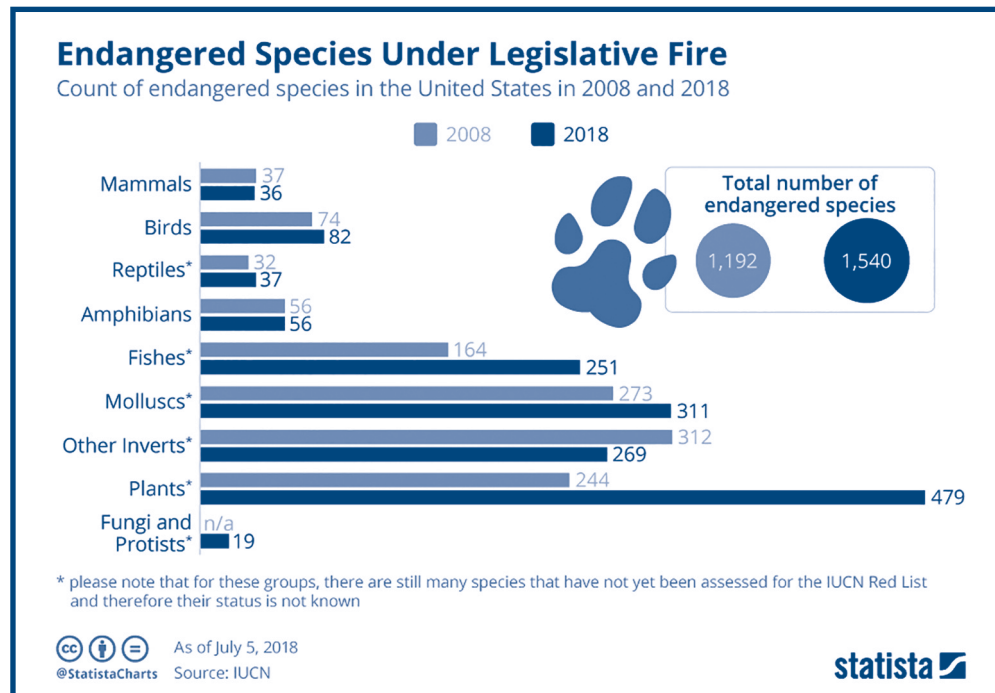


## ON THE WRONG TRACK: WHY THE ENDANGERED SPECIES ACT ISN'T ENOUGH

An NPG Forum Paper  
by Karen I. Shragg



*“It’s been a long time coming, it’s going to be a long time gone.”*

Crosby, Stills & Nash

### FLORA AND FAUNA: RELEVANT, NECESSARY, AND DECLINING

I know many people who care deeply about wildlife. Thanks to their efforts, the Bald Eagle, the Peregrine Falcon, the Trumpeter Swan, the Brown Pelican and others have made impressive recoveries, but not without a lot of effort and expenditure. Their future is not secure, and the rates of extinctions are accelerating at a rapid pace.

With funny names like the Texas Pimpleback, the Pink Pigtoe or the Guadalupe Fatmucket, these unfortunate clams have the not-so-funny distinction of being recommended for listing as endangered by the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS).<sup>1</sup> The USFWS tracks

these clams and many other species of fish, birds, insects, mammals, conifers, and lichens precariously dangling on the edge of extinction. They are suffering from what agencies like to call “habitat loss”, or “habitat degradation”. But what is really behind the loss of habitat for everything from the Lesser Prairie Chicken to the Hermes Copper Butterfly?

We are now living in what scientists are calling the sixth mass extinction. While the earth lost 95% of its species during the third and largest mass extinction during the Permian Period, the last period of the Paleozoic Era, the difference is that no humans were around in those pre-historic times to blame.<sup>2</sup> The previous

extinctions were caused by catastrophic climatic and atmospheric events. Now the blame can be laid at the feet of humans, not only due to our fossil fuel consumption habits but also by our sheer, overwhelming numbers.

