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Most Wildlife Species Appear to Be Doomed By Growth in Population and by Pollution

THE IMPORTANCE of wildlife as an aesthetic resource that enhances the quality of our own lives is universally understood. It is also an indispensable reminder of our own place in the natural world.

We are, however, as careless with the protection of endangered animal species as we are with our own. Wild species are disappearing under our very eyes as we complete the exploitation of the planet, destroy specialized habitats, dump our wastes into air and sea and recklessly harvest the whales, the big cats, the seals, the alligators and what have you for the most frivolous or replaceable human purposes.

Most wild species are probably doomed, in the long run, in the face of the growth of human population. And we may not be far behind them. But this is hardly good reason to rush that doom.

In fact, if we can postpone it for a century or so, we might even find ways to avert it.

FOR THAT reason, any plausible help ought to be mobilized. But legislation was stalled in the Senate last year, for example, that would have broadened the protection of endangered

species against commercial depredation by regulating their shipment into and within the U.S. The only opposition to such laws came from an irresponsible part of the fur trade, whose natural supplies will soon evaporate if they are not promptly protected.

The best advertised arguments for wildlife protection are the aesthetic and moral ones. These reach the passions more easily than the votes and dollars of the electorate. In fact, however, a diversified wildlife is a perishable resource of vast but unpredictable economic value.

The variety of species is a great library of information, literally encoded in the specific DNA molecules that characterize each type. It is paradoxical that, in this era of most rapid elimination of natural variety, we have begun to learn the keys to that code and to appreciate the subtleties of the evolutionary mechanism that it drives. Each difference species is a unique adaptation to its own way of life, a lesson in "How to Live" that we can never properly understand after we extinguish it.

At a more practical level, we have only begun to domesticate the range of plant and animal species

that we might exploit for highly specialized uses. The very wide use of rhesus monkey tissues for growing virus vaccines is an example that would have been beyond imagination 50 years ago; the rhesus may not last another 20 years. A rare species of hamster is now very important in cancer research; this could not have been predicted 20 years ago.

The orangutan is disappearing in the forests of Borneo. This one among man's closest relatives might be the key to understanding how the brain works, or to the farming of hearts for transplant or, most likely of all, to answering questions we do not yet know how to ask. A few isolated specimens in the zoos are all we have to count on for breeding stock, and these are already so few that much of the potential variety within that species is irretrievably lost, even if close-bred orangutans will survive at all.

WHAT WE NEED most of all is a clear policy to respond to the accelerating loss of all wildlife where we do not make careful plans to prevent it.

We cannot save every species, and we should not be shifting our attention from one to another with every shrill outcry about the Hawaiian Nukupuu or the Mongolian wild ass. We ought to frame a policy that we know how to pursue and enforce for the effective preservation of the species that can be saved.

When we see clearly which ones we might abandon, we can also reckon the balance of merits and costs in adopting them too. If we muddle along as we have been doing, they will all go.

During this process, our museums of natural history must be transformed into more effective depositories of what can be saved from the dying remains. Here, modern biology may offer unexpected contributions to a museum's responsibility: the preservation in cold storage of tissue samples of representative animals, a technique already widely used in laboratory studies. At the very least, our descendants will be able to reconstruct some import detail from the study of DNA molecules retrieved from such a library. Furthermore, a whooping crane might be hatched in future from another bird's egg that has been renucleated from frozen, dormant tissue. This backstop ought not be accepted as a substitute for nurturing the wild birds, however, any more than freezing some human cells would take the place of saving mankind.

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