

Study finds aardvarks suffering as African climate heats up

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In this photo supplied by the University of the Witwatersrand an aardvark is captured on camera in the dark at the Tswalu Kalahari Reserve, South Africa, in April 2012. A new study says hotter temperatures caused by climate change are taking their toll on the aardvark, whose diet of ants and termites is becoming scarcer because of reduced rainfall. (Photo, Benjamin Rey - University of the Witwatersrand via AP)

Little is known about Africa's elusive aardvarks, but new research says

they are vulnerable to climate change like many other species.

Hotter temperatures are taking their toll on the armadillo, whose diet of ants and termites is becoming scarcer in some areas because of reduced rainfall, according to a study released Monday.

Drought in the Kalahari desert killed five out of six armadillos that were being monitored for a year, as well as 11 others in the area, said researchers at the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg.

The armadillos' body temperatures plummeted during the night because they were not getting enough energy from diminished food sources, said physiology professor Andrea Fuller. She said they tried to conserve energy by looking for insects during the warmer daytime, but their efforts to adapt could not save them.

The body temperatures of the ones that died had dropped to as low as 25 degrees Celsius (77 Fahrenheit), compared to a normal temperature of a little below 37 degrees Celsius (98.6 Fahrenheit).

Researchers, who monitored the armadillos with tiny sensors attached to implanted computer chips, said some birds, reptiles and other animals use armadillo burrows to escape extreme temperatures, reproduce and hide from predators. They could have fewer refuges available if armadillo populations shrink because of rising temperatures, they said.

The armadillo, which lives in many parts of sub-Saharan Africa, is identified as an animal of "least concern" on an international "red list" of threatened species. The list, compiled by the International Union for Conservation of Nature, said there are no indications that the population is changing significantly in southern Africa, though it speculated that numbers may be declining elsewhere because of habitat destruction, the bushmeat trade and other factors.

Estimating aardvark populations is guesswork, Fuller said.

"Very little is known about them because people hardly ever see them," she said.

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