



22

Mark Carwardine's **AT A GLANCE...**

HOTSPOT CONSERVATION

WHAT IS HOTSPOT CONSERVATION?

Conservationists have identified 36 regions of the world that support the greatest species diversity and are the most threatened. The logic is that focusing attention on protecting these biodiversity hotspots is the most efficient way of saving as many species as possible. Together, they represent just 2.3 per cent of the Earth's land surface, yet support more than half of all plant species and nearly 43 per cent of terrestrial mammal, bird, reptile and amphibian species.

WHERE ARE THE HOTSPOTS?

Biodiversity hotspots range from the Guinean forests of West Africa to more than 7,100 islands in the Philippines, and they include the whole of New Zealand and Madagascar. To qualify as a hotspot, a region must meet two criteria: it must have at least 1,500 endemic plant species (0.5 per cent of all known species) and it must have lost at least 70 per cent of its original vegetation.

WHO CAME UP WITH THE IDEA?

It was first mooted by the ecologist Norman Myers in 1988. He argued that we were spreading our conservation efforts too thinly. His hotspot concept was simple – if we have limited resources, and want to preserve the maximum number of species, we should concentrate on the regions that have the

greatest biodiversity and face the greatest threats. It was quickly adopted by Conservation International and others, and became the blueprint for their future work.

WHY IS IT SO POPULAR?

Many people have been seduced by its simplicity. There was a sense that conservation had become too ad hoc, saving this pretty place or that charismatic animal, and that it wasn't changing the steady drumbeat of extinction. But hotspots made it more analytical and scientific. In one fell swoop, it divided a vast and intractable problem into more manageable parts, with definable targets. It has also attracted vast amounts of money – to the tune of about US\$1bn (£740m at today's exchange rate) so far – from businesses, governments and individual donors.

IS IT UNIVERSALLY SUPPORTED?

No. Hotspot conservation is perceived by many decision-makers and donors as a cure-all solution, when clearly it is not, and many experts believe this draws attention from other areas in urgent need of conservation action. What about places where there is less biodiversity – so-called 'coldspots' – where losing a handful of species could cause entire ecosystems to collapse? There are no hotspots in northern Europe,



Madagascar, home to the indri, is one of the 36 conservation hotspot regions.

HOTSPOT CONSERVATION IS PERCEIVED AS A CURE-ALL SOLUTION, WHEN CLEARLY IT IS NOT."

MARK CARWARDINE is a frustrated and frank conservationist.

Every month he demystifies some of the most important issues affecting the world's wildlife and assesses the organisations that protect it.

● Would you like to comment? Email wildlifeletters@immediate.co.uk

for example, or in areas of Africa or North America that would ensure the survival of megafauna such as bears, wolves, elephants or rhinos.

WHAT ARE THE OTHER CONCERNS?

Not all conservationists agree that focusing purely on biodiversity should be the sole objective: saving 'charismatic' species, for example, is what motivates people to take action, while many argue that species extinction of any kind is unacceptable. The selection of hotspots is another concern: delineating them is not an exact science, there is a mismatch between biodiversity and endemism (many regions have fewer species but lots of endemics) and it largely ignores marine species and invertebrates. Perhaps most importantly, only a tiny proportion of the 36 originally selected have been protected anyway.

IS THERE A COMPROMISE?

Yes. There's no way we can save everything, so identifying priorities – according to ecological, political and cultural situations – is fundamental to modern conservation. Hotspot conservation should be part of the armoury, but it's not the silver bullet some claim it to be. 🐼

➤ FIND OUT MORE

Hotspot conservation areas: bit.ly/1VOICIV