

Going, Going ... Gone?

WHAT DO THE AUROCH, the passenger pigeon, and the western black rhinoceros have in common? The answer: They've all gone extinct. These vanished animals typify the problem of the disappearance of species. Several grim statistics indicate the seriousness of the issue. Today more than 18,000 species are thought to be in danger of extinction. This means that over 40 percent of the world's animals are considered at risk. It is also estimated that about one-half of the world's animal species have disappeared since 1970. Many feel that something must be done to stop this, and soon. But what?

Some animals have been extinct for a considerable time. Aurochs, large wild oxen that lived in Europe and Asia, had died out by the early 1600s. The passenger pigeon was once the most common bird in North America. Historically it populated the eastern U.S. and Canada, but by the end of the nineteenth century it had almost disappeared because of habitat destruction and excessive hunting. The last known passenger pigeon, a female named Martha, died at the Cincinnati Zoo on September 1, 1914. More recently, we have lost the western black rhinoceros, which lived in the southeastern part of the African continent. It declined greatly over the twentieth century and was last seen in 2008. It was officially declared extinct on November 6, 2013.

Which animals are presently in danger of extinction? There are three significant categories: critically endangered, endangered, and vulnerable. Those considered critically endangered include the mountain gorilla of central Africa and the California condor. Those termed endangered include the Asian elephant and the blue whale. Those considered vulnerable include the African lion and the polar bear of northern North America.



Critically endangered

Endangered

Vulnerable

The picture looks bleak¹ overall. Nevertheless, the situation is not hopeless. There have been a few successes in bringing animals back from the edge of extinction. The whooping cranes of Canada and the United States are one example. In 1941, there were only twenty-one cranes in captivity and two in the wild. By 2015, there were estimated to be 603 birds in the wild. Their story can be considered a limited recovery, though there is still a potential problem of species diversity. The humpback whale is another species that has made something of a comeback, particularly since the ban on commercial whaling was instituted.

Human activity is by far the most significant cause of animal extinction. The most crucial problem is loss of habitat caused by the increase of human population and its associated development. This includes expanded farming, excessive hunting, poaching,² and man-made pollution. To that we can add climate change and the effects of invasive species that overwhelm³ the native animals of an area.

What can we do? Several strategies have been suggested: (1) reduce our use of meat and dairy products; (2) focus on renewable energy; (3) change our shopping habits; (4) support laws that restrict development; and (5) support efforts to protect the rain forests, wetlands, coral reefs, and grasslands. There is need for alarm. If we're concerned about the loss of species, we need to make our voices heard. Once an animal is gone, it is gone forever.

¹ bleak: giving no encouragement

² poaching: taking by illegal hunting

³ overwhelm: completely defeat

AFTER YOU READ

A VOCABULARY Match the words in **bold** with their meanings.

- | | |
|---|------------------------|
| ___ 1. Sadly, these animals have vanished from the earth. | a. plans of action |
| ___ 2. Some animals have been extinct for a considerable time. | b. extremely important |
| ___ 3. Nevertheless , the situation is not hopeless. | c. variety |
| ___ 4. A ban on whaling was instituted decades ago. | d. disappeared |
| ___ 5. There is still a problem of species diversity . | e. introduced |
| ___ 6. The most crucial aspect is loss of habitat. | f. limit |
| ___ 7. Several strategies have been suggested. | g. in spite of that |
| ___ 8. We need to support laws that restrict development. | h. long, extensive |

B COMPREHENSION Read the statements. Check (✓) *True* or *False*.

- | | True | False |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. More than 18,000 species are believed to be in danger of extinction. | ☐ | ☐ |
| 2. About one-fourth of the world's species have disappeared since 1970. | ☐ | ☐ |
| 3. Aurochs had gone extinct by the early 1600s. | ☐ | ☐ |
| 4. The passenger pigeon once populated the western U.S. and Canada. | ☐ | ☐ |
| 5. At present, the mountain gorilla is considered vulnerable. | ☐ | ☐ |
| 6. The habitat of the polar bear is in the southern hemisphere. | ☐ | ☐ |
| 7. Whooping cranes have made a partial recovery. | ☐ | ☐ |
| 8. Climate change is considered the most significant cause of extinction. | ☐ | ☐ |