

## Indian mammals under threat: IUCN Redlist

According to the recently released IUCN Redlist<sup>1</sup> of threatened species, mammals of the world have confirmed an extinction crisis. IUCN, with its headquarters in Gland, Switzerland, is the world's oldest and largest global environment network of membership union with over 1000 governments and NGOs. The IUCN Redlist of threatened species identifies and documents species in need of conservation efforts and assigns them a status according to their risk of extinction and produces major analysis every four years. The 2008 update of the IUCN Redlist<sup>1</sup> comprises of 44,838 species, of which 2% is extinct or extinct-in-the-wild, 38% is threatened with extinction, 8% is near-threatened, while 12% has insufficient data to assign any status.

Since AD 1500, 76 mammals have become extinct, with two in the extinct in the wild category. It is interesting to note that more than half of the species that became extinct, belong to the order Rodentia. This figure is just for the number of species documented and described, and could be much higher as 836 mammalian species are listed as 'data-deficient'. If more information on these species is obtained, then the number of species in different categories, including those that belong to the extinct category can go much higher. More than 1800 scientists from over 130 countries helped in assessing the status of world's mammals<sup>1</sup>.

About 188 mammals all over the globe are in the critically endangered category

for various reasons like shortage of prey populations, habitat loss, hunting for trade, etc. Loss of habitat and degradation affects 40% of world's mammals, with dire consequences in South America and South and South East Asia including India. IUCN has also identified over-harvesting as one of the major causes of species loss in South East Asia.

Biological diversity in the Indian sub-continent is one of the richest in the world owing to its vast geographical area, varied topography and climate. India has two hotspots in terms of biodiversity; the Western Ghats and Eastern Himalayas. During the past 60–70 years, plant and animal life in the Western Ghats has been degraded. About 96 mammals in India are threatened. This number is just the second highest figure in South and South East Asia. Also, a total of 659 species threatened in India is the third highest number in South and South East Asia. The only blessing in disguise for Indian biodiversity is that the Indian rhinoceros (*Rhinoceros unicornis*) has moved from the endangered to the vulnerable category. Surprisingly, the leopard (*Panthera pardus*), highly poached for its skin, has moved from LC (least concern) to NT (near threatened) category. The largest Indian deer, Sambar (*Cervus unicolor*) has also moved from LR/LC (lower risk, least concern) to vulnerable category. Asiatic wild ass has also moved from vulnerable to endangered category<sup>1</sup>.

Apart from mammals, 14 Indian tarantulas (8 of which are threatened) made their first appearance in the IUCN Redlist<sup>1</sup>, as they are threatened by international pet trade. Indian tarantulas along with Rameshwaram parachute spider (*Poecilotheria hanumavilasumica*), listed as critically endangered, face habitat loss due to various developmental projects.

Around the globe, some reverse trend is also being seen. Proper conservation efforts can bring back a species on the verge of extinction. Population of some mammals has recovered and has moved one step to a safer category. Reintroduction of black footed ferret in Mexico and wild horse in Mongolia has placed them both in extinct-in-the-wild to endangered and critically endangered category respectively<sup>1</sup>.

What is required is a little concern towards our environment and towards our fragile wildlife and the ability to understand the complex processes that go on to make life on earth sustainable.

1. [www.iucn.org](http://www.iucn.org), retrieved 17 October 2008.

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## Breeding professional writers

I teach English for students pursuing a degree in science. Many a times, I am pained by the lack of interest shown by these students to the subject. The editorial by Balam<sup>1</sup> entitled 'Writers and Readers' solved my problem and Pandit's<sup>2</sup> suggestion clarified that science-writing needs both knowledge of science and communicative English to report the happenings in the field. I read *Current Science* mainly for its lucid language

in the editorials, correspondence and news categories.

To develop the skill of science-writing, the English texts should be of that nature, instead of mere skills of communication and literary English. Secondly, reading science magazines in English and watching television programmes on science will help in developing a taste for language. I am inspired to teach English from that angle.

1. Balam, P., *Curr. Sci.*, 2008, **94**, 1345–1346.  
2. Pandit, M. K., *Curr. Sci.*, 2008, **95**, 701.

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