



WILDLIFE FADING, EVEN IN NEW JERSEY

The world's wildlife is disappearing.

So says the 2018 edition of the Living Planet Report, published last week by the World Wildlife Fund and the Zoological Society of London. The Report found that the population size of some of the world's vertebrate species had shrunk by 60 percent between 1970 and 2014.

It's not just a matter of already rare and threatened animals going extinct. The shrinking wildlife numbers account for all species, from the African elephant to the American robin.

The changes are noticeable, said John Cecil, the vice president of stewardship for New Jersey Audubon,

"People used to go bird watching and they would encounter many more birds than they would today," Cecil said.

The most threatened species are vertebrates, which include any animal that has a backbone. More creatures from fish and birds to reptiles and mammals have disappeared from the Earth over the four decade period, according to the report.

According to the report, species in Central American, South America, the Caribbean and Africa are most at risk and tropical species have suffered the most.

Still, the rash of wildlife decline hits home here, too.

"It mirrors what we see in New Jersey," said David Wheeler, the executive director of the Conserve Wildlife Foundation of New Jersey.

One example is the Eskimo curlew, a shorebird that is listed by the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources as critically threatened but has not had a confirmed sighting since 1963. The Jersey Shore once served as a stopping point for the curlews as they migrated in the fall from their summer breeding grounds in Canada to their winter home in Argentina.

The story of the Eskimo curlew serves as a worst-case scenario for the currently endangered Red Knot, Wheeler said, a species with a similar migration pattern that has struggled in recent decades.

The decline of species is being driven by a combination of factors, all of which can be connected to human activity.

HABITAT LOSS

Development has continuously pushed wildlife into smaller and smaller areas. According to the WWF report, only a quarter of the Earth's land is currently free of impacts from human activities. That quarter is expected to shrink to just 10 percent by 2050. Habitat loss is also the foremost contributor to wildlife decline in New Jersey, according to Wheeler. Hit particularly hard by this are pollinators, insects like bees and butterflies that spread pollen and help plants grow.

Cecil pointed out that grasslands birds, which rely on large swaths of open area, are hard hit by development. The upland sandpiper, for example, was once common across the Garden State. Today, it is only found in the state at Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst.

INVASIVE SPECIES

Invasive species are often able to dominate habitats that they are introduced to because they face no natural predators.

The bog turtle, New Jersey's newly minted state reptile, is threatened by invasive plants. The bog turtle's habitat in the Garden State has shrunk due to development, and that loss is compounded by invasive plants transforming what habitat remains into something that the turtles cannot survive in.

CLIMATE CHANGE

Climate change, driven by humans, is reshaping our world, and wildlife faces the impacts just as much as humanity does. In New Jersey the effects of climate change are felt most strongly in coastal areas, where sea level rise is exacerbated by the fact that the Garden State is sinking.

DISEASE

For some species, disease serves as the primary existential threat. Bats serve as a prime example of this; White-nose syndrome is believed to have come to North America from Europe in 2006 and has devastated American bat populations. New Jersey's bats have not been spared, Wheeler said.

"There's no end in sight," Wheeler said. "It's really become a battle with some of the bat species to stave off extinction."

POLLUTION

Aquatic species, living in both freshwater and saltwater, have faced high rates of extinction. The report specifically mentions plastics pollution in the world's waterways as a direct threat to fish and other aquatic life.

Increasingly, towns and cities throughout New Jersey have taken steps to cut back on the use of single-use plastics like bags, balloons, straws and food containers. A proposal for a comprehensive statewide ban on single-use plastics is currently moving through the Legislature.

POACHING

Poaching remains a major threat to wildlife worldwide.

The recent arrest of a Pennsylvania man who was allegedly smuggling diamondback terrapins out of South Jersey put a spotlight on the region's role in that black market.

RECOVERY STORIES

"On the positive side, we have seen a number of species recover incredibly well in New Jersey," Wheeler said.

In New Jersey, the recovery of bald eagles, peregrine falcons and ospreys is an example of this. All three bird species saw their numbers rapidly decline in the Garden State as widespread use of the pesticide DDT entered the food chain and weakened eggs. Leading to fewer offspring.

That changed in 1972, when the United States banned the use of DDT for agriculture 10 years after Rachel Carson published "Silent Spring." The birds became healthier, and today Wheeler says the birds are found in large numbers across New Jersey.

(Michael Sol Warren for South Jersey Times - 11-6-18)



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