



Get to know some endangered species

Animals are endangered due to a variety of causes. This activity provides students with an opportunity to look into issues that caused them to be labeled endangered.

About the activity

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Learning Objectives:

The objective is to stimulate the students' interest in endangered animals.

Grade level: 4th - 8th

Subjects: Language arts, science, research skills.

Case Histories

Asian Elephant

Asian elephants used to live in the forests from Iraq to southern China. Since these forests were cut down to make room for farms and villages, the elephants have been confined to small, hilly regions where they have little contact with humans. These tiny areas of land cannot supply enough food for the elephants. An adult elephant eats about 330 pounds (150 kg) of grasses, leaves, and other vegetation each day. When forests were larger, Asian elephants migrated with the seasons. In this way, they found fresh food supplies. The plants and trees could also regenerate after the elephants left.



Today there is nowhere for the elephants to go. Experts say that the Asian elephant population is about 55,000, living on a habitat of about 190,00 square miles (494 sq km). In contrast to this, the African elephant population is about 10 times this size and lives on almost 3 million square miles (7.7 million sq. km) of available habitat.

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Black Lace Cactus

This colorful plant is a favorite of collectors around the world. It is a tiny plant, only 6 inches tall. It grows alone or in small groups in desert areas near the coast of southern Texas in the United States. It is called "black lace" because the pattern of spines on each stem looks like lace.



One reason the black lace cactus is endangered is because its habitat has been destroyed. In areas where the land has been cleared to plant grass for cattle, the cacti have disappeared. Another problem is overcollecting. The plant's large pink and purple flowers are very pretty. For this reason, many people dig up the plants and take them home for their private collections. Other people dig up them up and sell them.

Kagu

Many birds sing or whistle. Others such as myna birds and many parrots talk. The kagu is a bird that barks! These barking birds live in the forests of New Caledonia, an island about 900 miles (1,450 km) east of Australia.



Kagus are big birds. They are 20-24 inches (51-61 cm) long and weigh about 1.9 pounds (0.9 kg). Their loud barking noise is becoming rare because only about 650 kagus are alive today.

One problem for kagus is the animals that people have brought to the New Caledonia. These dogs, pigs, cats, and rats eat kagus or their eggs. Another problem is hunting. Some people kill kagus for their meat. But, the biggest problem for kagus is the loss of habitat. The forests of New Caledonia have been cleared for mining and agriculture, leaving only a few small valleys where the kagus can live.

Manus Island Tree Snail

Manus Island, north of New Guinea, is covered with rain forest. The Manus Island tree snail, a small animal with a bright green shell, lives in the tops of the trees in this forest.



Overcollecting has been a serious problem for these small animals. Many people like to collect the shells of Manus Island tree snails because of their beautiful color. The 1.6-inch long (4 cm) shells are often used for jewelry. Another big problem for these snails is the loss of the forests where they live. Loggers are cutting down more and more trees of the Manus Island rain forest.

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Leatherback Sea Turtle

Picture a turtle that is six feet (1.8 m) long and weighs 1400 pounds (636 kg)! That's the size of a large Leatherback sea turtle, the largest turtle on earth. It is called "leatherback" because its shell is covered with a leathery-type skin.

Leatherbacks live in the warm waters of the Atlantic, Indian, and Pacific Oceans. Males spend all of their time at sea, and females come on land only when it is time to lay their eggs.



Photo in public domain, retrieved from U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Loss of nesting habitats is a serious problem for Leatherbacks. Females build their nests on remote sandy areas along the coast. Because many coasts are being made into beaches, leatherbacks often cannot find a safe place to lay their eggs. Other problems are fishing and hunting. Leatherbacks get caught in fishing nets, and in some parts of Asia they are hunted for food and oil. Only about 100,000 females are alive today. It is hard to know the number of males since they never come ashore.

Karner Blue Butterfly

With a wingspan of about one inch (2.5 cm), Karner Blue butterflies are among the smallest of all butterflies. They are also among the rarest. They are found in the midwestern and northeastern parts of the United States.

Many people like to collect Karner Blue butterflies because they are so beautiful. However, because numbers of Karner Blue butterflies are so low, the collection of even a few can seriously harm their population.



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An even bigger problem for these butterflies is habitat loss. The only known food of the Karner blue butterfly is the wild lupine, a small blue flowering plant. Wild lupine grows best in sandy soils, in areas that are occasionally cleared by wildfires. Land development and lack of wildfire have reduced the growth of this plant. Without the wild lupine, Karner Blue butterflies cannot exist.

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Classroom Activity

Complete the table with the appropriate information about the species mentioned below.

Animals	Appearance	Rare feature	Habitat	Population	Threats to their survival
Asian Elephant					
Black Lace Cactus					
Kagu					
Manus Island Tree Snail					
Leatherback Sea Turtle					
Karner Blue Butterfly					

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