

Animal conservation: the debate



Photo © Russ Mittermeier
Enricke Bouma

On the 15th of April 2008, the International Conference Centre of Geneva hosted a lively youth debate on animal conservation, organised by the **Earth Focus Foundation** and ICVolunteers. Students from public and private schools in Geneva were invited to the debate. In addition, 10 students from the **Aga Khan Academy from Mombassa**, Kenya, also participated. ICV volunteers took care of contacts and liaising with schools, onsite logistics and reporting.

How can we understand better what threats endangered species are facing? Why is it important to protect them? These were the principal issues at stake during the conference.

The importance of the Red List

Mr Jean-Christophe Vié, Deputy Head of the Species Programme at the **International Union for Conservation of Nature** (IUCN), explained that the IUCN's mission is to influence, encourage and assist societies throughout the world to conserve the integrity and diversity of nature. "Biodiversity is crucial," he pointed out. "Diversity is vital to maintain healthy populations; it underpins all life and makes things more interesting". Part of the mission of the Species Conservation Programme is to compile a Red List of Threatened Species. The first Red List was compiled in the early 1960s and contained about 6000 species. Roughly 1.9 million threatened species have been described so far, but it is estimated there are between 10 to 100 million. According to the IUCN Red List, there were 16,306 species that were threatened with extinction in 2007. Among them are African vultures, Sumatran Orang-utans, Western Lowland Gorillas and Yangtze River Dolphins.

But what is a species? "The most basic definition is that it is a group of organisms capable of interbreeding and producing fertile offspring", explained Mr Vié. Species are an easily understood unit, even for national legislations, and that makes it possible to talk about their relation to us. One could ask if all species are equally important. "If not, how do we decide which ones to save first?", continued Mr Vié. The Red List deals with the species that are 'endangered' and 'critically endangered'. The levels above this are 'extinct in the wild' and 'extinct'. A fluctuating and declining population size and a small area of distribution represent the major risks factors, while over-exploitation, invasive alien species and habitat loss or degradation are some examples of the causes for a decline in a species. Species can be most successfully pulled back from the brink of extinction if the threat is very well understood and the intervention targeted. Most public attention is on so-called 'flagship species', such as polar bears and tigers, which speak to people's imagination. When there is a focus on an animal, the ecosystem in which they operate will also benefit.

The case studies: a map of endangered species

The debate continued with the presentation of 8 case studies made by students from the International School of Geneva and the Collège du Leman.

The first group of students explained to the audience the case of the **Blue Whale**. The blue whale is the biggest mammal that ever lived on earth. It is endangered because of climate-change, maritime traffic, illegal hunting and pollution (such as oil spills, but also sound pollution). In 1930 there were an estimated 175,000 blue whales. In 2001 there were only about 1,000 left. "As all of the above are man-made problems, it's up to humans to solve them," added the speaker. "Blue whales are starting to go up in numbers a little bit," commented Mr Vié, "but the problem is that when the numbers go up, people think it's Ok to start hunting them again!".

The **Bengal Tiger** is the 2nd largest species of tiger and one of the most endangered species in the world, even if it is a predator on top of the food chain. The Bengal tiger is in danger primarily due to rain forest destruction, but also

because of hunting: tiger's body parts are used in traditional medicine and skin is sold to the USA and Europe. Today there are only 40,000 Bengal tigers left.

From the **Red Panda** group, the assembly learned that this animal is about the size of a cat and eats mostly bamboo. There are only about 2500 red panda left in China, India, Bhutan and Tibet, and their main enemies are men (who massacre the panda for his skin and destroy his habitat) and the snow leopard. To stop deforestation, the use of bio-fuels, recycling and the introduction of stricter laws against poaching are some of the actions which could be taken.

The **Bumble bee** - which is much less aggressive than an ordinary bee and produces very little honey - is endangered mostly because of pesticides and skunks, while the Polar Bear suffers from the destruction of his natural habitat, global warming, the exploitation of oil and gas, and the pollution of waters. There are about 20-25,000 polar bears left in the arctic.

Alizeh Jaffrey next presented the case of the **Pink Dolphin**, which at birth is not pink, but almost black, and gradually turns pink because of its diet, which contains pigments it cannot digest. There are only about 120 pink dolphins left. They live near river mouths, where the water is brackish. They don't migrate if the water gets polluted because they can't swim through salty water. This makes them very vulnerable. Pink dolphins are endangered because of pollution (untreated sewage is dumped into the water in great quantities), DDT (which passes through the mother's milk and kills baby fish), fishing (which often causes the accidental death of dolphins) and hunting (because their meat is rare and expensive). "To save pink dolphins sewage needs to be better treated, alternatives to DDT should be found, better net sizes should be used, fisherman should be more careful maneuvering their boats and laws against slaughter should be stricter."

The following case (which was given an award because it was the most balanced, accurate and original in its content) was about the **Proboscis monkey**. This monkey is unique and very special, with its big nose that regulates heat and attracts females. It eats leaves, flowers and insects and has a complex digestive system, which can handle cellulose and deal with toxins in plants. Its stomach represents a quarter of its weight! Borneo Island is the natural habitat of the Proboscis monkey. Due to deforestation and forest fires there are only 1,000 specimens left in the world and the situation is getting worse every year. "The monkeys are also kept in zoos," explained the speaker, "but this is not really a solution, as they are social animals. The main advantage of keeping them in zoos is that captive breeding is good and maybe they can then be taken back to the wild".

The last speech was given by a student from the Aga Khan Academy (Mombassa, Kenya) and presented the case of endangered animals in Kenya. Animals such as the **Sea Turtle** and **Dugong** (Sea Cow), which are poached for their skins, tusks, oil, and meat, and to make clothing and medicine, said the speaker. The last recorded sighting of a dugong in Kenya was in 1999, and it is not known how many specimens exist in the wild. We only know that there are five in captivity. Some protection schemes are urgently needed such as land allocation (reserves), regular clean-up of beaches, patrolling of water, laws against poaching and species education programmes in local communities and schools.

"It is hard to balance human needs with the needs of animals," concluded Mr Vié in his final remarks "but we have to remember that each species is unique. It has taken thousands of years to evolve and cannot be replaced".

Posted: 2008-4-16 Updated: 2008-4-23