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PRESS RELEASE

New publication

Mediterranean Freshwater Fish on the Brink of Extinction

Released IUCN report says seven species have become extinct and one is extinct in the wild.

Malaga, 18 May 2006 (The World Conservation Union - IUCN Centre for Mediterranean Cooperation) – The situation facing freshwater fish in the Mediterranean is getting worse. An assessment recently released by the IUCN Centre for Mediterranean Cooperation reveals that seven species have become extinct and one is extinct in the wild. In total, 253 endemic freshwater fish have been assessed by expert ichthyologists in the Mediterranean region and by staff from the IUCN Freshwater Biodiversity Assessment Programme and the IUCN Red List Programme, who gathered in a five day regional evaluation workshop in Malaga in December 2004.

According to the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species criteria, the current situation for the Mediterranean endemic freshwater fish species shows that 56% are threatened, of which 18% are Critically Endangered, 18% Endangered and 20% Vulnerable. The report reinforces the idea that biodiversity has been lost in the Mediterranean, and more actions are needed to meet the agreed global target to significantly reduce the rate of biodiversity loss by 2010.

“Freshwater fish are indicators of the health of our freshwater ecosystems. The assessment provides the best possible scientific consensus concerning the species status in the Mediterranean. This report will help prioritise sites for inclusion in regional research programmes and for the identification of internationally important sites of biodiversity”, comments Jamie Skinner, Director of the IUCN Centre for Mediterranean Cooperation.

The greatest concentration of threatened endemic Mediterranean freshwater fish is in the Lower Guadiana river in southern Spain and Portugal, which includes 11 species of endemic fish. Other sites have been identified as regionally important for endemism, as well as threatened endemic species, such as the Po river basin in Northern Italy, the lower Orontes in south west Turkey and Lake Kinneret in Israel.

Threats

Water pollution and water extraction are the two greatest current threats to the future of these fish. Other major threats that have been highlighted are intrinsic factors such as the restricted range of the species (often restricted to only one river system) and limited dispersal, as well as invasive species and the construction of dams.

Actions

Mediterranean rivers require measures for their integrated management that improves water quality (pollution) and quantity (seasonal flows): in too many countries the natural values of our rivers are regarded as secondary to their role as suppliers of water or receptacles for our urban and agricultural pollution.

The challenge now is to ensure that the information collated and presented in this report and in the SIS database is made readily available for policy makers and environmental planners in a format that can easily be employed for integration within the development planning process. Governments at every level could take the necessary action based upon this scientific data to contribute to the IUCN initiative 'Countdown 2010' which aims at significantly reducing the loss of biodiversity by 2010 as agreed by the Contracting Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity.

Success story

The gizani (*Ladigesocypris ghigii*) is a species endemic to the island of Rhodes (Greece). Of the 13 populations one is extinct and 7 were assessed as being "Critically Endangered" due to water abstraction and inbreeding. This species has been the subject of a LIFE-Nature project (<http://www.life-gizani.gr/pages/en/gizani/index.htm>) to promote its conservation. The project entailed the study of the geographic range, life history characteristics, reproduction, nutrition, habitat preferences, genetics and threats to the species and design of conservation actions. These included the construction of pilot fish refuges and two gizani conservation and information centres, the development of an artificial breeding programme, the maintenance of fish stocks from different populations and the formulation of an Action Plan for the species focusing on the sustainable management of the island's water resources. The species has recently increased its population and has been assessed as "Vulnerable", showing that the correct conservation policies can contribute to reduce risks of extinction.

All the species assessed in this project are included in the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species.

The full report (in English, French and Spanish) and species assessments are available from the following link:

http://iucn.org/places/medoffice/cd_fwfish

More details on IUCN Freshwater Biodiversity Assessment Programme:

http://www.iucn.org/themes/ssc/our_work/freshwater/indexfreshwater.htm

For further information, please contact:

SSC Freshwater Biodiversity Assessment Programme: Mediterranean basin endemic fish assessment

http://www.iucn.org/themes/ssc/our_work/freshwater/regional_mediterranean.htm

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