

Europe faces extinction of many species, EU says

May 16 2011, By DON MELVIN , Associated Press

(AP) -- The Iberian lynx that prowls the grasslands of southern Spain. The Mediterranean monk seal swimming waters off Greece and Turkey. The Bavarian pine vole that forages in the high meadows of the Alps.

These are among hundreds of European [animal species](#) - up to a quarter of the total native to the continent - that are threatened with extinction according to a warning issued this month by the European Union.

"Biodiversity is in crisis, with [species](#) extinctions running at unparalleled rates," said a statement from the European Union's Environment Commissioner, Janez Potocnik.

The threatened species include mammals, amphibians, reptiles, birds and butterflies. Plant life is under threat as well. The crisis is due to several factors, including loss of habitat, pollution, [alien species](#) encroachment, [climate change](#) and [overfishing](#).

Critics say the EU's proposed solutions don't go far enough and lack funding.

"Life is possible because of biodiversity," said Ana Nieto, with the International Union for Conservation of Nature. "Everything comes from biodiversity. Everything comes from having well-functioning ecosystems."

The crisis threatens humans as well, potentially wreaking economic and

social havoc in Europe, said Potocnik spokesman Joe Hennon.

The continuing loss of birds can allow insects to breed at alarming rates, harming crops, Hennon said. A reduced number of bees inhibits plant pollination. Diminishing forests mean water is not cleaned naturally and the soil is loosened, too, making floods and mud slides more likely.

All of that, Hennon said, means governments should spend money preserving species from extinction.

"People say, 'Yes, but we don't have the money to spend on environmental protection. Surely growth and jobs are more important,'" Hennon said. "You have to say, 'Well, look what happened in Pakistan last year. You can have catastrophic flooding because forests have been cut down. So it ends up costing you more in the long run.'"

The strategy proposed this month by Potocnik sets a variety of targets - among them, halting the loss of species in the European Union countries by 2020, putting management plans in place for all forests, restoring at least 15 percent of degraded ecosystems, controlling invasive species, and more.

Environmentalists have generally welcomed the targets but expressed skepticism.

"There needs to be funding and there's not really funding," said Nieto.

Hennon, the EU spokesman, acknowledged Monday that funding so far is insufficient to meet the EU's goals. A paper explaining the new proposals said the European Commission, the EU's executive arm, is "assessing the funding needs" for implementing the 2020 goals. The EU failed to meet its biodiversity targets for 2010.

The European Environmental Bureau, a confederation of grassroots environmental organizations, said the EU strategy "appears to fall short of delivering what is needed to protect Europe's valuable natural resource base."

Nieto said the loss of biodiversity is more acute in Europe than in many other parts of the world because of the scale of residential and industrial development. With an average of nearly 70 people per square kilometer (180 people per square mile), Europe is the second most densely populated continent, behind only Asia - and about three times as densely populated as North America.

"Today, biodiversity doesn't simply mean the protection of rare plants and species," said Sarolta Tripolzsky, with the European Environmental Bureau. "It's about protecting a system people rely on to live. The costs of replacing nature's free services would be devastating."

Conservationists argue that ecosystems over time find a complex balance and changing one seemingly small aspect can have significant consequences that cannot always be foreseen. They say there's also an obligation to preserve species, regardless of the consequences.

"The species was here before we were even here, so there's also a moral issue," Nieto said.

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