

# Celebrity pandas and tigers hog the extinction limelight

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(Phys.org) —Worldwide, around 20,000 endangered animal species are competing for scarce conservation funds – but just 80 'celebrity species' are hogging most of the attention.

The world has developed a very inefficient way of choosing which animals facing [extinction](#) to save, says Professor Hugh Possingham of the National Environmental Research Program's (NERP) [Environmental Decisions](#) Hub and The University of Queensland (UQ).

This has led to extinctions that could have otherwise been avoided, he cautions.

"Around 80 mammal species are used by international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to raise funds for conservation," Prof. Possingham says. "These flagship species, such as panda bears, tigers, lions and [rhinos](#), are charismatic and have high marketing appeal, leading to the success of sponsorship programs.

"However, if money is being raised for 80 charismatic species, what happens to the other 1,000 threatened mammal species and the 19,000 threatened plants, birds, reptiles, frogs, insects and obscure species?"

Prof. Possingham explains that conservation funds are usually spent 'within the neighbourhood' – most conservation dollars are spent within 100 kilometres of where they were raised.

Also, the choice of which species to save is often based on 'donor appeal' and the animal's closeness to extinction.

"So if you're an obscure animal or plant in a remote place, you have next to no hope of getting conservation resources," he says.

Prof. Possingham says that the way society chooses which species to save at the moment is not transparent and also is highly inefficient. As a result, he says, we risk losing a lot more animals and plants.

"For instance, [conservation efforts](#) are focussed on Europe and North America because they have the most resources, while places like Brazil, Mexico, Australia, Madagascar and Indonesia have the widest range of threatened species in need of help.

"There are also cases where we're spending a lot of money to save a species that's on its last legs – and could end up being extinct – when we could rescue several other dwindling animals or plants with much less funds."

While it's not possible to save all threatened species, a systematic approach in choosing which ones to save will help ensure that a limited budget can achieve the best outcome possible, Prof. Possingham says.

For instance, he says, it may be more efficient way to save a special habitat where many animals and plants live, instead of putting all the resources into rescuing one particular animal.

"Habitat loss affects over 2,000 mammal species. It is the greatest threat to biodiversity globally. As people identify more with a species than with a habitat, we can still choose some iconic animals or plants to 'represent' the area," Prof. Possingham says.

Another approach would be to extend the list of charismatic animals, Prof. Possingham says. "Flagship animals are generally large and have forward-facing eyes, and researchers suggest that there's another 180 threatened [mammal species](#) that have similar traits, and may have equal appeal to donors."

NERP researchers have also developed an evaluation method that allows governments to estimate the cost secure a particular species. It is currently used by New Zealand as well as Australia's New South Wales government in their conservation plans.

"We need to ask more questions and encourage public debate, such as why are we saving this particular animal instead of another. We need to ask for evidence from governments and NGOs non-government organisations to ensure that they have spent the money cost-effectively," Prof. Possingham says.

"We can also ask local councils if there are any threatened [animals](#) or plants nearby and how we can best save them. There may a small population locally which has national significance and can be saved with little effort or cost."

"Extinction rates are accelerating – we're losing species about 100 to 1000 times faster than the normal rate in evolutionary history," he says. "Half of all [species](#) will be gone in a few centuries if we don't act fast.

"The sad truth is we can't save everything with current funding levels, but we should demand that the available money achieves the greatest outcome possible."

Professor Possingham and Mr David Salt's article "Clash of the icons" is published in the journal *Decision Point*. See: [bit.ly/144qSxD](http://bit.ly/144qSxD)

Provided by NERP Environmental Decisions Hub

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