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WILD THOUGHTS

Canada is tightening its purse strings and, predictably, the environment will be the first to suffer. It's just slashed spending on wildlife protection and monitoring so drastically that the Canadian Wildlife Service has been forced to halt all of its scientific field and survey work.

Meanwhile, Environment Canada can somehow find £30,000 for a consultant to study why employee morale is so low (as if we can't guess), but is unable to find 80 per cent of the money needed to monitor the health of the country's ecosystems.

Ironically, the Canadian announcement came in the same week as the World Conservation Union issued its annual Red List of Threatened Species. Cataloguing no fewer than 16,306 plants and animals in trouble (up from 16,119 in 2006), the new list includes the usual array of depressing statistics: great hammerhead sharks appearing for the first time, western lowland gorillas moving from Endangered to Critically Endangered and, of course, Yangtze river dolphins declared "possibly extinct".

Meanwhile, the US Geological Survey has just announced that two-thirds of the world's polar bear population could be gone by the middle of the century if predictions of melting sea ice hold

true. Watching endangered species slide down the slippery slope towards oblivion is becoming just as predictable as watching western governments pay lip-service to the environment.

Yet some poorer countries seem to understand the gravity of the situation. The West African country of Gabon set aside a mind-boggling 26,000km² to create no fewer than 13 national parks in 2002, and this year troubled Cambodia announced the establishment of an 8,000 hectare crane sanctuary near the Mekong Delta.

The West should be setting an example, making conservation an absolute priority. Instead, we're being embarrassed by the foresight, understanding and awareness of nations much worse off than ourselves.

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