

Animals

Protection of biodiversity

The disappearance of species

An animal species is seriously threatened with extinction when its population is broken up. Extinction is a natural process that may be caused by natural selection, shortage of food or natural calamities. It has been calculated that 9 species out of 10 of those that have appeared on Earth over the centuries have disappeared. Man's action on nature has also caused entire animal species to disappear over the years. Hunting, deforestation, pollution, the conversion of uncultivated areas into pastures, the illicit trade of wild animals as well as climatic changes have made life difficult for many animals. The areas that have been hit hardest by the rise in the Earth's temperature are the Arctic and the oceans. In these places, animals suffer because they have lost their habitat and find it hard to find food to eat. This results in a decrease of births and therefore in the slow disappearance of some species. In the oceans, the reduction of plankton caused many types of fish to migrate and many invertebrate organisms to disappear.

How animals can be safeguarded

Nevertheless, over the last few years, man has realised that the loss of some animal species can cause extremely serious damages to the natural course of the food chain, so he tried to help the species most at risk. Many animals, such as, for instance, the chamois and the ibex in Italy, have been brought back to their habitat through a "re-colonisation" operation. For instance, green areas have been extended to protect butterflies.

Disappearing animals cannot be hunted or traded. Scientists have thought of meeting the animals' needs by building up some communicating "corridors" within the forests and broken-up natural areas. When a natural area is divided up, corridors are dug out to let the animals move within the last pieces of habitat left. And some animal populations have been found to really move along these corridors and also use them to mate.

Nevertheless, even if some animals have got back on their feet, the survival of many species is still at risk. The attempt to protect species at risk within parks and wildlife sanctuaries is certainly positive.

Biodiversity

The word "biodiversity" was coined in 1988 by Edward O. Wilson, entomologist, and has become common parlance since the 1992 Earth Summit. Biodiversity means the wealth composed of the whole of the genetic information of the living organisms that live in different climatic regions and habitats. Biodiversity originates from the evolutionary process that generated, through natural selection and over the centuries, all the living animal and vegetal species. Due to the fast and indiscriminate exploitation of natural resources, many living species (both animal and vegetal) have disappeared, while many others are at risk. More and more species are disappearing all over the world, much faster than it takes new species to appear. According to the 1995 Global Biodiversity Assessment (GBA) presented by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), 112 species of mammals disappeared between 1810 and 1995, three times as much as those disappeared between 1600 and 1810. As regards the disappearance of invertebrates, fish and plants, we are talking thousands of species.