

Editorial

Cats on the Brink

Iberian lynx

IUCN has declared that the Iberian lynx (*Lynx pardinus*) is Critically Endangered with extinction. According to Spanish officials there may be fewer than 300 in the country, and specialists say that there are only two small breeding populations, one of about 40 lynx in the Coto Doñana National Park, south of Seville, and another in the Andújar region of the Sierra Modena. In Portugal, the lynx may already be extinct. The chances are that we could see the first known extinction of a cat species for at least 2,000 years – perhaps even for 10,000 years, when the sabretooths disappeared.

That this could happen in western Europe, where conservationists call on the Third World to save its wildlife, is shameful. The lynx, only 2-3 times the size of a domestic cat, has posed no threat to humans or their livestock, although it might have taken a few chickens. Its main food is the rabbit, which came to be regarded as an agricultural pest, to the extent that the deadly virus *Myxomatosis* was released to reduce the population. It did, but, inevitably, that led to a major decline in the lynx population. Meanwhile, lynx habitat was destroyed in Spain and Portugal as they pressed ahead with economic development. New roads proved to be deathtraps for lynx, and, despite legal protection, many lynx have been shot, often on private lands where the law could not be enforced.

The Spanish Government announced a US\$ 7 million conservation plan in March 2002, which involves efforts to save and restore habitats. Captive breeding is also envisaged at the Jerez Zoo, which has recently obtained some young females from the wild, but has no males so far. An earlier captive breeding programme produced no young despite an excellent facility near the Doñana National Park. It is hoped to have a founder population of 12 lynx this time to achieve an effective reproduction programme.

In November, Spanish central and provincial government officials met together with Portuguese representatives and non-governmental organisations, including the Cat Specialist Group, in Andújar. They pledged to work together for the lynx. It will be a long and hard task.

South China tiger

In the far east of Eurasia, another cat hovers on the brink of extinction. The South China tiger has long been listed as Critically Endangered by IUCN, having been brought to the edge of extinction when hunted down as an officially-declared pest in the 1950s and 60s. Since then it has been apparent that few remained in the wild. Although a scientific survey in the early 1990s found footprints and other indications that some tigers survived, none was seen. In 2001, a much more intensive survey was organised by the Chinese State Forestry Administration, with the technical assistance of Dr Ronald Tilson, one of the world's leading tiger experts. They came to divergent conclusions. No tigers were observed, or photographed by automatic phototraps, and Tilson says he believes the South China is already extinct in the wild, although there might be a few stray individuals left. The Forestry Administration, however, declares that footprints and other tiger signs were found, indicating that some tigers still roam the mountains of several provinces. The difference is rather like seeing a glass as half full or half empty.

However, unlike the Iberian lynx, there are about 50 captive South China tigers, and the Chinese government has agreed to send some to South Africa to establish a captive population, trained to catch wild prey and to produce young tigers that can be released in their natural habitat, hopefully coinciding with the Olympic Games in Beijing in 2008.

The Cat Specialist Group would certainly like to see the South China tiger restored in its homeland, where it has had great cultural significance. But reintroduction is a complicated and difficult operation, particular with large carnivores; failure is all too likely. While there is no objection to a captive population in South Africa, or elsewhere, cat and carnivore reintroduction specialists believe that there would be a greater chance of success if tigers were trained and prepared in their natural habitat rather than where tigers have never lived.

Peter Jackson

Iberian Lynx Declared Critically Endangered

The Iberian lynx (*Lynx pardinus*), found only in Spain and Portugal, has been declared Critically Endangered in the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species.

Announcing revisions of the 2000 Red List, IUCN's Red List specialists said:

“With the population having declined to less than half of the 1,200 of the early 1990s, the Iberian lynx is close to becoming the first wild cat species to go extinct for at least 2,000 years. The species occurs in Mediterranean woodland and maquis thicket, favouring dense scrub for shelter and open pasture for hunting rabbits. Habitat fragmentation by agricultural and industrial development has resulted in the population being confined to scattered groups in the southwestern quadrant of the Iberian Peninsula.

