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What Is A Species, When Is It Endangered, And How Does It Affect The Herpetologist ?

Definitions

Firstly we must ask, 'What is a species?' According to the Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary (Fourth Edition 1989), a species is a 'group of animals or plants within a genus differing only in minor details from the others, and able to breed with each other but not with other groups'.

On that basis all Carpet and Diamond Snakes *Morelia spilota* are clearly of the one species. On the other hand it appears that Desert Death Adders *Acanthophis pyrrhus* and Northern Death Adders *Acanthophis praelongus* are separate species as no populations appear to hybridise either in the wild or in captivity. Some herpetologists have in recent times attempted to 'create' new species by using a minor difference/s to separate individual populations of a widespread species. The creation of the Bredli's Python *Morelia bredli* by Gow (1981) was one such example. Besides being wrong in terms of abusing the well-accepted species concept, the 'splitting' of species only serves to add confusion for taxonomists, conservationists and others. Perhaps the most graphic illustration of 'species creation' in this country was a pair of papers by Richard Wells

and Ross Wellington, when they used and abused rules of taxonomy to create an enormous range of 'new' species, (Wells and Wellington 1983, 1985).

Although the two men did in some cases give names to previously undescribed species, they did in the main declare certain variants of well-known species as new species on the basis of the most tenuous of evidence. Some of these 'new' species were in fact only isolated populations of widespread species, and were only declared as species on the basis of their distribution. To declare a group of animals a species solely on the basis of distribution is simply incorrect. Extrapolating the same logic to humans we could justifiably declare Fijians a different species to Samoans, who would be different to Hawaiians, and so on.

It would be hard to see Alan Thorne accepting such a proposition!

I mention the above, only to come to the next question, which is, when is a species endangered?

Returning to the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, (Fourth Edition 1989), we get the definition as 'in danger of becoming extinct'. As we now know that the Earth as we know it will probably cease to exist in another 10-50 billion years, it would be fair to assume the every species on earth will eventually become extinct, but clearly the term 'Endangered' can't be used for all species.

The definition used by myself in the book *Endangered Animals of Australia* and the IUCN, runs as roughly as follows:

'Species in danger of extinction and whose survival is unlikely if the factors causing their endangerment continue operating.'

This includes species whose numbers have been reduced to a critically low level or whose habitats have been so drastically reduced that they are deemed to be in immediate danger of extinction.

Using the above widely accepted criterion of what is endangered, it is fairly clear cut as to which species are or are not endangered. It is only in the cases of a few species where people could conceivably debate whether or not they could be classified as endangered.

The term 'threatened' is sometimes loosely applied to species under any kind of threat, not necessarily extinction, and is often confused with the term 'endangered'. However both terms are very different and shouldn't be confused.

A Diversion Of Resources

Now readers may be asking, 'What has this all got to do with reptiles and the interests of ACTHA members?' I'll now explain.

By virtue of their status, endangered reptiles receive greater 'protection' than other species. This may mean restrictions on keeping them and greater Penalties if caught doing so illegally.

However what happens when a common reptile is endangered? and why would anyone want to do this?

Early this year, DCE (Victoria) officials nabbed some kids who trapped some reptiles in Queensland and were selling them to keepers in Victoria. Wildlife officer Graeme Bowley told the *Herald-Sun* (reported on 11th Jan.), that among the reptiles seized was an 'Endangered' Lace Monitor. Lace monitor - Endangered? As far as I recall these lizards are as common as rabbits across a wide part of Eastern Australia. Why call these endangered?

The 'official' was clearly playing a game with the media and the victim of his department's raid. The public would be wrongly led to believe that department officials were protecting Australia from those pillaging our endangered fauna, thereby rescuing them from the brink of extinction.

In actual fact, all that the department officials were doing was perverting the term 'endangered' in order to justify their own existence and the laws they served to uphold. Although I cannot condone the activities of the kids that were busted, we must keep things in perspective. Had they not been nabbed the conservation status of the Lace Monitor, or any other reptile they had, would NOT have been adversely affected by their activities.

