



FADING FOOTPRINTS: EXPLORING THE EERIE THREAT OF MASS EXTINCTIONS

One more Cheetah succumbs!

Yet another cheetah has perished within the confines of Kuno National Park. This recent loss of life involves a cheetah known by the name of Surya, and tragically, it occurred merely two days following the demise of another cheetah, affectionately nicknamed Tejas.

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Over the past five decades, our planet has witnessed a rapid surge in human population, development, and urbanization. This relentless expansion has led to the deforestation of hundreds of millions of acres of forests worldwide, posing a significant threat to wildlife. As habitats and food sources dwindle, the plight of wildlife worsens with each passing day. A 2020 analysis highlights the alarming acceleration of the sixth mass extinction of Earth's wildlife. More than 500 species of land animals are teetering on the brink of extinction, and if current trends continue, they may vanish within the next two decades. Given that India stands among the most densely populated countries globally, it's not surprising that human activity and land development are escalating at a rapid pace. This escalating situation only adds to the mounting challenges faced by wildlife and their habitats.

Vanishing Wonders: The Alarming Rise of Endangered Species

The 21st century is marked by an alarming surge in the number of endangered species. Iconic animals, such as elephants, rhinos, and tigers, are not the only ones facing extinction. Countless lesser-known species, from amphibians and insects to marine creatures, are equally at risk, but often slip under the radar of public awareness. Deforestation, driven by agriculture, logging, and urbanization, is one of the leading causes of habitat loss. As forests shrink, many unique and specialized species find themselves without a home. Climate change exacerbates the issue, as rising temperatures and changing weather patterns disrupt ecosystems, pushing species out of their accustomed ranges.

From Iconic Giants to Disappearing Marvels

India is home to several endangered species facing numerous threats. The Bengal tiger, comprising about half of the world's tiger population, has suffered from persistent poaching, habitat loss, and human-wildlife conflict, reducing its population to less than 2,000 individuals in just 7% of its historical range. The Asiatic lion, smaller than its African counterparts, now exists only in India's Gir National Park, with approximately 500-650 individuals remaining, threatened by electrical fences and accidental drownings in open wells. The snow leopard, once widespread in Asian mountains, is now limited to certain regions in India, with about 500 left, threatened by poaching, loss of prey, and habitat degradation from human activities. The one-horned rhinoceros faced near extinction but has rebounded to around 3,700 due to conservation efforts, although challenges persist from poaching and human-wildlife conflicts.

The blackbuck, Indian antelope, saw its population plummet due to severe poaching, but conservation efforts have helped it recover to around 25,000, although stray dogs, pesticides, and vehicles continue to pose threats. The lion-tailed macaque, native to Western Ghats, is endangered, with approximately 4,000 remaining, facing habitat loss, hunting, and behavioural changes due to human food access. The resplendent tree frog, discovered in 2010, is rare, with around 300 left in Kerala's Anamudi summit. The Kashmiri red stag, critically endangered, is confined to Dachigam National Park, threatened by habitat fragmentation and low fawn-female ratios. The Nilgiri tahr, an endangered mountain goat, faces threats from poaching, habitat loss, and potential habitat unsuitability due to climate change. The Indian bison, the largest wild cattle, is vulnerable, with more than 70% population loss in some areas, primarily due to poaching and habitat destruction. These endangered species require urgent conservation efforts to secure their survival in India's diverse and delicate ecosystems.

The Consequences of Vanishing Biodiversity

The loss of biodiversity carries profound consequences for the planet and humanity. As species disappear, the intricate web of life weakens, leading to imbalances in ecosystems. The disappearance of pollinators, for instance, threatens global food security, as a significant portion of crops depends on them for pollination. Moreover, declining biodiversity can increase the vulnerability of communities to natural disasters and diseases.

Beyond the ecological implications, the extinction of species carries an emotional toll. Many cultures revere wildlife, and the loss of iconic animals can lead to cultural erosion. Additionally, ecotourism, which provides livelihoods for millions, relies on thriving wildlife populations. The disappearance of these animals can disrupt local economies and communities.

Conservation Efforts: Hope on the Horizon

Amidst the gloomy scenario, a ray of hope shines through the efforts of conservationists and organizations worldwide. Conservation initiatives, ranging from the establishment of protected areas and wildlife reserves to the reintroduction of endangered species into the wild, are showing promising results.

Global collaboration is also key to addressing the silent extinction crisis. International agreements, such as the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), regulate the trade of endangered species and their products, curbing illegal wildlife trafficking. Furthermore, public awareness campaigns and education play a vital role in inspiring collective action.

The Role of Individual Action

While global conservation efforts are essential, individual action can also make a significant difference. Adopting sustainable practices in our daily lives, such as reducing plastic usage, supporting sustainable products, and making eco-conscious choices, can help alleviate pressure on endangered species and their habitats.

Supporting responsible ecotourism and conservation-oriented organizations can directly contribute to safeguarding wildlife and their environments. Additionally, citizen science initiatives allow ordinary people to participate in data collection, contributing to scientific understanding and conservation efforts.

The Final Call

The silent extinction crisis is a wake-up call for humanity. The fate of endangered species is intertwined with our own, and their survival is indicative of the planet's overall health. By recognizing the urgency of the situation and taking collective action, we can rewrite the narrative for endangered species. It is time to stand united as stewards of this precious planet, working tirelessly to preserve its incredible biodiversity for generations to come. Together, we can ensure that the vanishing wonders of our world are celebrated, cherished, and protected for all time.

