

# The Proliferation of Hope

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**Above:** The western snowy plover is an endangered shorebird that suffers from the impacts of human recreation. Beach lovers disturb the chicks or trample nests, often without knowing it. By erecting a simple rope marker and signs, and using docents to educate the public, conservation managers at Santa Barbara's Coal Oil Point Beach have seen between 20 and 60 chicks through to maturity each year for the past decade. **Credit:** www.ianvorster.com

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Environmental destruction seems to be all around us all the time: Poaching, habitat destruction, growing markets for ivory and bushmeat, political strife and increasing human population are reducing wildlife populations for many key species.

In the early 90s, it seemed that the rhino had made a successful comeback from the brink of extinction, elephants numbered roughly 1.5 million, cheetah-breeding programs seemed to have saved the rare cat from extinction, and estimates put the African lion population at roughly 50,000.

By 2012, however, the most comprehensive research project done on lions, completed by Duke University's Nicholas School of the Environment, found that only 32,000 lions remained, a 75 percent decline from their more conservative estimate of 100,000 in 1962. The study's abstract notes, "Lion populations in West and Central Africa are acutely threatened with many recent, local extinctions even in nominally protected areas."

Elephant numbers have dropped to between 450,000 and 700,000. A recently-published study found that 100,000 elephants were slaughtered in the three-year period leading up to the summer of 2014. The most comprehensive air-survey ever conducted in Botswana (by Dr. Michael Chase of Elephants without Borders) found a 61 percent decline in 11 species in Ngamiland – the northern region of the country – since a previous 1996 survey. Wildebeest have all but vanished from the plains, their tally having dropped by 90 percent from 23,538 to 1,985 – far below the minimum sustainable number of breeding pairs. Tsessebe have dropped by 84 percent, warthogs by 81 percent, and giraffe by 75 percent.

As dire as the situation is for wildlife, the academic field of environmental communications has found that when bad news is reported, human indignation or alarm actually declines. It may be that the brain just shuts out bad news or that people resign themselves to the loss, gradually becoming indifferent. Climate change communicators – a category that includes both scientists and journalists – have long been stuck in this hard place of needing to educate the public about the bad news, yet finding that the news does not motivate people to take action. There also is a rift between scientists who are more conservative in terms of communication and those who wish to tell it like it is. The question remains: How can environmental communicators stress the urgency of the environmental situation, in particular loss of biodiversity, in a way that people can hear, and which leads to change?

According to Dr. Mark Meisner, who teaches a course in environmental communications and serves as the executive director of the International Environmental Communication Association (IECA), there are several steps that advocates for wildlife can take:

TO BEGIN WITH, STOP TALKING ABOUT LOSSES AND EXTINCTIONS, STOP TRYING TO EDUCATE PEOPLE ABOUT THE SCIENCE, STOP TALKING ABOUT WILDLIFE AS RESOURCES, AND STOP APPEALING TO PEOPLE'S SELF-INTEREST. THESE ARE COUNTER-PRODUCTIVE STRATEGIES IN THE SHORT AND LONG TERM BECAUSE THEY FRAME THE ISSUES USING VALUES THAT RUN COUNTER TO THE GOAL OF PROTECTING WILDLIFE. INSTEAD, USE YOUR COMMUNICATION OPPORTUNITIES TO FOCUS ON SUCCESS STORIES AND WHAT'S WORKING. OPENLY CELEBRATE AND SHARE THE WONDERS OF THE NATURAL WORLD. TRY TO EVOKE A SENSE OF SHARED DESTINY AND COMPASSION FOR PEOPLE AND THE REST OF NATURE. AND PERHAPS MOST IMPORTANTLY, COLLABORATE WITH THE LOCAL PEOPLE TO IDENTIFY AND SOLVE THE UNDERLYING PROBLEMS THAT CAUSE HABITAT LOSS, POACHING, THE BUSH MEAT TRADE AND SO FORTH.

So let's highlight the good news. For example, *Scientific American* reported that the United States' greatest oil-producing state, Texas, provided up to 38.43 percent of the energy load at times of low usage – through wind power. While serious questions have been raised about birds and bats flying into wind turbines, this at least speaks of a decline in fossil fuel usage and the associated benefits regarding climate change.

And we live in a time when strange alliances are being formed to help slow biodiversity loss. For example, the African Wildlife Defence Force is recruiting U.S. veterans to train and staff anti-poaching patrols in Africa. And Princess Aliyah Pandolfi, CEO of the [Kashmir World Foundation](#) founded the worldwide Wildlife Conservation Unmanned Aerial Vehicle Challenge to foster innovation in the use of unmanned aircraft to assist with counter poaching and illicit wildlife trafficking (Watch a National Geographic video on the subject [here](#)).

Regarding that threatened big cat, the cheetah, a recent interview (published on *Voices for Biodiversity*) with Dr. Laurie Marker, founder and executive director of the Cheetah Conservation Fund headquartered in Namibia, shares that she has been able to help the endangered wild cheetah by improving rural livelihoods through model programs in integrated livestock and wildlife management.

As Stewart Brand, president of the Long Now Foundation and co-founder of the Revive and Restore project in San Francisco, so aptly wrote in his article *Rethinking Extinction*, "The loss of whole species is not the leading problem in conservation. The leading problem is the decline in wild animal populations, sometimes to a radical degree, often diminishing the health of whole ecosystems." The word *extinction* produces panic, but the reality is, as Dr. Marker has shown with her work with cheetahs, that nature can rebound if we focus on restoring ecological richness. The situation is hardly impossible.



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Ian started as a professional photojournalist on the California Central Coast, telling community stories with a camera. He moved on to serve as director of communications at the Woods Hole Research Center in Massachusetts. Prior to working as a photojournalist, he directed communications for Afrimog Safaris and Honeyguide Wilderness Adventures in South Africa.

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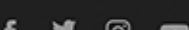
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