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THE LIST OF SPECIES THREATENED WITH EXTINCTION MUSHROOMS EVERY YEAR. SO WHY WON'T GOVERNMENTS TAKE ACTION?

OPINION

No fewer than 22,784 species of plants and animals are now officially threatened with extinction, according to the latest IUCN Red List of Threatened Species – a shocking 681 more than this time last year.

Compiled by the Swiss-based International Union for Conservation of Nature, this is the most authoritative and up-to-date inventory of the conservation status of plants and animals. So far 77,340 species around the world have been assessed. That's an impressive achievement, of course, considering the phenomenal amount of fieldwork necessary for each and every one. But it's still barely scratching the surface. We have identified scarcely 14 per cent of the species alive today – 1.2 million out of an estimated 8.7 million – let alone evaluated their conservation status.

So here's the real shocker: given all these figures, the actual number of threatened species could be as high as 2.6 million.

Admittedly we do know more about some groups than others. We know that roughly

a quarter of all mammals, one in eight of all birds, one-fifth of all reptiles and one-third of all amphibians are now officially threatened with extinction. Our knowledge tends to be best for the more charismatic species – the ones we all strive to protect, without question, and the ones that get most of the attention and publicity, such as elephants, tigers, dolphins, owls, albatrosses, Komodo dragons and tropical frogs.

But exactly what is happening to the vast majority of fish, invertebrates and plants, in particular, is anyone's guess. And the little information we do have is, quite frankly, frightening. The latest Red List reveals that 78 per cent of all assessed arachnids (spiders and scorpions) are threatened with extinction, for example, and so are an astonishing 99 per cent of tropical Asian slipper orchids.

The IUCN tries to be positive by pointing out glimmers of hope. Indeed, thanks to successful conservation efforts, a few species that were once on the brink of extinction are now on the increase. Following six decades of decline, for example, the Iberian lynx population has increased from 52 mature individuals in 2002 to 156 in 2012. In other words,

the population has trebled in a decade. But even that good news doesn't make me want to sing and dance. Sadly our benchmark is so low these days that a population of 156 mature individuals – clearly still teetering on the brink – somehow seems to be cause for celebration.

It does, at least, go to show that we can save many species from extinction – if we really want to.

The trouble is that most governments and big businesses simply don't want to. Whatever they say in their environmental rhetoric, most of them wouldn't give a damn if the Iberian lynx (or the forest owlet, the tiny

scaled gecko, the Tanzania screeching frog or any other threatened species, for that matter) were to become extinct. The trouble is that, without government support, the people who really do care often have their hands tied.

So year after year the IUCN publishes its latest shocking figures, and year after year we see more and more species sliding down the slippery slope towards oblivion. It has to be a dire emergency – or, worse, too late – before action is taken. It happened with the Tasmanian tiger (a special reserve was created three decades after the last known survivor died), and the same is happening today.

Just how serious does it have to get before common sense prevails? 🐾

MARK CARWARDINE is a zoologist, photographer, writer, conservationist and broadcaster. Visit www.markcarwardine.com to find out more.

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This thylacine, the last officially recorded 'Tasmanian tiger', died in 1936.

Dave Watts/naturepi.com