

Wildlife icons may be 'beyond help'

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China has spend millinos on Giant Panda conservation, but with limited success. Photo / Supplied

A majority of professional conservationists believe it's time to consider shifting efforts away from some of the world's most famous species, such as the panda, to concentrate on others with a greater chance of success.

A survey of nearly 600 scientists involved in wildlife protection found more than half agreed with the idea of species "triage", where conservation efforts are concentrated on certain animals and plants that can be saved at the expense of species too difficult or costly to preserve in the wild.

The highly controversial idea has been discussed for several years among conservationists with little consensus, but it seems there's now a growing appetite for taking it more seriously, given the scale of the extinction crisis facing the natural world this century as a result of loss of natural habitats, a growing human population and climate change.

The overwhelming majority of the 583 scientists who took part in the survey believe a serious loss of biological diversity is "likely, very likely or virtually certain".

In that context, about 60 per cent of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with the idea of triage - a medical term where limited resources are concentrated only on those who can survive with help.

"They argue it's time to move beyond outright rejection of triage. Results from my survey suggest that a shift in attitude may have already happened or that it always existed," said Dr Murray Rudd, an environmental economist at York University, who carried out the study published in the journal *Conservation Biology*.

"The challenge in conservation is to know what's beyond help and what's not. In some cases,

we don't know what the costs of species conservation will be."

Many experts reject the idea of wildlife triage on the grounds that it's impossible - and perhaps immoral - to make judgments about one species at the expense of another, given the complexity of ecological interactions in the natural world.

However, others are starting to question the value of spending millions on one celebrated species, such as the panda, or a big predator such as the tiger, where loss of its habitat is almost inevitable.

"When considering conservation values and priorities, the scientists said understanding interactions between people and nature was a priority for maintaining ecosystems," Dr Rudd said. "However, they largely rejected cultural or spiritual reasons as motivations for biological biodiversity. They also rejected human 'usefulness', suggesting many do not hold utilitarian views of ecosystem services."

The Canadian Government, for example, had poured millions of dollars into efforts to save the Atlantic salmon. But there were questions over whether the money could have been better spent on other conservation projects, Dr Rudd said.

But one message is clear from the survey. Almost all the professional conservationists interviewed said species extinction was happening.

"Given the perceived severity of loss of biological diversity, scientists may be willing to discuss potentially contentious conservation options."

Dying out species losing the fight for survival

Tiger

In 1900, there were up to 100,000 tigers in India alone. Now estimates of the global population range from 3062 to 5066. India still has the most - about 1700 - but as it is expected to overtake China as the most populous nation, pressure on tiger populations is intense. And Chinese herbalists' false belief that tiger products can cure many ills means poaching is endemic.

Polar bear

Estimates of polar bear numbers range from 20,000 to 25,000. But with Arctic sea ice melting at its current rate, the population is expected to plummet by up to 30 per cent within 40 years. The bears rely on sea ice to reach their preferred meal - seals. As sea ice melts, bears starve and can come into contact with humans more by scavenging farther for food.

Atlantic salmon

Overfishing has led to a plunge in Atlantic salmon populations, nowhere more spectacularly than off the east coast of Canada. Since the closure of Newfoundland's commercial fisheries in the early 1990s, Canada has invested millions of dollars in trying to bring stocks back up, but the initiatives have had little success.

Giant panda

It is no coincidence that the World Wildlife Fund chose the giant panda as its logo. There are now just 2500 mature pandas in the wild. China has spent millions on conservation, but it has had only tentative success.

- INDEPENDENT