

EDITORIAL & COMMENTARY



Reflection

SCOTT LONGFIELD

IT'S YOUR TURN

Commentary

Report: Earth has lost half its animals

By Michele S. Byers

A new report on the state of the Earth's animals is "not for the faint-hearted," according to the World Wildlife Fund.

They're not kidding. According to their research, our planet lost more than half of its individual vertebrate animals during the past 40 years, mostly due to human impacts.

The 2014 Living Planet Report tracks more than 10,000 populations of mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians and fish from all over the world. The sobering news is that overall numbers have declined by 52 percent since 1970.

"Put another way, in less than two human generations, population sizes of vertebrate species have dropped by half," wrote World Wildlife Fund director general Marco Lambertini. "These are the living forms that constitute the fabric of the ecosystems which sustain life on Earth – and the barometer of what we are doing to our own planet, our only home. We ignore their decline at our peril."

Freshwater species fared the worst, with an average 76 percent decline. The most serious threats are habitat loss and fragmentation, pollution, and competition from invasive species.

Terrestrial species, those that live on land, experienced a 39 percent decline. They are threatened by human land uses, especially agriculture, urban development and energy production. Marine species also suffered a 39 percent decline, mostly due to overfishing or becoming part of commercial fishing "bycatch."

Not all places on Earth lost biodiversity equally. Wealthy countries, in general, experienced less animal loss than poor countries, and cooler climates less than warmer climates.

So how does New Jersey fare? The World Wildlife Fund report doesn't break its data down into segments as small as states; it uses much larger regions known as "biogeographic realms."

We're part of the "Nearctic" realm, which includes all of North America. Data shows that, on average, vertebrate populations here declined by 20 percent during the study period, although they appear fairly stable in recent years. But there's considerable variation, with some populations increasing and others dropping.

This seems to hold true for New Jersey.

According to New Jersey fish and wildlife officials, the state has 182 animal species with greatly diminished populations. While a few adaptable, backyard species are probably more numerous than ever – such as cardinals, robins, bullfrogs, deer, and red-tailed hawks – many species considered common are experiencing serious population declines. These include snapping turtles and most other amphibian and reptile species, along with hundreds of native pollinators like bees, flies, butterflies and moths.

Endangered mammals in New Jersey include bobcat, Indiana bat, Allegheny woodrat and blue whale. Endangered breeding birds include many beach, forest, wetland, and grassland species, like piping plover, northern goshawk, golden-winged warbler, red-shouldered hawk, American bittern, pied-billed grebe, sedge wren, vesper sparrow and upland sandpiper, as well as migrant birds like red knots. Bog turtle, corn snake, timber rattlesnake, blue-spotted salamander and Atlantic sturgeon are among our endangered reptile, amphibian and fish species.

The worldwide loss of half our vertebrates is alarming. Let's make sure it doesn't happen in New Jersey!

This state we're in must continue to protect the habitats of our wildlife species, as we've been doing for more than 50 years through our outstanding open space preservation programs.



COURTESY DORN'S CLASSIC IMAGES

Two River Moment

Delicious Orchards was originally located on County Road 537 when it opened in 1959. This building was constructed the following year, according to the company history. As the operation grew, the owners moved to its present location on Route 34 in 1966. This building and its orchard are now operating as Eastmont Orchards.

New Jerseyans can "think globally, act locally" by voting for Public Question 2 on the Nov. 4 ballot. This ballot question will secure a dedicated, long-term source of funding for preserving natural areas and wildlife habitats – as well as parks, farmland, historic sites and flood-prone lands.

To find out more about the 2014 Living Planet Report, go to the World Wildlife Fund website at wwf.panda.org. For information about New Jersey's endangered and threatened species, go to www.conservewildlifenj.org/species/fieldguide.

And to learn more about preserving New Jersey's land and natural resources, go to the New Jersey Conservation Foundation website at www.njconservation.org or contact me at info@njconservation.org.

Michele S. Byers is the executive director of the New Jersey Conservation Foundation.

November's Elections Won't Resolve Much of Anything

By Lee H. Hamilton

Members of Congress are home now, campaigning for the upcoming elections. Their messages are all over the map, and for a good reason: they have very little to brag about. The Congress that just recessed until after the elections makes the 80th – the one that Harry Truman blasted as "do-nothing" – look like a paragon of productivity. This year's members did manage to avoid a shutdown, but that's about all. Congressional leaders spent the better part of the year avoiding tough votes.

They didn't pass an annual budget. They made no pretense of weighing U.S. policy against ISIS or, really, any other foreign or defense policy issue. They didn't tackle immigration reform, climate change, tax reform, the minimum wage or domestic surveillance. They passed fewer bills than any other Congress in 60 years. In the three and a half months between the beginning of August and mid-November, they'll have been in session all of 10 days.

Small wonder that voters are in a sour mood when it comes to Washington. They want to see our elected leaders tackling issues that confront the country. They want less partisanship. They don't understand government's frequent failures, and crave more competence. On every front, the people they've elected have disappointed them.

This may be why there is no dominant theme in this year's elections: Voters seem more focused on a variety of issues than on one dominant issue. Apathy is high and we are headed for low voter turnout, even by the standards of midterm elections. Voter outrage at Congress is not translating into a message of rejecting incumbents.

This has made the tone of the election rather interesting. Candidates appear to have picked up on voters' dislike of mean-spirited campaigning, and for the most part are showing restraint. The deeply partisan politics we saw in 2010 and 2012 has abated. Where a couple of years ago there was heated talk of storming the gates in Washington and potentially shutting the government down, that kind of campaigning is just a memory this year. Candidates may not be embracing Washington, but they're not attacking it as they once did. There's even talk of bipartisanship and building bridges, sentiments that were nearly invisible in recent years.

Given President Obama's lack of popularity, there's a general sense among members of the political class that Republicans have an edge in the election and may well take over the Senate. A battle to control the Senate can have significant consequences, yet it's unlikely that much will change on Capitol Hill in the near term. Midterm elections are usually about the president, and Republicans are largely content in this election to attack him, while Democrats are content talking about anything but the president.

Even if the Senate majority changes hands, it will do so only narrowly. Given that a party needs 60 votes there to accomplish much of anything, whoever controls the Senate will be able to maneuver only on the margins; resolving tough issues head-on will be difficult, maybe impossible. Unless the recent election talk of bipartisanship and finding common ground becomes a reality, in other words, the dysfunction and lack of productivity that have become defining characteristics of Congress in recent years are likely to continue.

This is ironic, because large amounts of money are being poured into the fall elections, especially in races for the Senate. You'd almost think transformational policies were at stake. In truth, though, these elections are more of a run up to the presidential race in 2016. And even then, the attention on the Senate is probably misplaced. Polls are showing that a number of gubernatorial seats are likely to switch hands in both directions, and if anything this year's 36 gubernatorial contests will have more of an impact on politics two years from now than what happens in the Senate.

In short, whatever happens on Election Day this year, it's unlikely that much will change in its wake. This may hardly be the most important election of our lifetimes, but the business that Congress left unfinished is still waiting.

The nation needs an elected leadership capable of rolling up its sleeves and meeting our challenges head-on right now, not a few years hence.

Lee Hamilton is director of the Center on Congress at Indiana University. He was a member of the U.S. House of Representatives for 34 years.

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75 West Front Street Red Bank NJ 07701
 732-219-5788 • Editorial Fax: 747-7213 • Advertising Fax: 224-0806
 Email editor@tworivertimes.com Website www.tworivertimes.com

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