



MARK CARWARDINE

WILD THOUGHTS

The reason I haven't written this column for the past six months or so is that I've been criss-crossing the globe with Stephen Fry. Our plan was to retrace the steps I had taken on a similar journey 20 years earlier with Douglas Adams, for a book entitled *Last Chance to See*, to learn how a motley collection of endangered animals have been coping and to make a BBC series about our findings.

Our journey has left me with a mind-boggling mishmash of memories and impressions: exactly how much Stephen hates camping, for example, and the astonishing fact that he can learn a new language in just three weeks.

But my overriding impression is to do with conservation. And I'm afraid it's not good.

I remember flying down the east coast of Madagascar in 1989, over an almost continuous swathe of rainforest that stretched as far as the eye could see. Sitting next to Stephen, exactly two decades later, we stared out of the window at the same stretch of coast – and there was virtually no forest left.

On the other side of the world, in New Zealand, we went in search of the world's largest, fattest and least-able-to-fly parrot – the kakapo. During my visit 20 years ago, the kakapo population hit an all-time low of just 40 birds, but following the most successful breeding season in years, it has just clawed its way up to a figure of 124.

That there are any left at all is a tribute to the determination and dedication of the people charged with the kakapo's protection, but by no stretch of the imagination is 124 a safe and healthy population. There is no denying that the species is still teetering on the brink of extinction.

The final stop on our world tour should have been China, to look for the Yangtze river dolphin, but that was officially declared extinct before we could get there.

While our travels can hardly be considered a global scientific review, our findings really shocked us. Time and again it felt as if conservation was barely (if at all) holding against the tide, let alone making significant progress.



Kakapos: fat, flightless and far from safe from extinction.

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You can see Mark and Stephen in *Last Chance to See* on BBC1 in the autumn and read all about it in *BBC Wildlife Magazine*.