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World Wildlife Hubs for Migratory Species at Risk

UN Calls for International Collaboration to Safeguard Wildlife Frequent Travellers

Bergen, Norway, 21 November 2011 – The world is covered by billions of invisible migratory pathways. On land, in the water and in the air, animals on the move depend on the availability of critical sites along their annual journeys. These world wildlife hubs are vital for the animals to refuel and reproduce – one missing link can jeopardize an entire population.

Much like modern transport systems with airports, railways and roads, migratory species have similar networks spanning the globe. Many of these hubs are under intense pressure from human development and the exploitation of natural resources.

Scientists predict the global “Mean Species Abundance”, a measure to project both the diversity of species and their numbers, will decrease from 0.70 in 2000, to about 0.63 by 2050.

This projected loss of abundance and species of wildlife is equivalent to eradicating all fauna and flora in an area of 9.1 million km² – roughly the size of the United States of America or China – in less than 40 years.

Today, representatives from near 100 governments come together for a UN conference in Bergen, Norway, convened by the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS) of the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) to help safeguard migratory wildlife.

World wildlife hubs are threatened across the planet. In the Canadian High Arctic white Beluga whales migrating in open narrow corridors in the ice may see their migration stopped by shipping traffic from a large proposed iron mine. Whales and dolphins are exposed to increasing noise pollution from sonar and vessels, which might lead to changes and drops of up to 58 per cent in the communication of the marine mammals.

In the Yellow Sea in East Asia land reclamation is destroying critical “airports” for waterbirds, while the open plains of Central Asia, Africa and South America are being bisected by roads, railways and new mining projects.

Poaching is causing dramatic declines in rhinos, elephants, tigers and antelopes worldwide, with few resources for enforcement.

These are some of the threatened sites identified in the report entitled *Living Planet: Connected Planet. Preventing the End of the World's Wildlife Migrations through Ecological Networks*. It was launched today in Bergen by the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (UNEP/CMS).

“For all the frequent travellers of the animal world, ecological networks are essential for their migration and survival. International cooperation is crucial to manage these large transboundary networks. The commitment of all countries is needed, so that future generations can still marvel at and benefit from these nomads connecting our planet,” CMS Executive Secretary, Elizabeth Maruma Mrema said.

The report highlights how international collaboration has resulted in unique success stories in protecting migratory species as examples to follow.

Birdlife travelling along the East Atlantic Flyway from Africa to the Arctic needs to land and refuel. The Dutch-German-Danish trilateral cooperation has helped safeguard a key “airport” hub in the Wadden Sea for species travelling globally.

In the tiny Pacific island nation of Palau, sharks that have roamed the oceans for over 400 million years were becoming endangered due to the demand for their fins for soup.

“Two years ago, Palau became the first country to declare its coastal waters a shark sanctuary--scientists now estimate that shark diving tours are generating around eight per cent of the country’s GDP and that a single shark generates revenues from ecotourism amounting to €1.9 million over its lifetime”, says Achim Steiner, UN Under-Secretary General and UNEP Executive Director.

The globally threatened Lesser White-fronted Goose breeds in the forest tundra from Scandinavia to easternmost Russia has declined dramatically since the 1950s, but the framework of the African-Eurasian Migratory Waterbird Agreement has brought together governments of the 22 key countries along the birds’ migration routes to help save the species from extinction.

The endangered Mountain Gorillas in the Virungas on the borders of the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda and Uganda numbered only 250 in 1981, but successful transboundary enforcement measures led to its recovery in the midst of one of world’s most severe conflicts. By 2010, the ape’s population had reached 480.

A ten-year programme to restore and conserve seven million hectares of wetlands in China, Iran, Kazakhstan and Russia has not only boosted the prospects for the critically endangered Siberian crane but also improved drinking water supplies, inland fisheries and carbon storage.

The report calls for international collaboration to safeguard the ecological networks binding the many wildlife hubs and corridors together.

However, while great success has been made through the Convention and international collaboration, a few of the largest countries in the world, accounting for near 36 per cent of the global land area – are still not parties to the Convention, posing challenges for protecting migratory species worldwide in spite of the 150 countries collaborating.

Poaching

Poaching is once again on the rise, especially in the grasslands and savannahs of Africa and Central Asia. “Organized poaching on animals such as rhinos, elephants and antelopes is increasing rapidly in Asia and Africa and support is desperately needed to address this at a wider international scale”, says Christian Nellemann, of UNEP’s GRID-Arendal centre in Norway.

The numbers of Wildebeest, Rhinos, Saiga and Chiru antelopes, Goitered and Tibetan Gazelles, Guanacos and Vicuñas, have fallen in many areas by 35-90 per cent over the past decades.

