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IUCN is the world's largest environmental knowledge network and has helped over 75 countries to prepare and implement national conservation and biodiversity strategies. IUCN is a multicultural, multilingual organization with 1000 staff located in 62 countries. Its headquarters are in Gland, Switzerland.

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NEWS RELEASE

World's largest conservation gathering opens to escalating global species extinction crisis

A total of 15,589 species face extinction, reveals the 2004 IUCN Red List of Threatened Species. One in three amphibians and almost half of all freshwater turtles are threatened, on top of the one in eight birds and one in four mammals known to be in jeopardy.

Bangkok, Thailand, 17 November 2004 (IUCN) – From the mighty shark to the humble frog, the world's biodiversity is declining at unprecedented rates. Halting the growing extinction crisis will be a major concern for IUCN's 1,000 plus member organizations attending the 3rd IUCN World Conservation Congress, which kicks off in Bangkok today.

The situation facing global biodiversity is clearly escalating and the 4,000 delegates, including representatives of the private sector, governmental and nongovernmental organisations, will be outlining ways to halt this alarming trend. They will draw the attention of the international community to the fact that species loss has critical implications for human wellbeing, and that conserving biodiversity is central to managing the risks this poses to sustainable development.

There is some good news. Conservation measures are already making a difference – a quarter of the world's threatened birds have benefited from such measures. What is needed is more of them, and to focus them better using the constantly improving information at our disposal. That means more resources, resources applied more effectively, and new coalitions across all sections of society.

These are among the key messages to emerge from the Global Species Assessment (GSA) based on, and released in conjunction with, the 2004 IUCN Red List of Threatened Species. It is the most comprehensive evaluation ever undertaken of the status of the world's biodiversity. The GSA is produced by the Red List Consortium comprising IUCN and its Species Survival Commission, Conservation International and its Center for Applied Biodiversity Science, BirdLife International and NatureServe.

The Global Species Assessment shows trends in biodiversity over four years since the last major analysis in 2000, and it includes, for the first time, complete assessments of amphibians, cycads (an ancient group of plants) and conifers, as well as regional case studies. It also highlights which species are at greatest risk of extinction, where they occur, and the many threats facing them.

"Governments are starting to realise the value of biodiversity and the critical role it plays in their peoples' wellbeing. Species provide food, medicine, fuel, and building materials. They help filter water, decompose waste, generate soil and pollinate crops. Recognition of this is growing but governments need to mobilize far more resources. The private sector also needs to play a central role by actively promoting and pursuing the sustainable use of the world's natural resources," said Mr David Brackett, Chair of IUCN's Species Survival Commission. IUCN's Congress, the world's largest democratic environmental forum, plays a unique and urgent role in bringing knowledge about biodiversity into the mainstream of development decision-making. It will set priorities for conservation work for the coming four years.

In 1996 it was revealed that one in eight birds (12%) and one in four mammals (23%) were threatened with extinction (falling into the Critically Endangered, Endangered or Vulnerable categories). This infamous line-up has now been joined by one in three amphibians (32%) and almost half (42%) of turtles and tortoises.

With amphibians relying on freshwater, their catastrophic decline is a warning about the state of the planet's water resources. Even though the situation in freshwater habitats is less well known than for terrestrial, early signs show it is equally serious. More than half (53%) of Madagascar's freshwater fish are threatened with extinction.

The vast ocean depths are providing little refuge to many marine species which are being over-exploited to the point of extinction. Nearly one in five (18%) of assessed sharks and rays are threatened.

Many plants have also been assessed, but only conifers and cycads have been completely evaluated with 25% and 52% threatened respectively.

For the first time, the assessment includes the Red List Index, a new tool for measuring trends in extinction risk. This shows overall changes in threat status (projected risk of extinction) over time for a particular group. It will be important for measuring changes in biodiversity. Red List Indices are currently available for birds and amphibians, and show that their status has declined steadily since the 1980s.

"Although 15,589 species are known to be threatened with extinction, this greatly underestimates the true number as only a fraction of known species have been assessed. There is still much to be discovered about key species-rich habitats, such as tropical forests, marine and freshwater systems or particular groups, such as invertebrates, plants and fungi, which make up the majority of biodiversity," says Craig Hilton-Taylor, IUCN's Red List Programme Officer.

People, either directly or indirectly, are the main reason for most species' declines. Habitat destruction and degradation are the leading threats but other significant pressures include over exploitation for food, pets, and medicine, introduced species, pollution and disease. Climate change is increasingly recognised as a serious threat.

