



MARK CARWARDINE

WILD THOUGHTS

The recent splitting of the European common skate into two different species raises a couple of very important issues. Eighty years ago, scientists made the mistake of classifying the common skate as a single species, but the latest study, in France, reveals that it is actually two distinct ones: the enormous flapper skate and the slightly smaller blue skate.

The first issue is that this classification confusion masked the rapid decline of the flapper skate among catch results labelled merely 'common skate'. But now we realise that this new species has been pushed so close to the edge it could soon become the first marine fish to be driven to extinction by commercial fishing.

The second issue is a more positive one. The French discovery demonstrates the importance of pure scientific research. Whether it is one skate species or two is exactly the kind of information we need to make informed decisions for conservation action.

We didn't have that information until now – and, as a result, the future for this particular endangered species is very bleak indeed.

Pure research is driven simply by a thirst for knowledge; scientists working in this field don't necessarily have any ideas in mind about potential applications of their work. Applied research, on the other hand, has a recognisable purpose and is designed to solve practical problems.

Politicians and major funding bodies prefer applied research because it tends to produce more tangible results. But they're ignoring the fact that you never know when the results of pure research might be useful. X-rays, penicillin and Archimedes in his bath come to mind.

So, is it okay for scientists to spend days, weeks or years watching humpback whales breach, counting badgers emerging from their setts, working out where basking sharks go in winter or reviewing the classification of the European common skate? Of course it is. Appropriate conservation action depends on knowledge – and it's pure science, or idle curiosity, that keeps new ideas and discoveries flowing.

Mark Carwardine is a zoologist, author and photographer and will be presenting a series about the Natural History Museum later this year.



Skate-away: the common skate has recently been 'split' into two species.

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