

Snails are slowly dying

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Concerns raised over disappearing species

Swiss experts have been sounding the alarm over the devastating consequences of the loss of the world's flora and fauna.

It is estimated that around 100 species become extinct each day worldwide - a threat which also affects Switzerland.

It is difficult to imagine a meadow without flowers or a lake without fish, but voices are warning that this may become a reality.

"The earth's biodiversity is in grave danger," Nicolas Wüthrich, a spokesman for the environmental non-governmental organisation Pro Natura, said. "It's got to the stage where some experts are talking about the number of species being halved by 2050."

Industrialisation, urbanisation and exploitation of resources have all accelerated the damage to nature and the countryside and have disturbed the delicate balance of ecosystems.

These man-made changes have been so sudden and so brutal that animals and plants have not been able to adapt quickly enough.

The introduction of invasive alien species, which tend to spread at the cost of indigenous ones, has made the problem worse. "These organisms manage to undermine indigenous species without too much difficulty. Moreover, they can cause diseases unknown at our latitudes, as well as considerable damage to agriculture," Wüthrich said.

"The rainbow trout, for example, is a fish of American origin whose presence in our rivers endangers the survival of our local trout."

It is estimated that alien species have been a contributing factor in around 40 per cent of animal extinctions.

According to the International Union for Conservation of Nature, alien species make up the second largest threat to biodiversity, after changes of habitat caused by man.

More than 220 species of flora and fauna have become extinct or disappeared in Switzerland over the past 150 years. Almost half of local animal life is currently on the red list of endangered species and more than a third of ferns and flowering plants, as well as moss and lichens, are considered "at risk".

The state of the biodiversity in Switzerland varies from one region to another. Nature is particularly rich in the mountains, forests and in some sparsely inhabited areas, but vegetation is becoming increasingly uniform in the plains and pastures.

In Switzerland the legal basis for the conservation and management of biodiversity exists, but it is often difficult to apply. There is a lack of funds and staff and there are long delays in applying regulations. The species on the red list are still threatened and it is therefore imperative to draw up a new action strategy.

The dying out of species can also be a natural phenomenon. Earth has already witnessed five mass extinctions, the last of which dates back 65 million years. But the present rate of flora and fauna loss is unprecedented.

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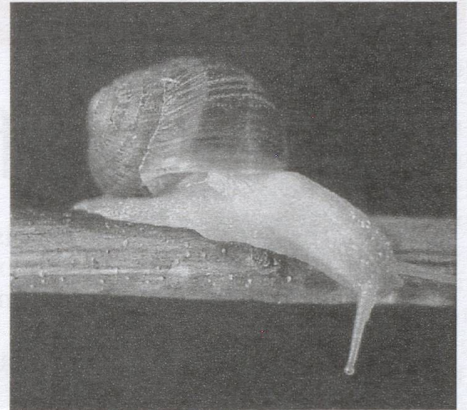
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One-third of snail species in Switzerland are threatened by extinction, the Swiss Association for the Protection of Birds has warned.

The updated red list of snails, due to be published in 2010, will show that two more species have become extinct since 1994.

There are around 200 species of land snails in Switzerland and 50 species of water snails. Around 80 of these are endangered.



The group said that despite their reputation as pests, snails are an important part of the food chain, and also contribute to the fertility of the soil. It attributed their decline to a number of factors, including habitat loss and climate warming.

BirdLife is currently overseeing Swiss participation in a European census of two common types of snails, which is due to run until September.

Members of the public have been asked to participate in the survey. The Swiss have proved enthusiastic snail observers: although they account for only two per cent of the population of Europe they have so far supplied ten per cent of the observations.

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Trudi's comment: Hm, in my garden the snails are still plentiful, but they may be from the same family. Plenty of food for the birds!