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WILD THOUGHTS

Talk about shutting the stable door after the horse has bolted. All hunting has been banned in an area where a young South China tiger was recently caught on film (see above). Numbers of this now virtually extinct subspecies were greatly reduced after China's Communist leader, Mao Zedong, ordered an extermination campaign in the second half of the 20th century.

The news reminded me of the Tasmanian tiger. Hunting permits were still being issued until 1936, which was the year the last-known survivor died. Astoundingly, a 647,000-hectare Tasmanian tiger reserve was created in 1966 – a mind-boggling 30 years too late.

One reason Asian 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 a frighteningly low 4,000 to 5,000 in the early 1970s before a few visionaries took action.

Now it's the lion's turn – 60 years ago there were half a million in Africa, 20 years ago there were fewer than 200,000, and today there are barely more than 20,000 across the continent. Yet this catastrophic decline seems to be passing the world by unnoticed.

I know money is tight (at least that's what we're told – but if you can't raise funds for charismatic animals such as tigers and lions, then what *can* you raise funds for?), but just how rapidly – and by how much – does a population have to decline before everyone is galvanised into action?

The biggest problem is lack of political will – politicians won't get off their backsides until a situation has become critical. In the UK, for example, the water vole population began to decline in the 1950s, and has plummeted to dangerously low levels, yet the Government has still not given it full legal protection.

Waiting to act until disaster looms is not merely tempting fate – it is inefficient. To quote another proverb: surely an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure?

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