19Mar2011 Courier Mail

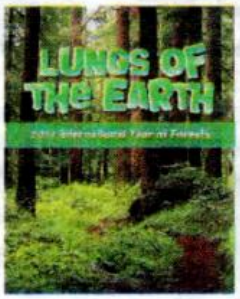
Species die out at a rapid rate

THERE is a list compiled by the International Union for Conservation of Nature. If you haven't seen it yet, you should.

The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species is perhaps the greatest indicator of the damage mankind has done to our planet – and it's alarming.

The latest update shows 17,291 out of the 47,677 assessed species are threatened with extinction.

Twenty-one per cent of all known mammals, 30 per cent of amphibians, 12 per cent of birds and 28 per cent of reptiles are under threat globally.



"The scientific evidence of a serious extinction crisis is mounting," IUCN biodiversity conservation group director Jane Smart says. "It's time for governments to start getting serious about saving species and make sure it's high on their agendas . . . as we're rapidly running out of time."

Scientists say they have the first firm evidence to show the planet is entering the largest mass extinction in 65 million years. Destructive human activities – deforestation, industrialisation and the hunting of animals, illegally or otherwise – have led to a rate of extinction that is at least 100 to 1000 times higher than the expected natural rate.

Despite huge conservation efforts by organisations including the IUCN and World Wildlife Fund, extinction rates aren't slowing.

WWF Australia global forest and trade network manager Lydia Gaskell says: "I only hear of more species going on the Red List, not getting taken off, so that's probably an indication that we haven't peaked and that we're still losing our species within the forests. The more we lose our forests or we convert our forest from natural forest to, say, palm oil plantation, we lose the variety of animals that can live within it."

While rates of deforestation may have decreased in parts of the world, the rate of extinction is rising because of what Dr Stephen Debus from the University of New England calls "extinction debt".

"There's a time lag – the clearing might have been happening since World War II when it was highly mechanised . . . but the extinction process is ongoing," he says.

"Animals can hang on for years in remnant patches, but then a drought or a fire will wipe them out and they can't recolonise. What's left is too degraded or isolated.

"We've sped things up so much that a lot of species aren't able to cope with the amount of change and loss of habitat."

Gorillas, orang-utans, elephants and the giant panda have become the faces of a growing conservation movement, but few Australians realise the devastation happening in their own backyards.

Already, we are noted for having lost more mammals in modern times than any other place on Earth – almost 40 per cent of mammal extinctions in the past 200 years have occurred in Australia.

Under national legislation, conservative figures show 1667 species are listed as threatened and 103 as extinct.

"There's a wave of extinctions happening now in the tropical north," Debus says.

"We're probably on the verge of a wave of extinction in the birds, too."

Don't believe it?

"Look out your window," says Patrick Medway from the Wildlife Preservation Society of Australia.

"Can you see a robin red breast or a fairy wren or anything like that? Can you look out the window and see a koala? No, that's right, because we've cleared the land. Koalas are not rare or endangered, but their habitat has been reduced. In 2050, the expectation is they'll all be gone."

Land clearing and introduced species such as foxes are the greatest threat to our native wildlife, Medway says.

"There's some mistaken belief that when you clear a parcel of land all the animals go somewhere else and live there," he says. "But many of these birds and animals are very habitat-specific, and if you ruin the habitat they just simply die out."

There are plenty of conservation efforts in Australia working towards preserving population pockets of endangered animals, some more successful than others. The advent of threatened species legislation and wildlife acts since the 1960s have worked to prioritise research and conservation efforts.

ON WAY OUT: Tigers (above) are in danger of following the Tasmanian tiger (above left) and platypus frog (left) into extinction.

Dedicated researchers and non-government organisations are constantly monitoring the situation and some rebreeding programs are working. But you can help too.

"People could be a bit choosy about what they grow in their gardens," Debus suggests.

"They could grow the local indigenous plants and try to mimic natural habitat structure like a native shrub layer that small birds can shelter in; and grow plants that will provide food year-round."