"It is clear that the situation facing our species is serious and getting worse. We can continue to assess and bemoan the loss of the world's biodiversity or we can act! We must refocus and rethink the way in which society must respond to this global threat," says Achim Steiner, IUCN's Director General.

"While most threats to biodiversity are human-driven, human actions alone can prevent many species from becoming extinct. There are many examples of species being brought back from the brink including the southern white rhino and blackfooted ferret, and thousands of dedicated people around the world are doing their utmost to reverse the extinction rate," he added. "But this cannot continue to be the task of the environmental community alone. Governments and business must commit to these efforts as well".

Since the release of the 2003 Red List, more than 15,633 new entries have been added and 3,579 species reassessed. There are now 7,266 threatened animal species and 8,323 threatened plant and lichen species. A total of 784 plant and animal species are now recorded as Extinct with a further 60 known only in

cultivation or captivity.

Since 2003, there have been some notable changes to the List, including some marked deteriorations, like the St Helena olive (from Extinct in the Wild to Extinct), the Hawaiian crow (from Critically Endangered to Extinct in the Wild), the Balearic shearwater (From Near Threatened to Critically Endangered), the giant Hispaniolan galliwasp lizard (from Near Threatened to Critically Endangered), and an African begonia, *Begonia oxyanthera* (from Near Threatened to Vulnerable).

But there have also been some improvements, such as the European otter (from Vulnerable to Near Threatened) and the Christmas Island Imperial pigeon (from Critically Endangered to Vulnerable).

The 2004 assessment shows that threatened species are often concentrated in densely populated areas, particularly in much of Asia and parts of Africa. A major conservation challenge will therefore be to reconcile the demands of large numbers of people on the environment, whilst protecting the biodiversity upon which so many people's livelihoods depend.

The importance of international support in safeguarding biodiversity is critical says the assessment. Many countries with a high concentration of threatened species have a low Gross National Income (GNI) per capita and are unable to implement the required conservation measures without international assistance.

Some key findings from the Global Species Assessment

• Numbers of threatened species are increasing across almost all the major taxonomic groups.

• The marine environment is not as well known as the terrestrial environment but initial findings show that marine species are just as vulnerable to extinction as their terrestrial counterparts.

• Freshwater habitats are also poorly known, but recent surveys reveal that many aquatic species are threatened with extinction.

• Most threatened birds, mammals, and amphibians are located on the tropical continents - Central and South America, Africa south of the Sahara, and tropical South and Southeast Asia. These regions contain the tropical broadleaf forests which are believed to harbour the majority of the earth's living terrestrial and freshwater species.

• Australia, Brazil, China, Indonesia and Mexico hold particularly large numbers of threatened species.

• Countries with high numbers of threatened species and relatively low GNI include Brazil, Cameroon, China, Colombia, Ecuador, India, Indonesia, Madagascar, Peru and the Philippines.

• The world's list of extinctions increases – from 766 in 2000 to 784 documented extinctions since 1500 AD.

• Although estimates vary greatly, current extinction rates are at least one hundred to a thousand times higher than background, or "natural" rates".

• Over the past 20 years, 27 documented extinctions or extinctions in the wild have occurred but this underestimates the true number that have taken place.

• While the vast majority of extinctions since 1500 AD have occurred on oceanic islands, over the last 20 years, continental extinctions have become as common as island extinctions.

• Humans have been the main cause of extinction and continue to be the principle threat to species at risk of extinction.

• Habitat loss, introduced species, and over-exploitation are the main threats, with human-induced climate change becoming an increasingly significant problem.

A comprehensive information kit including profiles, case studies, photos, and graphics will be available on the IUCN website www.iucn.org on 17 November.

The Global Species Assessment is available from the IUCN Bookstore http://www.iucn.org/bookstore/ or can be downloaded from the IUCN website www.iucn.org/ from 17 November.

The IUCN Red List is available as a searchable database online at www.iucnredlist.org (the updated site will go live on 17 November).

Notes to Editors

Governments made a commitment to address biodiversity loss at the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development by setting the target of 'a significant reduction in the current rate of loss of biological diversity' by the year 2010, echoing a similar target agreed by Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity earlier that year. Meanwhile, the European Union has adopted the more ambitious target of halting the loss of biodiversity by 2010.

Setting these goals has focused attention on the information that is necessary to address global biodiversity loss: W hat is the overall status of biodiversity, at what rate is it being lost, where is it being lost, and what are the causes of decline? This information is needed to design and implement effective conservation strategies and the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species is one of the principle sources. It is critical for measuring progress, or otherwise, in reaching the global biodiversity targets and its latest findings show there is a long way to go in achieving them.

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