

Ripple Effect #18

Extinction-The Land of No Return

There are many plant and animal species living in the Red River Basin. They have been around a long time, but will they be here forever? The University of Minnesota Extension Service has provided the following information about extinction and what is being done to help prevent the loss of plant and animal species.

Extinction is a natural process that has been occurring since life began. As the earth changes in climate, disease, and food supply, some species can't adjust to changes and die off. New species take the places of the extinct ones. Over the earth's history extinction has occurred slowly. During the great dinosaur die-off, the rate of extinction was only one species every thousand years!

Why worry? If extinction is a natural process, why should we care about animals and plants disappearing?

In the last 300 years the human population has increased very quickly; consequently, the rates of extinction for other species have also increased. In fact, the extinction rate has increased more than 1,000 times since modern humans showed up.

Plants and animals do not suddenly become extinct. Instead, their numbers slowly decline. Scientists have names for the different stages that species go through as they head for extinction: rare, threatened, endangered, extirpated, and extinct.

How can we prevent species from becoming endangered or extinct?

- **Protecting habitat.** Habitat loss is the major cause of extinction. Parks and wildlife refuges around the world protect some habitats. However, the amount of land protected worldwide is still too small to help many endangered species.
- **Restoring habitat.** Habitats that have been altered by pollution, deforestation, or agriculture sometimes can be restored. In fact, many lakes and rivers are now cleaner than they were 20 years ago. People have restored some prairies and wetlands as well. Still, preserving habitat when it's healthy is easier than restoring damaged habitat.
- **Laws.** In the U.S. and other countries, we're passing laws to help protect endangered species. In 1973, an agreement called the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) treaty was signed by 86 countries. This treaty bans the trade of products made from endangered species. If selling and buying these products is illegal, the hope is that people will kill fewer animals. The United States Endangered Species Act, also passed in 1973, makes it illegal to kill or capture endangered or threatened species in the U.S. The law also protects some wildlife habitats.

- **Captive breeding.** Another method of helping endangered species is to increase their numbers through captive breeding. Zoos and botanical gardens collect and raise rare animals and plants. Biologists try to get these species to breed in captivity. However, many wild animals and plants do not reproduce well in zoos and gardens. Although captive breeding can help, preserving habitat is the real key to saving endangered species.
- **Research.** There is still a lot we do not know. Often we don't understand why a species is in trouble. Research can help us learn different ways to prevent extinctions.

To learn more about endangered species in the Red River Basin, go to the University of Minnesota Extension Service website at <http://www.extension.umn.edu/index.html>.

Until the next Ripple Effect,

The Red River Basin Commission (RRBC)

The RRBC is a grassroots organization that is a chartered not-for-profit corporation under the provisions of Manitoba, North Dakota, Minnesota, and South Dakota law. Our offices in Moorhead, MN and Winnipeg, MB can be reached at 218-291-0422 and 204-982-7254, or you can check out our website at www.redriverbasincommission.org.