

# SHARING THE EARTH WITH WILDLIFE

**W**hen you consider that there are currently thousands of plant and animal species inhabiting the planet Earth, it's somewhat difficult to accept the fact that these living species comprise only a small percentage of the total number of species that have been here since the dawn of time. But it's true.

Throughout the ages, unknown numbers of species have appeared on our planet, remained for a time, and then simply vanished. It's thought that at least 90 percent of all species that have existed on earth have since disappeared, and scientists say we'll likely have one less species on our planet tomorrow than we did today.

Even more alarming is the fact that the number of species becoming extinct has been growing. Take the case of mammals. In the 17th century, seven species became extinct. That number grew to 11 in the 18th century, 27 in the 19th century and more than 70 in the 20th century.

While there was a time when the disappearance could be written off as part of the natural process, that's no longer the case. The threat to species nowadays stems from mankind and the fact that we—as a single species with the power to dominate all others—must face up to the responsibility that goes along with that power.

As we all know, our resourcefulness has enabled us to construct massive industrial and educational centers, explore the depths of Earth's oceans and the mysteries of outer space and manufacture weapons powerful enough to cause the extinction of all species on the planet, including ourselves. Unfortunately, we have been so busy with our own interests, that we tend to

forget that we need to share Earth's resources with other species.

The key question is whether or not we recognize the seriousness of this problem, and if so, do we really understand the consequences. We are fairly well aware of how we have polluted our environment, but at least that's a trend that can be reversed if we are willing to make the sacrifices needed to clean up the air and waterways we have dirtied. Extinction of a species, however, is permanent. When a species disappears from the face of the Earth, it's gone forever, and no sacrifices can bring it back.

Interestingly, man has shown an inclination toward preserving some of Earth's more charismatic creatures such as whales, polar bears, chimpanzees and bald eagles in recent years, and he deserves credit for the exceptional efforts involved. The problem, however, is that while the attention was focused on these more charismatic species, most of the other "lesser" species have been ignored, and some have become extinct.

In fairness to human-kind, it should be noted that the vast majority of species are not driven toward extinction due to actions specifically intended to eliminate or decimate the species, although that has occurred at times in the past. The greatest threat to the world's many species of animals and plants is the overwhelming size and expansion of the human popula-

**In Colorado, there are now more than 45 pairs of nesting bald eagles. Pictured is a bald eagle with a trout.**



tion, which requires more and more of our planet's finite space and resources. Greater human population leads to greater resource consumption, alteration and elimination of other species' habitats, disruption of ecological processes and pollution of the environment. As long as this trend continues, we will see more species pushed to, and past, the brink of extinction.

Most of the species discussed in this publication reached their current status through the direct actions of the human race, but it's not the purpose of this book to condemn mankind for what it has done. Hopefully, however, this book will spur some to realize that man has the ability and obligation to share this planet with the variety of species that reside here. Such action would obviously benefit the other species, but man can benefit too.