

The need for wildlife surveys

Discoveries of new species, or rediscoveries of species that had not been seen for decades, are always pleasing and can be one of the rewards of working in often difficult conditions. In this issue, the News and Views section reports two ongoing surveys where important new species records have been made. Each survey is shedding light on the fauna and flora of an area important for the conservation of tropical biodiversity, one in Sumatra and one in Nigeria.

An FFI survey in Kerinci Seblat National Park in the Indonesia island of Sumatra has been continuing since 1995. Even at the start, new species records were being made regularly. These were mainly of bird species, observation alone increasing the number of bird species recorded for the park from 161 to 210, but the new records included a spectacular parasitic *Rafflesia*, which is shown on the front cover of this issue. When the FFI team started to use photo-trapping techniques, new records accumulated more rapidly. Birds and mammals never before or seldom photographed in the wild were captured on film. Photographs of two of the cats recorded by this method are reproduced in this issue and more will be published in the April issue of our newsletter *Fauna & Flora News*.

In the Niger Delta area of Nigeria, a wildlife survey that started in 1993 has added about 15 mammals, including new taxa and country records, to those known from and expected in the area. It has also revealed species distributional patterns that make it necessary to challenge former assumptions about appropriate conservation measures to conserve the delta's wildlife richness and diversity.

Broadly based but thorough surveys can provide information that can be used as a basis for persuasive arguments for protecting an area and developing appropriate management plans. They are only the first step, but they are becoming more and more vital if conservationists are to provide the best solutions to conserve biodiversity. With so much habitat being lost there is little room for error today: deciding on the precise areas that should be given protection from logging, farming or

development can be a matter of life or death for some species.

Unfortunately, there is sometimes no time for any sort of survey if a threat to an area is too imminent. Sometimes surveys have to be carried out in a short period of time, as part of an environmental impact assessment. There are at least two problems with these. They are often funded by those with a development interest, which perhaps affects how the findings are used, and they need to be conducted rapidly. While rapid assessment methods are being developed, they are no substitute for the surveys that produce the detailed and precise information that is necessary to make the very best conservation recommendations. In an ideal world, of course, there would be a ready source of free money available to carry out comprehensive surveys in areas of conservation interest before any threats arise.

Given the vital importance of surveys, it is not surprising that many of the applications for grants submitted to the FFI 100% Fund are for survey work of some kind. Unfortunately, the Fund is limited in extent and we often have to turn down good projects for lack of money. An appeal to FFI members meant that in February the FFI Conservation Committee was able to agree funding for surveys for dormice in Lithuania, saiga antelope in Mongolia and a rare highland salamander in Kazakhstan, among others. These and other surveys are so important to conservation efforts that a way has to be found to give them the priority and assistance that they deserve. We are working on it.

This has turned out to be quite a survey-dominated issue, with three main papers dealing with surveys on threatened species: the Mongolian gazelle, the Pemba flying fox (which was funded in part by an FFI 100% Fund grant) and the Sumatran rhinoceros. This latter survey was part of wider work that won the BP Conservation Expedition Award 1994, another mechanism by which FFI, in collaboration with BirdLife International and BP, helps to ensure essential conservation-oriented survey work is done.

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