

Describing Species Endangerment

THE EASTERN woodland bison, Eastern elk, Carolina parakeet, and passenger pigeon are just some animals that once inhabited large portions of the United States. They are gone forever having been hunted to extinction or robbed of habitat. Today, the future of many other wildlife species hangs in the balance.



Objective:



Explain different aspects of wildlife species endangerment.

Key Terms:



endangered species
Endangered Species Act
endangerment
extinct
rare species
threatened species

Species Protection

When a living plant or creature can no longer adapt to the world in which it lives, it ceases to exist. A species that has disappeared from the earth is said to be **extinct**. Food shortages, pollution, destruction of habitat, and failure to reproduce are examples of how a species can become endangered and eventually extinct. **Endangerment** is any threat to a wildlife species that could cause its numbers to decrease. Extinction and endangerment are natural processes caused by numerous factors.

ENDANGERED, THREATENED, AND RARE SPECIES

There are different levels of species endangerment, including endangered species, threatened species, and rare species.

Endangered Species

A species of wildlife that is in immediate danger of extinction is an **endangered species**. Many endangered species can be seen in zoos or wildlife preserves because they are no longer safe in the wild or their native habitat has been altered.



FIGURE 1. The American bald Eagle was once endangered.

Threatened Species

A species of wildlife that is likely to become endangered is a **threatened species**. Populations of these wildlife species are low, but they are not in immediate danger of becoming extinct. Examples of threatened species include the star cactus and the red wolf.

Rare Species

A species of wildlife that exists only in small numbers is a **rare species**. The numbers of these species decline for many reasons. If a rare species is not managed well, it may eventually become threatened or extinct.

CAUSES OF ENDANGERMENT

Wildlife can become endangered in a number of ways. For example, the way humans treat the environment can reduce the quality of life for many wildlife species. Pollution and habitat loss are usually caused by humans. In addition, the introduction of new species to an area and poaching are ways in which wildlife populations can become dangerously low.



FIGURE 2. Habitat loss is the major cause of endangerment to the spotted owl. (Courtesy, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service)

An example of an extinct wildlife species is the passenger pigeon. Once estimated to number in the billions, these birds no longer exist. They are extinct because of habitat loss and hunting. Their natural habitat—the eastern hardwood forests—was destroyed for human consumption. Consequently, there was nowhere for the birds to live, find food, or reproduce.

An example of a rare species is the red wolf. True purebred red wolves only exist in captivity. Originally from the southern United States, red wolves have become rare because of hunting, disease, and death (due to being hit by cars).

ENDANGERED WILDLIFE SPECIES MANAGEMENT

Not all endangered species become extinct. Through good management, many threatened species can be repopulated and reintroduced into their natural habitats. To repopulate, it is necessary to plant additional food sources, construct safe environments where the animals can breed and give birth, reduce the use of chemicals in the environment, and move the species to other areas that are less polluted or less populated. The whooping crane and the brown pelican have moved from threatened to safe.

THE ENDANGERED SPECIES ACT

The **Endangered Species Act** (a federal law established in 1966) sets regulations regarding endangered and threatened wildlife species. To enact this law, Congress provides money to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to help support the care and management of these wildlife species. Examples of ways this money is used include purchasing land for wildlife habitats and studying wildlife populations. The Endangered Species Act also makes it illegal to harm any endangered species.

Summary:



A species that has disappeared from the earth is said to be extinct. Endangerment is any threat to a wildlife species that could cause its numbers to decrease. Different levels of endangerment include endangered species, threatened species, and rare species.

Wildlife can become endangered in a number of ways: pollution, urban sprawl, habitat loss, the introduction of new species, hunting, disease, and poaching.

Through good management, many threatened species can be repopulated and reintroduced to their natural habitats. Repopulation can be promoted through the provision of food sources, construction of safe environments where the animals can breed and give birth, reduction of chemicals in the environment, and movement of species to other areas that are less polluted or less populated.

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Checking Your Knowledge:



1. What is the meaning of extinct endangerment?
2. What are three levels of endangerment?
3. What are some causes of species endangerment?
4. What are some good management practices?
5. What is the purpose of the Endangered Species Act?

Expanding Your Knowledge:



Conduct research to determine which mammal, bird, fish, reptilian, and amphibian species in your state have become extinct and which are endangered.

Web Links:



Conservation Status

<http://www.natureserve.org/explorer/ranking.htm#natsub>

Endangered Species

<http://www.endangeredspecies.com/>

Endangered Species Program

<http://www.fws.gov/endangered/>

Protecting Endangered Species

<http://www.worldwildlife.org/species/>