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WILD THOUGHTS

I'm in two minds about the potentially dangerous craze of species-splitting. It can be very difficult to tell where one species ends and another begins – whether using conventional field research or genetics – and yet drawing a distinct line is all the rage these days. What worries me is that it can have a significant impact on conservation.

There has been a dispute about the true status of the Scottish crossbill, for example, for more than a century. It's classified as a separate species in all the field guides, yet it's notoriously difficult to distinguish from other crossbills. Now experts say it has a slight Scottish accent, which it uses to attract mates of the 'right' species, and therefore does deserve full species status.

Amazingly, the fact that the DNA of Scottish, parrot and common crossbills is virtually identical doesn't seem to matter.

Meanwhile, there has also been dispute about the species status of the two populations of the endangered northern right whale. Recent genetic analysis has turned one species into two. In this case, their DNA is different, but they look virtually the same.

Splitting species certainly adds impetus to conservation efforts. Making the Scottish crossbill a distinct species makes it Britain's only endemic bird, with a more restricted range and therefore a much higher conservation priority. It even has its own entry in the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species.

The same principle applies to the northern right whale. Making it two species, instead of just one, splits an already tiny population of 300-400 survivors and creates a new sense of conservation urgency.

On paper, at least, species-splitting reduces population sizes and inflates the number of endangered species, painting an altogether bleaker picture. But whether this is good for conservation or could be seen as crying wolf – using science to make the situation appear worse than it was before – only time will tell.

The Scottish crossbill has a Scottish accent, which it uses to attract the right mate.