“The introduction of *Myxomatosis* to control the abundant rabbit population in Europe resulted in the disappearance of the lynx's principal prey. With the main food source decimated, the lynx population crashed. In an attempt to maintain the population, conservationists are breeding and releasing rabbits, while the wild rabbit population is developing a natural immunity to *Myxomatosis*. Additional threats to the species come from injuries caused by being caught in snares set for rabbits, accidental deaths caused by speeding vehicles on the expanding road network, and illegal shooting.”

The Iberian lynx was one of four mammal species newly declared Critically Endangered, the others being the Bactrian camel (*Camelus bactrianus*), Saiga antelope (*Saiga tatarica*) and Ethiopian water mouse (*Nilopegamys plumbeus*). The slender-billed vulture (*Gyps tenuirostris*) and the Indian vulture (*G. indicus*) have also been classified as Critically Endangered because they have suffered extremely rapid population declines, particularly across the Indian subcontinent, as a result of disease, poisoning, pesticide use and changes in the processing of dead livestock. The new additions raise the number of mammals listed as Criti-

cally Endangered to 181, along with 182 birds, 55 reptiles, 30 amphibians, 157 fish, 46 insects and 222 molluscs – a total of 510.

Threatened species are classified in three categories: Critically Endangered (CR), Endangered (EN), or Vulnerable (VU). There are now 11,167 species threatened with extinction, an increase of 121 since 2000 with several new additions to the Red List and notable shifts in status.

Habitat loss and degradation affect 89% of all threatened birds, 83% of mammals, and 91% of threatened plants assessed. Habitats with the highest number of threatened mammals and birds are lowland and mountain tropical rainforest. Freshwater habitats are extremely vulnerable with many threatened fish, reptile, amphibian and invertebrate species.

The 2002 IUCN Red List of Threatened Species is the first of what will be an annual update of the Red List database which is housed on its own searchable website <<http://www.redlist.org>>. The figures will change annually as new species assessments are included, currently-listed species are re-assessed, and species undergo taxonomic revisions.

In 2000, there were 5,611 plants assessed as threatened (1,014 CR, 1,266 EN, 3,331 VU). With the addition of Mexican and Brazilian cactus assessments, the figure is now 5,714 (1,046 CR, 1,291 EN, 3,377 VU) but there is much ‘catching up’ to do in plant assessments. With only approximately 4% of the world's described plants evaluated, the true percentage of threatened plant species is much higher. Most of the plant species listed are trees, since these have been relatively thoroughly assessed.

There are now 811 species assessed as Extinct and Extinct in the Wild, with seven additions to these categories since 2000 including the sea mink (*Mustela macrodon*), which was last seen in 1860, the Réunion Island sheldgoose (*Mascarenachen kervazoi*), which became extinct around 1710, and two hippo species (*Hippopotamus lemerlei* and *H. madagascariensis*) that became extinct around 1500 AD.

Since 2000, two species previously assessed as Extinct have been rediscovered – the Lord Howe Island stick insect (*Dryococelus australis*) and the Bavarian pine vole (*Microtus bavaricus*).

The Status of the Iberian Lynx

A Statement by the IUCN/SSC Cat Specialist Group

In 2002, the Iberian lynx became the first wild cat species to be listed as Critically Endangered in the IUCN/SSC Red List of Threatened Species. From there to extinction requires just one small step. The IUCN/SSC Cat Specialist Group therefore suggested to several governmental and private organisations in Spain and Portugal, and to international institutions, that an emergency meeting on the conservation of the Iberian lynx be convened. The response to this call was very positive, resulting in a seminar in southern Spain, 29-31 October 2002, co-organised by the

Spanish Ministerio del Ambiente, the Junta de Andalucía, the Council of Europe/Bern Convention, Adena/WWF, the Doñana Biological Station (National Research Council), and the IUCN/SSC Cat Specialist Group, and hosted by the Municipality of Andújar in Andalucía's Sierra Morena. More than 100 people participated, representing most organisations, but also private landowners from Spain and Portugal, involved in conservation of the lynx, as well as international institutions such as the European Union [EU] and the Large Carnivore Initiative for Europe (LCIE) (see p. 25).