Another press clipping from a few years ago which I cannot offhand recall for citation purposes, declared the Brown Tree Snake endangered when describing another bust by wildlife officials. Since when? Besides being found throughout a wide part of Asia and Australia, the last I heard about that snake was that it had been certified as a pest in Guam and elsewhere where it had been introduced, because they were overrunning the Islands and eating the indigenous birds.

Also recently the Telegraph-Mirror (Sydney) (11th Sept. 1991), ran a piece about a parcel addressed to Australia from the United States, intercepted by customs which had among other animals, a juvenile Ball Python *Python regius*. The officials didn't hesitate to declare it 'endangered', no doubt to heighten the shock value of their bust and it's ramifications.

Putting things in perspective, last year about 18,000 of these snakes were legally exported from Togo, West Africa, where these snakes occur in huge numbers and are most certainly not under threat. Not only do herpetologists have the options to buy any of these thousands of legal imports, but they also can buy many of the snakes bred within the United States, including striped and albinos.

Had the parcel and another twenty like it made it to Australia, there would have been no risk to the

snake species in question, nor any risk of Ball Pythons escaping and over-running the Australian bush.

Again it seems that the declaring the Ball Python 'endangered', and all the laws associated with guarding against illegal trade in the species in this country, seem more concerned with protecting the jobs of the officials rather than the wildlife concerned.

Who magazine (3/8/92) details the foiling of a major bird smuggling ring in three states, when some Americans got caught trying to export Major Mitchell's and Regent Parrots. Again customs officials declared the birds 'endangered' contrary to the above definitions, presumably to maximise shock value of their efforts and to maximise the penalties imposed under the federal laws the men were charged under. The birds may be sought after and very expensive in the United States, but endangered they are not.

Unfortunately all the resources diverted towards protecting these so-called 'endangered' animals should be used to protect those species that really are endangered. If just half the money used in the mis-directed efforts to protect common species were switched to truly endangered species, it is doubtful that any would ever become extinct. This statement is not to be taken as ignoring the very good work done by the Endangered Species Unit of ANPWS, and similar government and non-government agencies and individuals. But I'm sure these people would be able to do more if their budgets were doubled!

Now if the above appears to readers that I've picked out a few isolated cases to support my argument, I don't mean to disappoint. The problems with officials declaring common animals, including reptiles, 'endangered' for all the wrong reasons is simply huge.

A perusal of 'official' endangered animals lists put by various state wildlife departments will confirm this. Innumerable common species are seen listed as 'Endangered'. Now I don't believe these wildlife officials who compile these lists are completely stupid. There has to be more to it than that. What motives make these officials declare common species endangered can only be guessed.

Schedule 12

Early in 1992, I received a copy of the New South Wales National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS), 'Endangered Fauna' list, also known as 'Schedule 12'. Besides the usual inconsistencies in terms of

inclusion of some sub-species and exclusion of others, the most striking feature of the list was the inclusion of a large number of common species, including a number of reptiles. Clearly the list had been compiled with minimal consultation with herpetologists and other wildlife experts and/or their advice was ignored.

Well aware of some of the questionable past enforcement activities and corruption within sections of the service, since confirmed by three officers within the service, I looked at the list with the utmost caution. (In reference to the last sentence I refer readers to a tape recording of evidence by former NPWS/NSW officer Clive Bennett to the ICAC/NSW). Among the reptiles listed as 'Endangered' was the Carpet Python *Morelia spilota*. This was the same snake that in 1973, NPWS officials had declared as being one of only two species common enough to be kept legally without a permit.

Now not only had the conservation status of the snake not deteriorated appreciably over the past 20 years, but in view of radio telemetry studies by Dr Richard Shine, David Slip, Peter Harlow and others, the species had been found to be far more common than previously thought.

Why had the NPWS gone against all wisdom and declared the snake endangered? I immediately saw red. It is well known that there are far more unlicensed snake keepers in New South Wales than licensed ones. Furthermore it is my estimation that at least one in two of these keeps Diamond or Carpet Pythons (the same species), as they are by far the most common Python in New South Wales and nearby parts of other states, in particular Queensland and perhaps the most suitable and sought after captive snake in New South Wales.