During my 35-year career as a naturalist I tried to teach empathy for the earth, its systems, flora and fauna. I often felt that the messages my students were getting from their schoolrooms, scout groups, and athletic activities countered that. Now we can add social media to the list of ways children are taught to focus on a world run by and for humans. From when we are small children, most of us learn that people matter to the exclusion of all other species even though we depend on them for everything in our food supply and the sense of wildness in our hearts. According to the National Resources Defense Council,<sup>3</sup> one out of every three bites of food we eat requires bees to pollinate them. From pumpkins to tomatoes and blueberries, the way bee colonies are dying off should be of tremendous concern to us, yet we remain disconnected from this essential slice of nature's operating system.

Mainstream media also gives us a very anthropocentric viewpoint. The news is full of what happens to people. If there is a flood, we are told how many homes and lives were lost. If there is a fire, tornado or any other disaster the focus is the same. No one bothers to calculate the loss of wildlife and native plants, unless a bird is discovered dripping in oil. "If it bleeds, it leads," has long been the mantra for the news media with a mission to increase viewership. As species continue to disappear mostly in silence, the news cycle must take much of the blame for they continue to portray the same narrative, that people matter more than the species that are the building blocks of life.

The animals that make up the category of amphibians may seem inconsequential at first blush, but they let us know how polluted our

wetlands have become. Frogs, toads and salamanders live near the bottom of the food chain, eating insects and in turn become much needed nutrition for herons, turtles, racoons and others more familiar to us. They inhabit wetlands, which are wildlife nurseries when protected from development and pollution. Wetlands provide flood protection as they are able to absorb fast rising waters. Sadly, the Center for Biodiversity now alerts its readers to the demise of these critical species due to the loss of these essential habitats. Amphibians now have the highest rate of endangerment with a third or more of their 6,300 known species headed towards extinction.<sup>4</sup>

Few are teaching children that other species are a part of a very significant story which is connected to their well-being. They grow up into adults married to their phones which help to carry on the false narrative that only homo sapiens deserve our attention. These young people do not join those enlightened few who are screaming about the loss of bees and butterflies in my small corner of the world. Now we hear in the mainstream media, which must mean that it is finally true, that a myriad of new species are being listed as extinct, including the Ivory Billed Woodpecker. It is no surprise to me.

## **GROWTH IS THE ENEMY OF THE NATURAL WORLD**

There is no doubt about it, growth of the entire human enterprise is behind the decline of the natural world. Our fossil fuel based global economies are structured so that they must grow or die, so grow they do, eating up the natural capital of water, minerals, wood, etc. along the way. Growth isn't just economic, however; it is about the multiplying of our numbers. While humans have been poor at heeding the edicts of "Thou shalt not kill," we get high marks for following the commandment to "go forth and multiply," the one biblical commandment we have accomplished in overdrive. In spite of two

world wars, floods, hurricanes and many epidemics, we sit two decades into the 21<sup>st</sup> century at nearly 8 billion people, growing by over 80 million per year. We have created a human dominated planet to the point where there are now more people living in the US than were living on the entire planet back in the day when Christianity first began.

One cannot mourn the loss of these never-to-be-seen again species without taking into account our incredible population growth and the consumption that it creates. I tease my dad that when he was born, in 1926, the world had a chance to preserve some of its resources for wildlife. But that was 6 billion people ago. 6 billion is hard to visualize but try this example on for size: 6 billion minutes is the equivalent of 11,415 years. That number represents very significant pressure leading to the demise of wildlife, that cloth bags, electric cars and plant-based diets cannot erase. That global growth translates to the addition of 214,600,000 people within US borders in the same amount of time. Any wild animal with a requirement for a large territory or for quiet so that they can stalk prey is out of luck. They are the first to suffer. Grey Wolf packs, for instance, require 50 square miles of undeveloped land to procure enough prey. In lean years they can cover up to 1,000 square miles.<sup>5</sup> That is why they now only exist in a handful of states when their original range was two-thirds of the US.

To provide for the food requirements of our millions of people in the US and billions globally, huge tracts of land are cleared. Land that was habitat for wildlife disappears under tractors and backhoes as they convert acres of former prairie, wetlands and forests into feed and feed lots. Our industrialized food supply is required by the billions of mouths demanding nutrition. It is detrimental to soils because mass production of wheat, corn and soybeans allows for little else to grow on soils oversaturated with fertilizers and pesticides.

