

IUCN list shows no new extinctions – but they loom large

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The list serves to prompt authorities to protect species under threat, such as the New Zealand sea lion (*Richard Robinson/Cultura RM/Getty*)

Good news or bad? The latest update to the [IUCN Red List](#) shows many species are in decline – but no additions to the Extinct category.

Even so, evidence is growing that the world is entering another period of [mass extinction](#).

The IUCN now has information on nearly 80,000 animal and plant species, of which almost 23,000 are threatened with extinction.

In the latest update, 14 species have been moved into the Critically Endangered (Possibly Extinct) category, including a Haitian tree, *Magnolia emarginata*, and 10 species of Madagascar's endemic orchid, including *Angraecum mahavavense*.

The absence of additions to the Extinct category is largely because demonstrating extinction is difficult, says [Craig Hilton-Taylor](#), head of the IUCN's Red List Unit.

"It takes a long time of gathering negative evidence before we can say, 'ok, that species has gone'," he says.

However, evidence is growing that extinction rates are much higher than expected.

Many researchers have already concluded that we are entering a period of mass extinction, so Gerardo Ceballos at the National Autonomous University of Mexico and his colleagues set out to test the idea.

His team used evidence from fossils and written records to look at historic extinctions and compare their rate with the "natural" background extinction rate. They found that, even using the IUCN's "conservatively low" estimates of extinction rates of vertebrate animals, species have been lost at 100 times the normal background rate during the past century. In their words, the "sixth mass extinction" of life really has begun.

Ceballos's team stress that averting a dramatic loss of biodiversity is still possible through conservation efforts – something the IUCN update shows, too.

For example, populations of the Iberian lynx (*Lynx pardinus*) and the Guadalupe fur seal (*Arctocephalus townsendi*) are growing, even though the latter has been declared extinct in the past.

The updated list also highlights increasing threats to species like the lion (*Panthera leo*) and the New Zealand sea lion (*Phocarctos hookeri*), with the aim of encouraging authorities to take protective action before threats to these species become critical.

"The main focus of the Red List is to stop species entering the extinction categories," says Hilton-Taylor.

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