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The photos featured are from Photo Ark, a documentary project to save species and habitat founded by photographer and National Geographic Fellow Joel Sartore. Since the project began in 2006, Sartore has shot nearly 10,000 documented species.

Save the Species, Save the World

A recent UN report predicts unprecedented rates of animal extinctions and the outcome is entirely dependent on human behavior.

BY TED ALAN STEDMAN

In 2019, the Australian Koala Foundation declared koalas functionally extinct. Sad social media memes multiplied. Panic ensued. And then, a most important parsing of words. Not yet gone entirely the way of the dodo or the mammoth, koalas live on. Quite different than *actually* extinct, *functionally* extinct means that scientists believe the population has grown too small to produce future generations. In the case of koalas, even this claim is being debated, as conflicting conclusions were drawn in the wake of last year's devastating fires in Australia.

There is much to be learned from that moment of regret rendered at the thought that koalas were in fact, really, gone. And yet the experience is likely to become more frequent. Last year the conclusions of 455 experts forecasted an unprecedented species extinction rate. The alarm was poignant and potent—a call to action that reverberated worldwide as the United Nations released a landmark report. The cryptic conclusion was that “1 million of Earth's 8 million species are threatened by extinction because of humans.”

Rebecca Shaw, World Wildlife Fund chief scientist and senior vice president, links the loss of animal species to our fate. “Healthy functioning ecosystems provide clean air, water, and raw materials, but we're utilizing these at an unsustainable rate. It's clear that if we don't do something soon with the degradation of nature, including loss of species, we will struggle to survive.”

There are more than 105,700 species on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species, the world's most comprehensive inventory of biological species. Koalas are listed as vulnerable, which is three categories away from being classified as extinct (endangered, then critically endangered, then extinct in the wild are the three categories in between). The list cites more than 28,000 species threatened with extinction (40 percent of amphibians, 33 percent of reef corals, 25 percent of mammals, and 14 percent of birds). In the United States, the Endangered Species Act of 1973 is used as a tool for establishing species viability and recovery efforts. For most threatened species, it's not too late; following is the latest intel on eight beloved populations on the IUCN and/or EPA lists. →

Snow leopard



Joel Sartore/National Geographic Photo Ark (2)

SNOW LEOPARDS

Status: Vulnerable (IUCN)

As the flagship species of high-mountain ecosystems, snow leopards are at a critical juncture.

In the highest mountains of South and Central Asia, snow leopards prowl, feed, and live mostly alone, existing as fleeting apparitions and creatures of local myths and legends. Rarely seen and difficult to spot due to thick fur camouflaged to mimic their rocky habitat, the species has low densities (estimated at less than one adult per 39 square miles) compared to other big cats. Their exact numbers are unknown, ranging from as few as 3,920 to no more than 6,390. And while snow leopards have coexisted with mountain people for millennia, the species may now be close to extinction as a result of conflicts with humans.

“The snow leopard is considered the most enigmatic and iconic of all large cats,” says Dr. Charu Mishra, executive director for the **Snow Leopard Trust** (snowleopard.org), the world’s largest and oldest snow leopard conservation organization. “They have a precarious existence in the extreme cold and vertical mountain environments of 12 Asian countries.” Their populations are naturally low, he says, because of their harsh environment and the available number of wild sheep and goats they prey upon.

Snow leopard landscapes that were once considered remote are increasingly being accessed by road developments, railways, and infrastructure projects, exposing high-mountain ecosystems to new threats that diminish the species’ ability to successfully hunt and reproduce. “Snow leopards have shared their habitats with livestock herders almost since the end of the last ice age, but they’ll kill livestock if given the opportunity, causing herders to retaliate,” Mishra says.

To help mitigate conflicts, the Snow Leopard Trust and other conservation organizations are partnering with communities and providing education and tools to help offset livestock kills, while creating sustainable development programs that help diversify income streams. “There also needs to be greater integrated efforts among governments, enforcement agencies, and local communities to disrupt illegal trade of snow leopard pelts and bones, which has risen over the past decade,” Mishra says.

SEE THEM: Voygr Expeditions (voygr.com) bills its Snow Leopard Tours as a “rare opportunity” to spot the elusive species in the high, 10,000-foot-plus altitudes of the Karakoram-West Tibetan Plateau. Much of the 14-day trek is based in Hemis National Park in the Ladakh region administered by India, home to one of the world’s largest concentrations of snow leopards.

MEXICAN GRAY WOLVES

Status: Endangered (ESA)

Captive breeding programs help rescue the most endangered gray wolf in North America.

El lobo once occupied the height of North American lore, a supernatural entity respected as a warrior symbol and cunning predator in Pre-Columbian Mexico. But the Mexican gray wolf (a subspecies of the gray wolf of more northern latitudes) was extirpated in the wild during the mid-1900s, largely through government-sponsored hunting, trapping, poisoning, and the removal of pups from dens. Once numbering in the thousands, wild wolves were functionally extinct in the United States by the mid-1970s, with just a handful existing in captivity.

In 1976, the US Fish and Wildlife Service listed the species under the Endangered Species Act and collaborated with Mexico to capture all remaining wolves in the wild. Four males and one pregnant female were captured alive in Mexico and used to start a captive breeding program that led the 1998 release of 11 Mexican wolves into recovery areas in Arizona and New Mexico. By 2018, 131 wolves in 32 packs were documented in the wild, while 240 wolves existed in captive breeding. The recolonization of their former historical range had begun—but not without concerns.

“Mexican gray wolves were eradicated because of conflicts with livestock,” says Craig Miller, senior Southwest representative for Defenders of Wildlife. “Their numbers have grown slowly, but their future remains uncertain because of compromised genetics from small populations and human intolerance.”

As advocates for the survival of Mexican gray wolves, **Defenders of Wildlife** (defenders.org) works side by side with wolf country ranchers and wildlife managers to help reduce conflicts between wolves and livestock. When conflicts do occur, effective management strategies and compensation for rancher losses are saving wolves’ lives. “The partnerships around collaborative work have resulted in improved trust and communication with stakeholders—and unexpected friendships,” says Miller. “We don’t agree on everything, but we do agree on collaborative problem-solving to support long-term solutions allowing people and wildlife to coexist.”

SEE THEM: WolfHorse Outfitters (wolfhorseoutfitters.com) is a Native American guide service specializing in pack horse adventures into the Gila and Aldo Leopold wilderness areas, both strongholds of Mexican gray wolves. Beginning in Silver City, New Mexico, multiday rides journey along the old Apache “Drag the Wolf Trail,” while guides are attentive to the evidence of wolves. →



Joel Sartore/ National Geographic Photo Ark