On top of the pressures of human population growth is the actual slaughter of wildlife by the Wildlife Services Division of the US Department of Agriculture. This is done to prevent damage to cash crops and many others are killed as collateral damage. The Center for Biological Diversity reports that this department killed more than 1.3 million native animals during 2017. This included wolves, coyotes, cougars, black bears, foxes, bobcats, river otters, beavers, prairie dogs and red-winged blackbirds.<sup>6</sup> This tax supported slaughter is in the interest of protecting crops which feed our ever-growing populations.

Areas of the country which are popular due to their vistas, climate and economic opportunity, are growth magnets for people wishing to retire or just wanting to migrate from their colder more crowded cities. They end up bringing the problems of crowding with them. Population growth leads to sprawl, today's number one enemy of flora and fauna. According to the Arizona Sprawl study,<sup>7</sup> Arizona has grown from 263,000 residents in 1915, to 7.2 million people just a little over a century (2018) later. Golf courses are more symbolic of the Arizona landscape now, but jaguars and ocelots used to call it home. Arizona's population explosion is also behind the precarious status of the Mexican Spotted Owl and the Black-Footed Ferret. Developments of retirement homes and the roads and shopping centers that they inspire carve up the territories of wildlife.

While the Ridge-Nosed Rattlesnake would not win any beauty contests, its critically endangered status is particularly noteworthy since it has achieved the status of being the state reptile of Arizona.<sup>8</sup> Its decline, which has also been connected to over-collecting, negatively impacts both the hawks that would eat them and the rodents, lizards and even centipedes they would eat.



## **CONSERVATION ORGANIZATIONS MUST STEP UP TO THE OVERPOPULATION PLATE**

Our most well-known conservation organizations and their members do everything but address human numbers. They preserve, educate, lobby for dollars, and make slick magazines with beautiful animals on their shiny covers. They use their millions of donated funds to rescue some of our most amazing creatures and have had some notable successes. But the California Condor and the Trumpeter Swan will not be able to thrive with continued and unrelenting population growth. Overpopulation's role in the demise of the wildlife is ignored by NGOs that are supposed to be the champions of the Sonoran Tiger Salamander and others on the list of 1,300 species now endangered in the US.

We need to be seeing our growing population numbers on the front covers of conservation magazines to explain how our bloated presence is driving so many species to appear on the infamous list of extinct animals. I would start belonging to these groups again, but only if I were to see that they are taking on the responsibility of attaching wildlife destruction to overpopulation both locally and globally. Sir Peter Scott of the World Wildlife Fund admitted in a conversation once their error in neglecting population when he said, "You know, when we started the World Wildlife Fund, its objective was to save endangered species from extinction, and I'm now near the end of my career and we've failed completely... We haven't saved a single endangered species... And if we'd put all that money we'd collected into condoms, we might have done some good." Unfortunately, his words still fall on deaf ears.

It has been 51 years since the first Earth Day, inspired by the way one could set a match to Lake Erie and watch it catch fire. Since then, we have added 127 million people to our population. This fact alone has permitted the

trampling of wildlands, destroying flora and fauna with such abandon that some anthropocentric activists are now calling for housing the homeless in national park lands.

