

These animal species are dear to us, but can we protect them?

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Credit: Martha de Jong-Lantink

Animal species that are dear to us in the Netherlands often spend a large part or all of their lifecycle in other parts of the world. But their habitats worldwide are under increasing pressure, are often inadequately protected and much poorer than the global average. "If we truly care about these animals, we must pay more attention to East Africa, and Central and South Asia," says Alexander van Oudenhoven, who co-authored a recent publication on this topic.

What exactly did you investigate?

"In the Netherlands, many people donate money to nature conservation organisations, in order to help protect animal species that we think should be protected, such as the African elephant, the godwit or the white-tailed eagle. But many of these [animals](#) spent a part or all of their lifecycle in other countries, due to the favourable climate, food resources or breeding habitats. We analysed which are the 150 most valued [animal species](#) in the Netherlands and Germany. We then analysed the range maps of their habitats, as well as the areas' human footprint and their economic and nature protection status."

Which animals are we talking about? And which one catches the eye the most?

"The more a species was mentioned in annual reports and campaigns of nature organisations, the higher we ranked their value to humans. The top 5 for the Netherlands looks like this:

1. African elephant
2. Black-tailed godwit
3. Common redshank
4. Shared place: Tiger, white-tailed eagle, Eurasian spoonbill, northern lapwing

All in all this represents an interesting mix of charismatic exotic species from far-away countries with typically Dutch birds, which spent much of their lifespan abroad. Especially the godwit stands out: for decades it has been an indicator species for our grasslands in the Netherlands. When the godwit returns to your farmland, local biodiversity seems to be on the way back. But we should be aware that the godwit overwinters in West Africa and/or Southwest Europe. The protection of the black-tailed godwit is therefore a matter of restoring the [natural](#) environment on the farmland, but also elsewhere in the world."

What steps can the Netherlands take to better protect these animals in East Africa, Central and South Asia?

"We have known for a while what the major threats to biodiversity are in our own countries, and how we can help out. But if we truly want to help protect the species that are dear to us, then we have to understand the situation across the border. Which are the critical ecosystems for those species and how can we protect or restore them? This can only be answered with the help of local knowledge, and funding through donations and governments is badly needed. Biodiversity is a common good, it belongs to the whole world, and the countries and organisations that can afford it should also help out beyond their own borders."

How can we make this happen?

"It often helps to visualise to the general public where certain species spend the winter or where their home ranges are. For instance, this animation of migrating bird species in the Americas, made in 2016, made a huge impression and thereby opened the eyes of several countries. It underlined that each and every country is responsible for the conservation of the tracked bird species. In addition, the concept of so-called ecosystem services can be a useful argument for biodiversity conservation. Most of our investigated species provide such services in the countries that they visit, for instance through pollination, pest control and cultural [ecosystem services](#) like bird watching and ecotourism."

Should NGOs pay more attention to this, or should governments act?

"Because NGOs tend to be a bit more "fluid" and flexible, it might seem logical to support the role of them in transnational nature conservation. However, and this has also been underlined in recent IPBES reports,

nature conservation is a global issue, and the importance of nature and biodiversity must be interwoven with policies on other existing sectors. Hence, the active commitment of governments and the private sector is critical for successful nature conservation."

Even after the curlew hunt was banned in France, concerns remain regarding the hunt on [bird species](#) in France that are protected in the Netherlands. Was this something you also looked in your research?

"Not specifically, no. Our approach was more global and not isolating one species. This allowed us to conclude that the areas that host our most highly valued [species](#) are substantially poorer than the [global average](#), are under immense pressure by land-use change and are often inadequately protected. This is something that the Netherlands should care about and help with."

More information: Matthias Schröter et al. Distant regions underpin interregional flows of cultural ecosystem services provided by birds and mammals, *Ambio* (2019). [DOI: 10.1007/s13280-019-01261-3](https://doi.org/10.1007/s13280-019-01261-3)

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