

# ON THE BRINK OF EXTINCTION



notes

ADELAIDE ZOO  
EDUCATION SERVICE

ZOO

There are no dinosaurs living today; to see the preserved remains of some species you will have to visit a museum.

The reason why dinosaurs became extinct is not known. Humans, however, were not responsible because they evolved nearly sixty million years after the last of the dinosaurs. Unfortunately, at present, humans are responsible for the extinction of many species of animals.

If we want to see the thousands of threatened animal species remain living, and not as preserved specimens in a museum, then we must act now to save them.

Animal species are threatened mainly because of habitat destruction, hunting (for food, sport, the pet trade and as 'pest' animals), and because of competition with introduced species.

Zoos are involved in programs to assist in the conservation of Threatened Species. Some, like the Pere David Deer, Przewalski's Horse and Arabian Oryx, have been saved from the brink of extinction. For many other species however, the process of saving them is only just beginning.

Currently in the Adelaide Zoo collection there are over 60 animals that are Threatened Species. These include the Western-Swamp Tortoise, Golden-lion Tamarin, Axolotyl, Orange-bellied Parrot, Victorian Brush-tailed Rock Wallaby, Sumatran Tiger and the Pygmy Blue-tongue Lizard. For a complete list of the Threatened Species at the Adelaide Zoo, see the "Threatened Species" Zoo Note.

Habitat clearance, whether it is of swamps, coasts, deserts or forests, is the major cause of the decline in the numbers of many animal species. The removal of much of the habitats around Australia's major cities has already seen the extinction of some animals.

The small Western Swamp Tortoise was once found in swampy marshes around where Perth now stands. When building the city, the swamps were filled in and water slowly dried up, leaving animals like the Western Swamp Tortoise with nowhere to live. The few specimens remaining had to deal with introduced predators such as foxes and cats.

By 1989 there were thought to be less than 25 Western Swamp Tortoises living in the wild. A few of these animals were being monitored and researched at the Perth Zoo. In 1994 two Western Swamp Tortoises were transferred to the Adelaide Zoo and became the first Tortoises of their type to ever leave Western Australia.

It is hoped that these tortoises, and the two more that have arrived since, can help to prevent this species from becoming extinct.

Small and cute looking animals, such as the Golden-lion Tamarin, are often hunted relentlessly for the pet trade. Because these little monkeys fetch up to \$100,000 on the world-wide illegal pet market, their numbers in the wild are still under threat. They also have to contend with the removal of their rainforest habitat in Brazil.

The breeding group of Golden-lion Tamarins at the Adelaide Zoo has been very successful, with over 40 young being produced since 1988. The babies are very tiny, being about the size of a matchbox at birth. Adelaide Zoo has the only breeding group of Golden-lion Tamarins in the Australasian region. Animals bred from this group have been sent to other zoos in the region and some of the progeny of these animals have been returned to the wild.

Fortunately, sometimes a thought-to-be extinct species is rediscovered. When nobody sighted a Pygmy Blue-tongue Lizard since 1956 it was presumed extinct. However, a few specimens were discovered to be living north of Adelaide in 1992 and the species has since been put onto the Threatened Species list. This South Australian lizard likes to live in plains of native grasslands. Unfortunately much of these grasslands have been taken over by farms and towns. The small lizard is also an easy target for feral foxes and cats.

The Adelaide Zoo has obtained some live specimens of the Pygmy Blue-tongue Lizard. Some are on public display; others are part of a breeding program that is a security against the extinction of the species in the wild.

The Adelaide Zoo has successfully bred many of the Threatened Species it holds. For some of them, captive breeding is likely to be the only thing that ensures their survival. Ultimately however, the aim of captive breeding is the reintroduction of the animal to its natural habitat.