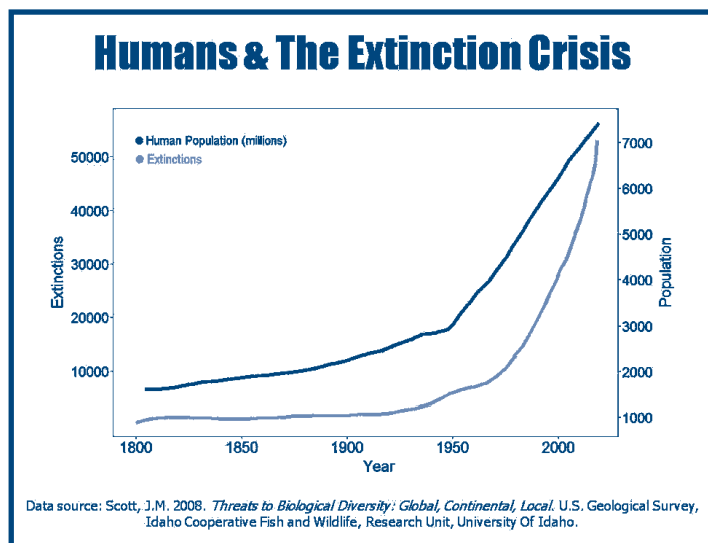
It is true that wild animals go extinct as a part of the natural cycle of natural selection. It is often argued by those invested in the world of development that 99% of all species ever to live on earth are now extinct and they accomplished this without the aid of modern humans. True enough, but that does not let us off the hook for the wildlife annihilation now taking place on the planet. This time the extinctions can directly be connected to us. From the pollution from our fossil fuel usage to gobbling up animal habitats, human population numbers matter.

## **EUPHEMISMS GET IN THE WAY**

The late great comedian George Carlin once told his audience how much he hated euphemisms. Simple direct language was what he thought would serve society best. Complex phrases are softer, Carlin said, as they are designed to disguise meaning in favor of palatability. So "died" becomes "passed away," "shell-shocked" becomes "battle fatigue" which morphs into "PTSD." In what Carlin describes as a retreat from reality, "toilet paper" became "bathroom tissue." Retreat from reality is exactly what phrases like "Loss of habitat," or "Human Activity" are doing to the reality of overpopulation. These euphemisms are so frequently used to describe why animals become endangered and in doing so cloud the issue. "Degraded habitats," "invasive species introduction," and "development" are other vague words which are all inextricably tied to the engine of this train that needs to be named so it can be blamed. Overpopulation is behind it all. Too many people consuming limited natural resources which if stretched due to technical advances only leads to more people. If I were a betting person, I would put my money on challenging an enterprising person to find a sign

at a zoo or wildlife refuge that uses the word “overpopulation” as the reason why these amazing animals are now only serving as spectacle attractions for visitors instead of living out their lives in the wild.

Look at any graph of population growth and species loss and see how they mimic each other. These hockey stick curves go up and up together in destructive unison illustrating a simple but profound truth, the growth of us equals the demise of wildlife. Avoiding this correlation in the conservation community has led us to what I like to call the “condom conundrum.” The fact that better use and easier access to birth control would help wildlife is clear and it is also clear that this issue has been avoided by the thousands of conservation groups promising a success that can never be theirs.



In my view we have gone about saving species entirely in the wrong way. It is very expensive to breed in captivity and then reintroduce the animals into the wild. Adding a species to the endangered list comes about only after a lengthy political process, when there are often so few left that researchers can hardly find enough genetic diversity in the few remaining wild individuals without risking genetic trouble down the road. As we've experienced recently, conservation legislation is only as good as the current political party holding office. Buying up land to keep in conservation easements is

another noble but very expensive strategy. We often wait too long to try and save species and do it in the most costly of fashions. We employ environmental lawyers to sue developers and spend extraordinary efforts to battle those with more money and moxie to save landscapes. Beneath all of these noble efforts is the difficult story about how we have been focused on the wrong problem.

As a naturalist, I used to love to teach about the way the food pyramid, also called the food chain or web, works. With a myriad of games, hikes and lectures I demonstrated the relationship between plants as producers and the various tiers of animal consumers. To me, the most important lesson was that the top of the pyramid needs to have the least number of consumers for it to function as dictated by evolution. Here is an oversimplified pyramid: grasshoppers eat plants and skunks eat grasshoppers. Owls, who are on top of the food pyramid as an apex predator, eat skunks. To keep this natural cycle going, the owls must always be the least numerous. Much like owls, we are also apex predators, but have become so numerous that we are changing nature's fundamental structure. We are demanding more than the natural world can provide. The collapse of wildlife is also affecting our ability to live in this unbalanced world. Daily news reports detailing frightening environmental disasters, especially the demise of pollinating insects and bats, indicate what happens when we recklessly break nature's laws.

