming, clear-cutting forests, destruction of wetlands and marshes, damming of waterways, land and water pollution, overuse of sensitive habitats, failure to protect critical habitats, and climate change. The next most common cause of species destruction arises because of the introduction of invasive species and exotic wildlife diseases.

Of course, if you look behind all of the above causes of habitat destruction and thus species destruction, you find the real cause of all of this. Too many of us. Not only is the human population of the Earth growing exponentially, but our footprint on the planet is increasing even faster than the human population. More and more of the Earth’s human inhabitants want the same kind of lifestyle as most of us have here in the U.S. That is, to be able to use or consume the same amount of the Earth’s resources (water, minerals, energy, food, space) as we do.

Unfortunately, the amount of the Earth's resources is not only not growing exponentially, but in most cases it is not growing at all. Yes, technology and new discoveries help somewhat with the supply of those resources, but that has not yet even kept up with demand, let alone grown as fast as the human population.

So the bottom line is that even more of the Earth's resources will be used in the near future and the rate of species loss will continue to accelerate.

So, what can we do about it? I think the answer has to be that we all have to adjust our lifestyles to consume less and conserve more. We need to leave, as individuals, as families, as societies, a smaller footprint on the land. Unfortunately, most of us have grown up and lived our lives striving to do just the opposite, to judge our success in life by how much we have acquired and how much we consume—how many TVs we have, how big a house we have, how many cars. And I suspect most of us have done so without even thinking about it, and we certainly never think about how our lifestyle might contribute to species destruction.

We should think about it

Until next time...

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