

Study shows need for increased protection of world's national animal symbols

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Source: N Hammerschlag & AJ Gallagher. "Extinction Risk and Conservation of the Earth's National Animal Symbols". *BioScience* (2017).

Infograph by Tatum Nugent

This is our national animal symbols. Credit: Tatum Nugent

The snowy-feathered head and distinctive brown body of the bald eagle

is a proud national symbol of the United States, adorning the country's currency and passports. The lion, known as "King of the Beasts," represents national strength and identity in several African countries.

But, how are populations of the planet's most valued wildlife fairing in the 21st century? How well are societies protecting the species they have chosen to embody their ideals and represent their national identity?

In a new study, scientists from the University of Miami (UM) Rosenstiel School of Marine and Atmospheric Science assessed the extinction risk and conservation status of all the world's national animal symbols. The 189 animal symbols assessed ranged from the lion and [bald eagle](#) to the turtle dove and common loon.

The analysis by UM researchers Neil Hammerschlag and Austin Gallagher found that an alarming 35 percent of the world's national animal symbols are threatened with extinction and 45 percent are experiencing population declines. They determined that the primary threats facing national animal symbols are killing for food, human-wildlife conflict, and habitat loss.

The researchers were surprised to find that only 16 percent of all symbols were receiving any sort of national protection within the country in which they are considered symbolic. They also found that populations of national animal symbols represented by North America and Australia-Oceania were faring better than those found within the African continent, which hosted the highest proportion of threatened animal symbols by geographic region.

"If current population trends persist, over 50 percent of national animal symbols may face future extinction," said the study's lead author Hammerschlag, a research assistant professor at UM's Rosenstiel School and Abess Center for Ecosystem Science & Policy. "This clearly shows

the opportunity for individual countries to protect their own national symbols."

The researchers analyzed data from the IUCN Red List to assess the threat and conservation status of national animal symbols, representing 127 countries, including some countries who share national symbols. The Africa lion, for example, is the national animal symbols of Morocco, Togo, Gambia, and Sierra Leone, although the lion already went extinct within the borders of these countries. Some countries, including the U.S. have taken specific conservation actions that have allowed populations of the once-threatened national symbol, the bald eagle, to recover and now thrive, demonstrating that these [animals](#) can be conserved with appropriate conservation action.

"Given the potential significance of animal symbols to national and personal identity, it may be relatively easy to garner public support and protection for these animals such that they may continue to function as not only a national symbol, but also a flagship species indirectly supporting the conservation of other species and their habitats," said study co-author Gallagher, an adjunct assistant professor at UM Rosenstiel School and director of the non-profit Beneath the Waves Inc.

"The results of the study pose a sobering question, if a country isn't able to conserve or protect its own national [symbol](#), what hope do any other species in that country have?" said Gallagher. "Local conservation initiatives may benefit from generating increased awareness of threats facing national animal symbols."

The researchers note that it may be relatively easy within a country to garner support for national animal symbols as flagship species if citizens become aware of the risks they face. "The fact that countries have been able to bring their national animal symbols back from near-extinction through strong [conservation](#) efforts is an important lesson and excellent

sign of hope for all nations," said Hammerschlag.

More information: Neil Hammerschlag et al, Extinction Risk and Conservation of the Earth's National Animal Symbols, *BioScience* (2017). [DOI: 10.1093/biosci/bix054](https://doi.org/10.1093/biosci/bix054)

Provided by University of Miami

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