We have not tried to save wildlife by doing what would have really worked, ratcheting down our numbers and recognizing which laws, policies and economic systems are surreptitiously working to help us grow when we need to be shrinking the entire human enterprise away from the edge of extinction of all life. We have been sold a bill of goods by over 11,000 NGOs dedicated to global conservation efforts with combined assets of

over 3.5 billion dollars. Oh, they are sincere enough, but they would have been much more successful had they partnered with population groups to focus on the multiple ways human numbers have needed to be curtailed with non-coercive but effective methods.

There is a second part to the “condom conundrum.” The first part is revealing that overpopulation and access to birth control are connected to the survival of wildlife. The second part is that birth control advocacy alone will not solve local overpopulation issues by itself. Some countries, including and especially the US, have impressively lowered their fertility rates but their populations are still growing due to increases in immigration.

## **THE LOCAL NATURE OF EXTINCTION**

Professor Garret Hardin wrote prophetically about how to go about solving how humans are overtaking the planet by using the analogy of potholes. Potholes are a global problem, but they must be solved locally. The same is true when it comes to saving our local species on the brink of extinction. We should try to save globally threatened species whenever we can, but we have the most power to save them in our own back yards. It's sad that many US school children can identify endangered wildlife from other continents while being stumped to identify those in their own backyards. Young school children can easily identify gorillas and elephants but have a harder time with recognizing that bobcats, lynx and kangaroo rats live here in closer proximity to our neighborhoods.

It would be an excellent conservation position for every country to focus on the survival of their own endangered species, for that is where we can do the most to stop their demise. Each country should legislate protective policies and be in charge of educating their own populace. There are over 1,300 animals listed as endangered in the US and sending money to the United Nations Family

Planning Association (UNFPA) will not help them. UNFPA will likely send your donations to where the Asian Elephant or the Mountain Gorilla live, but not to where the Desert Tortoise is trying to survive, within our borders. Spending money to halt population growth here in the US holds the most hope. Want to help save the Florida Panther, the Lesser Prairie Chicken, the Monarch Butterfly and so many other species suffering from overpopulation's bulldozers? Make sure all wildlife lovers and the NGOs they support get on board with overpopulation's role in their demise. It is an issue which is screaming for attention right here in the USA. Native habitats will not be adequately protected with cloth bags and address labels from US-focused NGOs who do not also work on US overpopulation for it is our growing numbers which signal the bulldozers of 'progress' to invade wildlife habitats to make way for condos and theme parks.

The beautiful Red-Headed Woodpecker is threatened because of increased numbers in the US, now numbering over 333 million, and what that has meant to the loss of pine savannas. The endangered Karner Blue Butterfly depends on wild blue lupine flowers which used to be found in the pine barrens, oak savannas and dunes of lakeshores before overpopulation turned them into cabins, freeways and strip malls. The Amargosa Vole is endemic to the Mohave desert where it depends on rare desert wetland plants and raptors depend on it for food. But overpopulation has drained ground water and invasive species have become unnatural predators. Unfortunately, all you will read about it in any Google search, however, is at best that “human activity” is causing their demise. For those like me who may be geographically challenged, the Mohave desert is located in California south of Death Valley National Park. The endangerment of the Amargosa Vole there is tied directly to the fact that California has grown by 20 million people since the first Earth Day scolded us for not caring enough about the environment back in 1970.



The “condom conundrum” keeps us from addressing all causes of population growth because when we go country by country focusing only on birth control it is not comprehensive enough to help wildlife. According to the Pew Research Center immigrants and their descendants are projected to account for 88% of US population growth through 2065. Groups like the National Wildlife Federation, Defenders of Wildlife, The Wilderness Society and so many others I no longer feel I can support, must be challenged as to why they insist on ignoring overpopulation.

