

EXTINCTION: IT'S A MATTER FOR ALL OF US



There are many negative effects of the ill-treatment (= wrong treatment) of the environment. Although we mostly focus on those which can directly affect humans, we should not forget about others, which are less obvious but no less dangerous. One of them is the extinction of animal and plant species. The International Union for the Conservation of Nature estimates that about 16,000 species are threatened to disappear in the next few years. If this is true, it would be one of the biggest extinction events in history.

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

During humanity's time on Earth, many amazing animals such as the Dodo, Tasmanian Tiger and Passenger Pigeon have died out as a result of human activity. It is sad to think that future generations might never see the beauty of a blue whale or of a tiger.

But this is a very anthropocentric (= human-centred) view. Scientifically, the beauty of animals is irrelevant (= not important).

One important reason many scientists are worried about extinction is that it threatens biodiversity. Biodiversity, as the name suggests, is the variety of plants and animals living in an ecosystem. It is important because it ensures the continuation of life. At a very basic level, the more species there are, the greater is the chance of life to survive when there is catastrophe.

Moreover, there are complex mutually beneficial webs (= benefits for all participants) which interconnect animals and plants. Plants provide food, shelter (= protection), a place to hunt and, for some species, like humans and gorillas, medicine. Animals also help plants by propagating (= spreading around) seeds, pollinating flowers and, when they die, nourishing the soil (= proving earth with the nutrients it needs to stay healthy). If one or two species anywhere in this web disappear, the whole ecosystem can collapse.

WHAT CAUSES IT?

This environmental problem is not limited to famous places like the Amazon rainforest. It is a worldwide phenomenon, like global warming. In fact, global warming is one of the many causes of extinction. Other problems are deforestation, poaching and pollution.

WHERE CAN IT END?

It is an unpleasant fact about nature that species disappear all the time. However, when the extinction is caused by our carelessness, then it is time to think of it not as a natural event, but a catastrophe which we can try to stop. One reason you have probably heard is that the natural world is a treasure to be preserved (= kept) for future generations. More importantly, the world's ecosystems are fragile (= easily damaged). Remove a few pieces and other species could suffer – including us.

Ryan Scott (Australia)

TASK

Match the names of the extinct animals mentioned in the article with their descriptions.

1. Dodo
2. Tasmanian Tiger
3. Passenger Pigeon

- A) It used to be one of the most common birds in North America; died out in late 19th century mainly because of intensive hunting.
- B) A large bird, unable to fly, that used to live on the island of Mauritius in the Indian Ocean. It died out in late 17th century, probably because humans destroyed forests where it lived and brought animals (dogs, pigs...), which destroyed its nests.
- C) A wolf-like animal with dark stripes across its back; probably died out in the 20th century because of habitat loss and hunting.

Solution on p. 3

ENVIRONMENT GLOSSARY

conservation of nature - the protection of plants, animals and natural areas, especially from the damage caused by human activity

species (pl. species) - a set of animals or plants in which the members have similar characteristics to each other

endangered species - species which is /are in danger of dying out

extinction - dying out

ecosystem - all the living things in an area and how they affect each other and the environment

to pollinate - to carry powder produced by the male part of a flower to the female part of the same type of flower so that it can produce seeds (insects or the wind pollinate flowers)

global warming - an increase in world temperatures caused by polluting gases which stay in the air around the Earth and prevent heat from escaping into space

deforestation - the destruction of forests by people

poaching - catching and killing animals without permission

pollution - damage caused to water, air, and the environment by harmful substances or waste

habitat loss - the loss of natural environment because of human activity