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## DO WE NEED SUCH RARE BIRDS?

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## DO WE NEED SUCH RARE BIRDS?

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Gruidae is one of the oldest bird families; the genus *Grus* dates back at least 9 million years. Though they may have been around a long time, it is unlikely that cranes were ever among the most abundant of birds. Several of the 15 crane species occur today in such low numbers that they are considered in danger of becoming extinct. It has been posited that at the time of European colonization of North America whooping cranes may have numbered 10,000 individuals, so whooping cranes have likely always been rare birds. Rare has often been used as a synonym for endangered, however some organisms are rare by natural occurrence and not necessarily about to become extinct as the term rare and endangered would imply. It stands to reason, though, that those things that occur in low numbers are more liable to extinction than those in greater abundance. The amount of society's resources that have been committed to preventing the decline or extinction of rare animals has been in the billions of dollars; with millions of acres of land and thousands of years of efforts being dedicated to this same purpose. But to what avail? Aren't we still losing species at an alarming rate? Does the pace of their loss not seem to be accelerating? Accompanying the disappearance of species from the planet we often hear the cynical drone "*why bother, they were doomed anyway, otherwise they would not have been rare in the first place.*" Follow this course of logic to its end point and the product of the argument becomes appallingly apparent. Would we really be happy sharing the planet with nothing other than pigeons, cockroaches, house sparrows and rats? Let's hope not! As humanity's unkind progress overwhelmed those species that had the misfortune to be in the way, and before we excuse our insolent sins with so cavalier a notion as forgone doom, we should pause and fully appreciate what it is we are losing.

There are those that say the money spent to perpetuate rare species might be better spent on species that had not reached such a critical point in the equation of demise. Such sentiments are most typically espoused by someone other than a scientist, and certainly not by anyone consumed with the need to know. A mind bent toward understanding things would, faced with an inevitable loss, advocate for learning as much as possible in whatever time was left. Imagine what we will never know about the Labrador duck, the Carolina parakeet, or the great auk. What was their place in the fabric of life during their time? We can only guess at the answers, although we might have known some of the answers with more time and a few more minds to ponder. Where might our understanding of those lost ones be today? Could we dare to

hope they might even have been saved!

From ancient times humans have felt there was something extraordinary and remarkable about rare and spectacular animals. We've imbued them with mystical energy, miraculous powers, and invoked their images for special occasions. To some extent the culture we live in today is a consequence of having developed with rare animals among us. The awe and wonder they inspire reverberates in our understanding of the world outside and helped to frame our collective fears and communal joy.

Several of the world's cranes occur in precariously low numbers; first among these is the whooping crane, with a planetary population that has remained at less than 500 for the past century. Those whose job it is to think of such things speculate that, at their most abundant, whooping cranes never numbered more than a few thousand. Clearly they were always rare and, though they have come back from barely more than a dozen, they will likely be rare for many human lifetimes to come. Here we are presented with a creature that was spread so thinly over the landscape that their first interactions with mankind all but extinguished their splendor.

Now we must face the question, can our modern society afford the luxury of such ecologically precarious life form? If so then how are the costs justified? The easy and anthropocentric argument offered for preserving them from extinction has been that loss of any one species is just one step closer to the end of the human species. This must be wrongheaded or, after all the ills we have wrought on the planet so far, we should have already seen our end. Some may be lulled into believing that technology will intervene and provide solutions to excuse our insults. Technological intervention may be able to clean polluted water or fouled air, but it seems highly doubtful that human technology, no matter how advanced our society becomes, will ever be able to replace a species with all its ecological marvels intact.

When we lose one of the finite life forms from the planet one outcome that is seldom considered is the spiritual impact to human society bereft of yet another of the flavors of uniqueness. It is still true, as E.O. Wilson said in 1998, that the "psychological benefits of natural ecosystems are almost wholly unexplored." The human animal is a seeker of intellectual engagement. Our need for stimulation is one aspect of mankind that sets us apart from other prescient creatures. Paralleling this requirement for stimulation is a need to feel individually special. This need for *specialness* can take any of several forms, but the one that has greatest bearing on the argument at hand is having novel experiences.

This is where the inherent worth of having things rarely found among us becomes important. An encounter with a rare animal and understanding the significance of that opportunity is one way to satisfy the need for unique experiences. As important as the event, is the knowledge to appreciate what they have experienced. The challenge to us, as resource professionals, is to insure that the possibility for such an experience is never lost and that the understanding of the experience and its significance has been made available.

Unique events interrupt the flow of the regular that can threaten to overwhelm us with the commonplace. They add unique flavors to a moment, a day, a year and, eventually a lifetime. Seeing something rarely glimpsed creates moments of wonder which add to our sense of belonging in the world. It reinforces our feelings of individual uniqueness. There have always been rare animals among us and we will always

need to have such miracles of nature among us. Otherwise we will be forced to go about our lives mired in the routine and predictable. The cost of preserving what is left to us dynamic and thriving should not be measured in dollars only, it should be measured against the awful price civilization will pay when these efforts fail. Without the regular and unpredictable delight of the extraordinary, we run the risk of becoming even more unbalanced than we already are. It is society's sanity that suffers when the chance for rare encounters is lost. Though the damage maybe more a psychological than physical, there maybe something to the "*we could be next*" argument after all. For with the disappearance of each life form we are ourselves somehow diminished. Human kind is left just that much less human than we were before. After too much has been lost our society may be reduced to the point we are no longer recognizable, particularly to ourselves.