

Regionally Extinct and 175 as threatened; of the reptiles two species are categorized as Regionally Extinct and 136 as threatened; of the birds three species are categorized as Regionally Extinct and 146 as threatened; and of the mammals 169 are categorized as threatened. The main threats to China's vertebrates are human activities, habitat loss and overexploitation. For the mammals, overexploitation is the main threat, with 116 mammal species affected, followed by human interference and habitat loss.

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### **A little-known blackbuck population in Chennai's suburban forests**

The blackbuck or Indian antelope *Antelope cervicapra* is a medium-sized ungulate now endemic to India (it is Regionally Extinct in Bangladesh and Pakistan). It has been placed under Schedule I of the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972, and is categorized as Near Threatened on the IUCN Red List.

Blackbuck formerly occurred across almost the whole of the Indian subcontinent but have disappeared from many areas as a result of habitat destruction through conversion to agricultural use.

In Tamil Nadu, the southernmost state in which blackbuck survive in the wild, there are a few widely separated populations. An additional group of blackbuck was discovered recently by KN in Chennai's suburban forests, in Thaiyur Reserve Land, c. 40 km from Tambaram, in Kanchipuram District. One adult male, one adult female and four juveniles were discovered in July 2014. In a subsequent visit three adult males, nine adult females, 11 juveniles and three fawns were seen.

Discussions with local people indicated that 200–250 blackbuck may inhabit this 8 km<sup>2</sup> degraded area. Further research is required within and around the Reserve Land to assess the population's size. Blackbuck inhabit grasslands that are relatively open, with short grass, and avoid thick cover. In Tamil the blackbuck is called *veli maan* (antelope of the open areas). The species is well adapted to semi-desert habitat and can tolerate heat and drought. Thaiyur Reserve Land is, however, threatened by urbanization and neighbouring industries, and the traffic on the nearby Thaiyur–Kelambakkam road is a direct threat to blackbuck. There is a need for immediate action from the appropriate authorities to take the necessary steps to conserve this population of blackbuck, which is one of the few thriving populations of the species outside protected areas in Tamil Nadu. This is also an opportunity: Thaiyur Reserve Land and the blackbuck could serve as an ecology laboratory

for local students and could be used to educate the suburban public about conservation.

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### **The rare Kolar leaf-nosed bat**

India is home to 117 species of bats, of which only two species are included in the Wildlife Protection Act (1972). Bats in India are subjected to great pressures: they are hunted and eaten for their supposed medicinal properties, their roosting sites are marauded and burnt because of superstitious beliefs, and their habitats are destroyed to accommodate the ever-growing human population and other development activities.

The Endangered Kolar leaf-nosed bat *Hipposideros hypophyllus* is endemic to Kolar district, Karnataka, and is known from only two localities: Hanumanhalli and Therahalli. Since its description in 1994 this species had not been sighted and its conservation status was unknown. With the help of funding from The Mohamed bin Zayed Species Conservation Fund we conducted two surveys (during November–December 2013 and April–May 2014), to locate roosts and to conduct nocturnal acoustic monitoring, in both localities. We located a subterranean cave, the type locality of the species, on a granite hill in Hanumanhalli village, and were successful in mist-netting the species there. We estimate that this population may number no more than 200 individuals. We found the species sharing its roost with five other species of bats. In Therahalli, although we located a subterranean cave and other potential roost sites, we were not successful in finding the species. The cave at Hanumanhalli is threatened by illegal granite-mining activities in the immediate vicinity. Two other roost sites that we found on the same hill had been abandoned by bats.

Based on our findings, we recommend that the Red List category of the Kolar leaf-nosed bat is changed from Endangered to Critically Endangered. As there is only one known roost site, urgent steps need to be taken to halt nearby mining and quarrying activities. Failing this, the species will inevitably become extinct in the near future. Following a discussion with the Divisional Forest Officer of Kolar district, stone quarrying activity in the vicinity of the subterranean cave at Hanumanhalli has been halted, and the matter is now under further discussion with the appropriate authorities.

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### Enhancing conservation science capacity in India: first decade of the Master's programme in wildlife biology and conservation

India is a mega biodiverse country but, with a human population of 1.2 billion and aspirations for further economic growth, conservation of this biodiversity faces huge challenges. A decade ago, identifying the need for strong academic programmes to train conservation professionals, the Wildlife Conservation Society collaborated with the National Centre for Biological Sciences of the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research to initiate a Master's degree programme in wildlife biology and conservation, comprising cutting-edge course modules taught by practising scientists and conservationists, followed by a dissertation. The programme trains a cohort of 15 students every 2 years, and the fifth cohort graduated in September 2014. In all, 74 budding conservationists have graduated in the programme's first decade. Their field research has spanned multiple species and ecosystems in 20 Indian states, and alumni of the course now form the core of many academic and conservation institutions. The alumni have engaged in practical conservation initiatives, driving both policy and practice in India by setting high standards of research and science-based conservation. The sixth cohort of 15 students began their training in July 2014.

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### Does the tiger image on medicinal plasters create the wrong impression among consumers and hinder conservation efforts?

The tiger *Panthera tigris* is listed in Appendix I of CITES. In 1993 China banned all trade in tiger bones, and subsequently manufacturers of medicinal plasters stopped using tiger bone and musk as ingredients in tiger-bone plaster, which was renamed musk bone-strengthening plaster. Nonetheless the image of the tiger is still commonly used on plaster packaging, although tiger bone is not listed as an ingredient. In a survey carried out among urban residents in China 38% of respondents claimed to have used tiger-bone plasters (Gratwicke et al., 2008, *PLoS ONE*, 3(7), e2544). However, the number of people who actually used tiger bones may be overestimated, as people may have been misled by the tiger's image printed on the package.

In a questionnaire survey carried out in Beijing in July–August 2014, we found that 44% of respondents (183 of 418) alleged they had used tiger-bone plasters. Of these, 179 indicated there was an image of a tiger on the plaster packaging. However, 167 of these users confirmed that the plasters they had used were musk and bone-strengthening or other types of plasters rather than tiger-bone plasters. Only three users alleged that the plasters they had used were tiger-bone plasters but they were unsure whether the products actually contained ingredients from tigers.

Although few respondents, if any, had used plasters containing tiger bone, people are more likely to choose plasters printed with tiger images than those without tiger images. The manufacturers are using the tiger image to take advantage of brand effect. The tiger image fosters and reinforces habitual thinking that the plasters still contain tiger bone. To protect tigers and deter consumption motivations that trigger tiger poaching and illegal trade, we recommend that the manufacturers should remove the tiger image from musk and bone-strengthening plaster and related products, following the regulations of CITES.

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