

Tigers, Rhinos, Polar Bears: Most Threatened in 2009

World Wildlife Fund recently released its annual list of some of the most threatened species around the world, saying that the long-term survival of many iconic animals is increasingly in doubt due to a host of threats.

WWF's list of "9 to Watch in 2009" includes such well-known and beloved species as polar bears, tigers, gorillas, pandas, elephants, whales and rhinos, as well as the lesser-known black-footed ferret and vaquita. WWF scientists say these, and many other species, are at greater risk than ever before because of poaching, habitat loss and climate change-related threats.



"If we don't get serious about saving these spectacular species, it's quite likely that many won't be around in the years to come," said Tom Dillon, WWF's senior vice president for Field Programs. "The potential loss of some familiar and beloved wildlife should be a wake-up call that immediate action must be taken if we want to live in a world with wild elephants, polar bears, and tigers. At the dawn of the new year, our global resolution for 2009 should be to save these amazing species before it's too late."

WWF's "9 to Watch in 2009" list:

1. Javan Rhinoceros

Population: Less than 60. Location: Indonesia and Vietnam.

This is probably the rarest large mammal species in the world and is critically endangered. Poaching and pressure from a growing human population pose greatest risk to the two protected areas where they live. WWF teams actively monitor these rhinos and protect them from poachers.

2. Vaquita

Population: 150. Location: Upper Gulf of California, Mexico.

The world's smallest and most endangered cetacean, this tiny porpoise is often killed in gillnets and could soon be extinct. WWF is working with local fishermen, local and international non-profits, and private sector and government officials on an unprecedented effort to save the vaquita. This includes establishing a vaquita refuge, buying out gillnet fisheries and developing vaquita-friendly fishing gear and other economic alternatives for the fishermen and their families.

3. Cross River Gorilla

Population: 300. Location: Nigeria and Cameroon.

The few remaining forest patches of southeastern Nigeria and western Cameroon are home to the recently discovered Cross River gorilla, a subspecies of the western gorilla. But as its forests are opened up by timber companies, hunters move in. Conservation measures are urgently needed for this beleaguered animal, which is probably the world's rarest great ape. In Nigeria, the Nigerian Conservation Foundation, a WWF Affiliate, is working with communities in the Cross River National Park to help save the Cross River gorilla.



4. Sumatran Tiger

Population: 400-500. Location: Sumatra, Indonesia.

Accelerating deforestation and rampant poaching could push the Sumatran tiger to the same fate as its now-extinct Javan and Balinese relatives in other parts of Indonesia. Tigers are poached for their body parts, which are used in traditional Chinese medicine, while skins are also highly prized. WWF is researching the Sumatran tiger population with camera traps, supports anti-poaching patrols and works to reduce human-tiger conflict as the cats' habitat shrinks. Through the efforts of WWF and its partners, the Indonesian government in 2008 doubled the size of Tesso Nilo National Park, a critical tiger habitat.

5. North Pacific Right Whale

Population: Unknown, but less than 500. Location: Northern Pacific, U.S., Russia and Japan.

The North Pacific right whale is one of the world's rarest cetaceans, almost hunted to extinction until the 1960s. It is rarely sighted and has a poor prognosis for survival due to collisions with ships, entanglement in fishing nets and the prospect of offshore oil and gas development in Alaska's Bristol Bay. WWF is working to improve shipping safety to avoid collisions and trying to prevent oil and gas development in Bristol Bay, the whale's primary summer feeding ground.

6. Black-Footed Ferret

Population: 500 breeding adults. Location: Northern Great Plains, U.S. and Canada.

Found only in the Great Plains, it is one of the most endangered mammals in North America because its primary prey, the prairie dog, has been nearly exterminated by ranchers who consider it a nuisance. Few species have edged so close to extinction as the black-footed ferret and recovered, but through captive breeding and reintroduction, there are signs the species is slowly recovering. WWF has been working to save the black-footed ferret and the prairie dog population upon which the ferrets depend.

7. Borneo Pygmy Elephant

Population: Perhaps fewer than 1,000. Location: Borneo, Malaysia.

These smallest of all elephants must compete with logging and agriculture for space in the lowland forests of Borneo. WWF is working to ensure protection of the "Heart of Borneo" and tracks the elephants through the use of satellite collars to learn more about these little-understood elephants.



8. Giant Panda

Population: 1,600. Location: China.

An international symbol of conservation since WWF's founding in 1961, the giant panda faces an uncertain future. Its forest habitat in the mountainous areas of southwest China has become fragmented, creating small and isolated populations. WWF has been active in giant panda conservation for nearly three decades, conducting field studies, working to protect habitats and, most recently, by providing assistance to the Chinese government in establishing a program to protect the panda and its habitat through the creation of reserves.

9. Polar Bear

Population: 20,000-25,000. Location: Arctic.

The greatest risk to their survival today is climate change. Designated a threatened species by the U.S., if warming trends in the Arctic continue at the current pace, polar bears will be vulnerable to extinction within the next century. WWF is supporting field research to understand how climate change will affect polar bears and to develop adaptation strategies. WWF also works to protect critical polar bear habitat by working with government and industry to reduce threats from shipping and oil and gas development in the region.

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