That's worldwide. What about in the U.S.?

All told, this year's red list includes 5025 species that are in danger of disappearing forever. Of these species, at least 500 (10 percent) will make up the United States' Endangered Species Act (ESA), which assigns the status of "endangered" or the less serious "threatened" to species that are in danger of extinction, but it emphasizes that thousands of groups of animals have never been assessed, so the truth is very likely worse than the IUCN has reported.

In addition to one-quarter of the world's mammals being threatened with extinction, the latest IUCN red list includes 1108 species of birds -- more than 11 percent of all the bird species on Earth.

In addition to mammals and birds, the red list of 1996 includes 253 reptile species, 124 amphibian species, and 734 fish species in danger of extinction, but it emphasizes that thousands of groups of animals have never been assessed, so the truth is very likely worse than the IUCN has reported.

All told, this year's red list includes 5025 species that are in danger of disappearing forever.

That's worldwide. What about in the U.S.?

** In January, 1996, the TIMES reported that the Nature Conservancy (a private organization) had evaluated 20,481 species of animals and plants. [5] The Nature Conservancy reported that about one-third of the species studied are rare or imperiled in the U.S. Specifically, 1.3 percent were already extinct (or possibly extinct --extinction is hard to prove); 6.5 percent were critically imperiled; 8.9 percent were imperiled; and 15 percent were considered vulnerable.

The four groups with the highest percentages of species in danger of extinction are freshwater mussels (67.1 percent), crayfish (64.8 percent), amphibians (37.9 percent), and freshwater fish (37.2 percent). The groups with the LOWEST percentages of species in trouble were birds (13.9 percent), and mammals (16.1 percent). This study listed only full species, not subspecies, so endangered creatures like the northern spotted owl in the northwestern U.S. were not included.

Harvard biologist E.O. Wilson told the TIMES that the Nature Conservancy study was scientifically valid and was representative of the nation's fauna and flora, even though some groups, like insects, were not well represented. There are an estimated 100,000 species of plants and animals in the U.S., so the Nature Conservancy only looked at about one-fifth of all species --the ones for which scientists had sufficient information to make an assessment.

There is only one cause of this decimation: humans and their economic activities, which are premised on the unspoken assumption that humans are the master species of the Earth and can do whatever they please with it. [6]

If the problem really has only one cause, why can't we make headway against it? For one thing, we can't seem to admit a defeat when we experience one. We insist on calling it victory.

Against the IUCN's and the Nature Conservancy's catalogs of destruction, we have Sierra Club's Carl Pope celebrating the year's accomplishments: managing to hang on to the environmental laws that have permitted the destruction for 25 years; protection of a former military base (albeit a park-like one), the Presidio, in San Francisco, and a slice of prairie in Kansas; and making the environment "a salient political issue" in a handful of Congressional races. For his part, John Adams celebrates the fact that 25 years of ineffective U.S. environmental laws have been retained. Adams calls this "the single most significant victory in the history of the U.S. environmental movement." If these evaluations are correct, then the environmental movement in the U.S. is bankrupt.

The national environmental organizations are continuing to work exclusively on the symptoms of our distress. They are working to pass laws and regulations, one at a time, to apply a zillion bandages to a zillion small wounds, each of which is oozing blood. This is a strategy doomed to fail. It has failed year after year, and it will continue to fail into the future until the human animal has disappeared.

Let's be blunt. Few will disagree with the following assessment by John Stauber and Sheldon Rampton: "The business class dominates government through its ability to fund political campaigns, purchase high-priced lobbyists, and reward former officials with lucrative jobs." [7] (Obviously this is true not only in the U.S.; this is a global problem.)

If this is so, why do we keep trying to tweak government, to pass one more law that either won't be enforced or won't change anything that matters? Instead, why don't we focus our attention and resources on the institutions that give the business class the undemocratic power to dominate government? (as well as to dominate our vision of what's right and good)? Think of where the environmental movement could be today if, 25 years ago, we had begun to focus our creative energies on diminishing the excessive power of the corporate class instead of on tweaking ineffective power of the corporate class instead of on tweaking ineffective power of the corporate class instead of on tweaking ineffective power of the corporate class...
environmental regulations.

Before government can help the environment in any significant way, government must be restored to a point where it can debate real issues and seek real solutions. That will require us to get private (corporate) money out of our elections AS A FIRST PRIORITY.

To his credit, Carl Pope went on record in a recent SIERRA magazine saying that the key institution of the business class --the corporation-- is a "major obstacle to the defense of clean air and water and the preservation of wildlife habitat."[8] This was an important, positive statement.

Despite this, the Sierra Club spent almost $7.5 million trying to influence the outcome of Congressional races in 1996--during an election campaign where total spending exceeded $1.8 billion.[9] This $7.5 million represents a breathtaking amount of cash, when compared to the money that is available to work on campaign finance reform--the effort to get private/corporate money out of elections--where even one million dollars is a huge sum. That $7.5 million could have funded a major effort to achieve campaign finance reform, but could make almost no difference in a $1.8 billion national election. Spent on a national election, those funds could do nothing to diminish the excessive power of the corporate class. Despite Mr. Pope's recent--and welcome--acknowledgement that corporations are a key problem, the Club evidently still doesn't have a strategy that can lead to anything but more of the same old stuff--and I offer this saddening assessment as a member and supporter of the Club.

Still it should be said that the Sierra Club is among the more progressive of the nation's 15 large national environmental organizations. At this point, the rest of the groups are far off target with the exception of Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace. NRDC seems unlikely ever to understand the centrality of the corporation to environmental destruction. Indeed, most of the Big 15 are committed to failed strategies, supporting Clinton/Gore, pretending to themselves that success will arrive when the Democrats come up with the corporate cash needed to retake control of Congress. History tells us it is a false hope.

But isn't it really individual lifestyles that are the problem, not corporate money and power? It is difficult to imagine people in an industrialized country like the U.S. successfully curbing their appetites while corporations are spending $23 billion each year promoting hedonism (usually called "consumerism") through advertising. Corporations have spent a century intentionally reversing our "old fashioned" attitudes of thrift, simplicity, and religious reverence for life. (And most recently they are in our schools, dismantling environmental education programs, intentionally exorcising the knowledge and attitudes our children will need for survival.) A few people have been able to withstand this ceaseless barrage of corporate propaganda, but not many. Before people can sort out what it's going to take to prevent the extinction of humans, we will need to clear our minds and focus on fundamentals, in preparation for a difficult national debate. Getting corporate money out of the institutions of our democracy is the first requirement.

--Peter Montague (National Writers Union, UAW Local 1981/AFL-CIO)

[1] Undated letter to "Dear Friends" from Carl Pope, Executive Director, The Sierra Club, received December 9, 1996.


[3] Les Line, "1,096 Mammal and 1,108 Bird Species Threatened," NEW YORK TIMES October 8, 1996, p. 4. The IUCN is part of the World Conservation Union, Rue Mauverney 28, CH-1196 Gland, Switzerland. Telephone +41-22-9990001; fax: +41-22-9990002. E-mail: mail@hq.iucn.ch. In Washington, D.C. their telephone number is (202) 797-5454. To order their publications from within the U.S. or Canada call toll-free 1-800-828-1302.


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