



MARK CARWARDINE

WILD THOUGHTS

Tigers have been in the news with the publication of a comprehensive scientific study of their habitat. It has been reduced by 40 per cent in the past decade.

It's a tragedy – but not really surprising. One reason tiger conservation has always been an uphill struggle is because conservationists took too long to wake up to the big cat's plight. The wild population plummeted from about 100,000 in the early 1900s to just 4,000 to 5,000 in the early 1970s, before a few visionaries took decisive action. Numbers climbed as high as 7,000 a decade ago, but have since dropped to fewer than 5,000. All those campaigns, meetings, international conferences and hundreds of millions of pounds may have bought time, but the tiger is still far from safe.

Now it's the lion's turn. Sixty years ago there were up to half a million lions in Africa; 20 years ago there were fewer than 200,000 left, and today there are barely more than 20,000 across the entire continent. So the conservation world is up in arms, right? Wrong.

The African lion is listed as merely 'vulnerable' on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species, and the best I could find in a web search of so-called concerned conservation groups was "must be considered at risk until more data is available." Just how much does the population have to decline before everyone is shouting from the rooftops and conservationists are really galvanised into action?

I'm not criticising individuals working in the field. Conservation of big cats, whose existence is at odds with human settlement and cattle culture, is particularly challenging. I've just returned from a tiger anti-poaching patrol in India and I've rarely met more dedicated souls.

But I'm not so impressed with the conservation world at large. Money isn't a problem, despite what we are told. If you can't raise funds for charismatic animals such as tigers and lions, you can't raise funds for anything. The problem is lack of forward-thinking. We need to focus more on prevention, not just cure. Waiting until disaster looms before we act is simply tempting fate.

How much must lion populations decline before we shout from the rooftops?