A grain of hope in the desert

Title

The Arabian Oryx *Oryx leucoryx*, which was hunted to near extinction, is now facing a more secure future according to the latest update of the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species?. Its wild population now stands at 1,000 individuals. The Arabian Oryx, a species of antelope found only on the Arabian Peninsula, is locally known as Al Maha. It is believed the last wild individual was shot in 1972. This year, thanks to successful captive breeding and re-introduction efforts, the oryx has finally qualified for a move from the Endangered category to Vulnerable on the IUCN Red List?the first time that a species that was once Extinct in the Wild has improved by three categories. Although there are some successes, there are some alarming new findings. Of the 19 species of amphibian (frogs, toads and salamanders) that have been added to the IUCN Red List this year, eight are listed as Critically Endangered, including *Atelopus patazensis,* a species of harlequin toad from Peru, and *Dendrotriton chujorum,* a dwarf species of salamander from Guatemala. Amphibians remain one of the most threatened species groups with an estimated 41% at risk of extinction; the main threats they face include habitat loss, pollution, disease and invasive species. ?The Red List update tolls a warning that we are still cutting away at our own safety net - the amazing web of life that supports all humankind. But it can also help us start making the repairs that are so urgently needed?, says Dr Leon Bennun, BirdLife's Director of Science, Policy and Information. Biodiversity loss is one of the world?s most pressing crises, with many species declining to critically low levels. Numerous extinctions are taking place unnoticed, and the number of species classified as Critically Endangered (those at most severe risk of becoming extinct) is increasing. Estimations from the IUCN Red List indicate that extinctions are happening at anywhere from 100 to 1,000 times the ?background? or natural rate. The causes are many, including habitat destruction, land conversion for agriculture and development, climate change, pollution, illegal wildlife trade, and the spread of invasive species. In the case of New Caledonia?s endemic reptiles, which have been assessed for the first time, two thirds (67%) of species within this group for which there is sufficient data are at risk of extinction. Many of these reptiles are threatened by ongoing habitat loss and fragmentation as New Caledonia?s nickel mining industry continues to expand. This is compounded by the effects of introduced species; for example, deer and pigs damage remaining available habitat, and fire ants, which are invasive alien species, decimate lizard populations, leading to localised extinctions. ?The key to halting the extinction crisis is to target efforts towards eradicating the major threats faced by species and their environment; only then can their future be secured. The IUCN Red List acts as a gateway to such efforts, by providing decision makers with a goldmine of information not only on the current status of the species, but also on existing threats and the conservation actions required?, says Simon Stuart, Chair of IUCN?s Species Survival Commission. An assessment of all 248 lobster species has been completed, with 35% being classified as Data Deficient, including the Caribbean Spiny Lobster *Panulirus argus*. This species shows decreasing populations as a result of over-exploitation, but unfortunately very little else is known about it. An estimated 1.2 billion people worldwide rely on marine species for food and livelihoods, so obtaining reliable information on catch levels is essential. ?Conservation does work and species can recover, as shown in the case of the Arabian Oryx. Using data from the IUCN Red List, an opportunity exists for governments and society to guide conservation programmes to put the brakes on species extinctions?, says Julia Marton-Lefèvre, IUCN?s Director General. BirdLife International recently released the 2011 Red List update for birds on behalf of the IUCN. For more details click here