In the US we grow in our numbers when capitalism and its industries favor loose immigration laws which result in lower wages and high profits for CEOs and their shareholders. Greed inspires immigration increases and we grow in numbers when rich and powerful industrialists use their wallets to sway politicians. If all goes as planned, they will then vote to keep immigration restrictions to a minimum. This way they can keep wages suppressed and unions from forming so their own portfolios can grow. The new book “Back of the Hiring Line, A 200-year history of immigration surges, employer bias, and depression of Black wealth” dedicates several hundred pages to a comprehensive look at this history. (Roy Beck, 2021). As Beck points out so clearly, restricting immigration, when it has happened over the years, improves the chances for employment and economic advancement for African Americans. We are also growing our immigration numbers due to relaxed and ignored immigration policies already on the books. Those who work to strengthen them should be supported, in the name of improving all issues important to Americans. There are many laws which can prevent opening up our borders to more people. These are common in other countries and not as controversial as they are here. Many countries require immigrants to prove they have a job and come into the country with a certain amount of cash. Just making employers follow the law and hire US citizens as well as restricting visas would help. This would

help save jobs for Americans especially those who have been shoved to the back of the hiring line. The Florida Panther, the Lesser Prairie Chicken, the Monarch Butterfly and so many other species suffering from overpopulation’s bulldozers will be thankful too.

When we focus solely on China, India, Nigeria and other nations with huge populations and their faster growth rates we are doing a disservice to the wildlife suffering here at home from our own overpopulation issues. Everything from worsening traffic to record breaking crowds at national parks is due to overpopulation. We are experiencing the loss of these freedoms to move about as we wish and wildlife disappears for the same reason. We cannot continue to pretend that it doesn’t.

### **ATTACKING GROWTH IS AN ACT OF COMPASSION**

If conservationists who are passionate about wildlife can finally grasp that it is overpopulation and its continued growth which is fueling the 6<sup>th</sup> mass extinction, then it shouldn’t be too far of a reach to understand and address how we are growing. It is regrettable that we have not explored a more nuanced understanding of this issue. Many have conflated overpopulation with several social justice issues, including covert racism and coerced abortions. Avoiding overpopulation and all the ways it happens only ends up harming the most marginalized among us. Some hear the word *overpopulation* and immediately hear the word *abortion*. Others hear the word *immigration* and jump to imagining the horror of keeping immigrant kids in cages. Unless we are indigenous most of us are descendants of immigrants. This makes for a tricky and very delicate part of this conundrum. It is easy for the kind-hearted to feel that we are being selfish to consider limiting the part of US population growth which is mostly due to immigration. Every country has its limits and once that limit is reached the continued pursuit of growth only creates harm to all.

The idea of being able to keep growing our population with an endless supply of those who would love to be a part of the American dream is a kick in the teeth to the reality of limits and ecological principles that dictate them. It is also an invitation to destroy open space with growth-inspired development. Limiting immigration will do more to protect wildlife than any other act of conservation.

Many articles have been written about the way Americans are harmed when overcrowding destroys our way of life, creates overcrowded hospitals, drains our rivers, crowds our freeways and increases homelessness. This essay is about including conservation in the mix of reasons to curb our population growth.

We are relying on the Endangered Species Act to save our wildlife and it is not working because the wrong issue is being targeted. This is not the first time Americans have focused on the wrong issue to solve a problem. For years the generally accepted science was that if we reduced fat in our diets we would become thinner. The opposite happened. Even today with mounds of data to prove otherwise, many still choose low-fat high sugar diets. “Despite eating less fat, we are fatter than ever before,” said David Ludwig, professor of nutrition at Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, in

the January 2016 issue of *Boston* magazine. Ludwig found that low-fat foods are also higher in refined carbohydrates which make food tastier, but what happens is that it actually raises our insulin levels resulting in making us hungrier and fatter. Americans got fatter because they began to eat more of these refined carbohydrates. Similarly, we are losing the battle to save wildlife because we continue to eschew the real reason they are hurting: the way overpopulation, driven largely by bad immigration policies, is harming their ability to survive.

Without a focus on the wildlife consequences of US population size and growth we will continue to mourn some of the most important and beautiful animals our world has ever known.

## NOTES

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2. <https://www.sciencealert.com/here-s-how-biodiversity-experts-recognise-that-we-re-midst-a-mass-extinction>
3. <https://www.nrdc.org/stories/without-bees-foods-we-love-will-be-lost>
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**NOTE:** The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of NPG, Inc.



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