What NPWS had in effect done was made the potential penalties faced by these illegal keepers far worse. This is because to be busted keeping an endangered animal is far worse than to be busted keeping protected animals that are not endangered. Now all this wouldn't be so bad, if and I repeat if, NPWS actually issued permits to keep reptiles. Unfortunately more often than not, including at the moment, NPWS officials seem to have a 'ban' on issuing permits to reptile keepers, in particular so-called amateurs.

The situation plays into the hands of NPWS enforcement officials in that reptile people who try to do the right thing and get a permit for their reptiles, will if refused a permit, usually go out of 'the law' and keep the reptiles without a licence (illegally). NPWS people know this and their

current policy actually gives them a never ending supply of people to bust having reptiles illegally. They simply refuse an applicant a permit and then raid them a few months later. The officials have a huge chance of getting a haul of illegally held reptiles. With Carpet snakes being listed as 'endangered', NPWS officials can now wield even more power over many reptile people, in terms of what they may or may not prosecute them for.

If you want to know how all this aids in the conservation effort of reptiles and Carpet Pythons in particular, I'll tell you. IT DOESN'T!

Why the above situation arose is subject to debate, but there are only two feasible arguments, both of which have been suggested by various People including wildlife officers themselves.

The simplest argument is that the above situation acts to justify the jobs of licensing and enforcement personnel who in conservation terms really aren't needed in their current numbers. The more cynical argument is that by declaring Carpet and more importantly Diamond Pythons as 'endangered' prices for these snakes in foreign countries rises and so smugglers within NPWS can make more money selling snakes they have seized. Specific allegations of this nature involving seizures by NPWS personnel including within the last three years are currently before the ICAC/NSW.

The NPWS/NSW policy in terms of licensing and enforcement has been a problem for reptile people in that state for many years and is unlikely to be resolved in the short term. An RKA/NSW submission on the matter of about 150 pp in 1985 got nowhere. However the removal of Carpet Pythons from Schedule 12 should in theory be more simple.

The Campaign

Although not resident in NSW since 1985, I still take an interest in conservation matters in that state and took it upon myself to mobilise action against putting Carpet Snakes on Schedule 12.

Phone calls to reptile people in Sydney on March 22nd revealed unanimous disgust at Carpet Snakes being on Schedule 12, but at that stage no action being taken in relation to it. I immediately sent a two page letter to Dan Lunney, The bureaucrat with the power to decide what does or doesn't get declared 'Endangered' in New South Wales. I explained why Carpet snakes and a number of species should be removed from the schedule 12 list. Letters went out to wildlife experts for their support. The result was gratifying.

The man who is almost certainly THE expert on Carpet snakes, Richard Shine, sent a six page letter to NPWS explaining why Carpets (and Diamonds) are not endangered and how using all accepted criteria numerous other reptiles including the Red-bellied Black Snake *Pseudechis porphyriacus* are more endangered, and in Rick's words 'who the hell would say that the Red-bellied Black is endangered?'

The then president of the AHS, Lothar Voight who certainly had his heart in the right place, decided the AHS would not take any action against the inclusion of Carpets on Schedule 12 because he 'didn't want to embarrass NPWS'. When I mentioned this to a herpetologist fauna officer in Victoria, he laughed and commented, 'You guys are your own worst enemies'. When Chris Williams became president of the society, that policy changed and representations were made to NPWS to get Carpets off Schedule 12.

Other experts such as Peter Harlow and John Weigal also threw their weight into the campaign against Carpets going on Schedule 12.

So far, it is uncertain whether or not the campaign for the removal of Carpet Snakes from the NSW 'Endangered List' will be a success. I would advise ACTHA members to take a strong interest in this matter due to the immediate proximity of NSW to the ACT. The herpetologists and reptiles of NSW need all the help they can get in this matter. Interested persons may write a letter to :

NPWS/NSW,

Attention Dan Lunney,

The Scientific Committee, Endangered Fauna,

PO BOX 1967, HURSTVILLE, NSW, 2220.

It would also be wise to send a copy of the correspondence to

The Minister For the Environment,

Parliament House,

Macquarie Street, Sydney, NSW, 2000.

Once carpet snakes are off the Endangered List, perhaps we about measures to save what's left!

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