Overhunting for illegal trade in horn led to a dramatic decline of the Saiga antelope populations by 95 per cent from one million to only 50,000 animals. Under the CMS, the Saiga Antelope Memorandum of Understanding, monitoring, identification of protected areas for calving and rutting herds, transboundary patrolling and the participation of local communities have built the core pillars of an efficient conservation strategy.

The protection of huge reserves in China and Central Asia, along with greater focus on anti-poaching, has also helped save the Chiru, or Tibetan antelope, from possible extinction, as their numbers dropped from over one million to less than 75,000 in one to two decades.

Chiru’s were hunted for their wool, Shahtoosh, which could bring up to US\$5,000 for one shawl on the black market, but Chinese anti-poaching efforts combined with the establishment of some of the largest reserves in the world by the People’s Republic of China, have turned the fate of these migratory animals. But challenges of poaching continue.

Barriers to migration

Chiru Antelopes still crossing the Qinghai-Tibetan railway and the Golmud-Lhasa highway to reach and return from their calving grounds spend 20-40 days looking for passages and waiting.

Road construction across the Serengeti, the most diverse grazing ecosystem on Earth, may cause major losses in the 1.5 million migrating Wildebeest, ranging from 300,000 to close to one million, with severe consequences for the entire ecosystem network, including for other animals and plants. Recent promises by the Tanzanian government to protect the Serengeti against the proposed roads, has helped the largest remaining intact

wild ungulate grazing system remaining on the planet in the last 250,000 years, and is being applauded by the international community.

In Kenya's Masai Mara a decline of 81 per cent between the late 1970s and 1990s in the migratory Wildebeest population was reported in response to the fencing obstructing the annual migration and poaching.

Examples:

- For migratory birds and bats, wetlands and resting sites have declined by over 50 per cent in the last century, many of which are critical to these long distance travelers.
- Coastal development is increasing rapidly and is projected to have an impact on 91 per cent of all temperate and tropical coasts by 2050 and will contribute to more than 80 per cent of all marine pollution with severe impacts on migratory birds.
- Guanacos and Vicuñas have lost 40-75 per cent of their ranges in South America, and probably dropped at least by 90 per cent in their numbers over the last centuries due to habitat loss from expanding ranching and poaching.
- Humpback Whales in Oceania are threatened by bycatch, habitat degradation, pollution, disease, noise, ship strikes, depletion of prey and climate change.
- The tiny Nathusius' pipistrelle is a bat species weighing only 6 to 10 grams which travels almost 2,000 kilometers annually and is threatened by habitat loss and of collisions with the rapidly increasing number of wind power farms. The CMS EUROBATS-project has worked towards protecting habitats and flyways.
- Loss of grassland ecosystems and agricultural activities at breeding grounds and along migration routes in southern South America threatens the Buff-breasted Sandpiper and other grassland birds. CMS is working with countries in the region to identify new protected areas and zones located outside to create a network of habitats.
- Bycatch is the top threat to the majority of marine mammals with an annual loss of more than 600,000 animals.
- The sub-population of the Humpback Whale migrating between Oceania and the Southern Ocean has plummeted by 70 per cent since 1942 to between 3,000 and 5,000 animals only.

Recommendations to secure ecological networks for migratory species include:

Assessing national infrastructure development projects including roads, railways, pipelines, power lines, wind parks and dams impeding migration of transboundary ungulates helps identify ways of mitigating impacts and evaluate them in relation to possible violation of the CMS.

Combating environmental crime, such as poaching, requires a more concerted international effort to counteract illegal trade in wildlife products globally. A substantial increase in the funding and collaboration between INTERPOL, the World Bank, CITES

(Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species), WCO (World Customs Organization) and UNODC (UN Office on Drugs and Crime) to help further combat wildlife crime are prerequisites for success.

Increased anti-poaching training and enforcement, including training of trackers and improved crime scene management to secure evidence for prosecution, are strongly needed.

A substantial increase in the number and size of **marine protected areas** is urgently needed. Important swimways of whales and dolphins, especially within the 200-kilometer coastal zone, should, where possible, be included in marine protected areas and certain stretches should be designated as limited sail zones for freight vessels and naval activity.

Restoration of wetlands, tidal flats and the coastal zones must be enhanced along the major bird flyways on all continents and countries, to ensure the survival of migratory birds.

The Tenth Meeting of the Conference of the Parties to CMS, which is being held from 20 to 25 November 2011 in Bergen, Norway, is putting particular focus on the importance of ecological networks as an efficient instrument to protect a wide range of migratory animals.

Notes to Editors:

The Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (UNEP/CMS) works for the conservation of a wide array of endangered migratory animals worldwide through the negotiation and implementation of agreements and action plans. CMS is a growing convention with special importance due to its expertise in the field of migratory species. At present, 116 countries are Parties to the Convention. www.cms.int

The report Living planet: Connected Planet is available for free download at www.unep.org and www.grida.no

High resolution graphics for free public use in media are also available for download at www.grida.no

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