

### Gorilla deaths show tourists should keep their distance

Respiratory disease has become the second biggest killer of gorillas after poaching. About 700 mountain gorillas live in two separate populations, one in Uganda and the other in a region that straddles Rwanda, The Democratic Republic of the Congo and Uganda. An investigation of deaths dating back to 1968 found that 40 were due to trauma, of which poaching is almost always the cause in adults and 24 to the effect of respiratory diseases, including influenza A and parainfluenza viruses. To cut the risk of people passing these disease on, tourists who trek to see the gorilla already have to stay at least 7 m away, and keep their visits to no more than one hour. The populations are closely monitored but their overall numbers are small.

Source: *New Scientist* (2005), 187(2507), 17.

### Mauritius highway threatens flagship site

Work has begun on a road that could devastate part of the forest heartland of the Mauritius Kestrel *Falco punctatus*, one of the world's flagship conservation success stories. The south-eastern highway will pass through the Mauritius east coast mountains Important Bird Area, cutting a swathe through some of the last remaining good quality forest in this part of Mauritius. This kestrel was once the world's rarest bird but from near extinction in the 1970s its population has grown to 800–1000 individuals, thanks to a captive breeding and reintroduction programme. The south-eastern forest is home to half the world population, centred around the Ferney Valley, where the first reintroductions took place. Ferney Valley is in the path of both proposed routes for the new highway. The road is funded by the African Development Bank. The Mauritian Wildlife Foundation has been lobbying both the government and the Bank to consider alternative routes, or at very least to ensure that harm to the biodiversity of the area is minimized.

Source: <http://www.birdlife.org/news/news/2005/05/mauritius.html>

### Africa bargain key site conservation

The cost of conservation work in all of Africa's protected wildlife sites has been found to be a fraction of the amount spent by governments and consumers in other areas. Research by BirdLife

International's African network and the African Protected Areas Initiative shows that just USD 300 million annually would cover the minimum costs of managing Africa's 1,200 national parks and reserves, compared to USD 51 billion on EU farm subsidies and USD 450 million on UK arms subsidies. Worldwide, shoppers spend USD 26 billion on dog and cat food and, in Europe, USD 11 billion on ice cream. Africa was chosen for the BirdLife study because it has substantial development needs but also a wide range of wildlife. The continent was also selected because biological resources there provide food, medicine and many sources of income.

Source: <http://www.birdlife.org/news/news/2005/06/cbd.html>

## South and South-east Asia

### Tsunami damage enhanced by coral theft

Illegal removal of coral along Sri Lanka's coastline increased the amount of destruction wrought on the island by the tsunami of December 2004. The tsunami reached significantly farther inland through gaps caused by illegal removal of coral. The coral is mined to provide souvenirs for tourists or to be ground up for use in house paint. Coral harvesters sometimes blow the reefs up with dynamite in order to collect fish at the same time.

Source: *Nature* (2005), 436, 1071.

### Storm protection function of mangroves in India

A study of the ecosystem services provided to three villages by the Bhitarkanika mangrove ecosystem in India was examined by looking at the effects of cyclones. The economic loss incurred per household as a result of cyclone damage was greatest in the village that was not sheltered by mangroves but had an embankment, followed by the village that was neither in the shadow of mangroves or the embankment, and least in the village that was protected by mangrove forests.

Source: *Environmental Conservation* (2005), 32(1), 85–92.

### Threats to the greater one-horned rhino in India

Pabitora Wildlife Sanctuary in Assam, north-eastern India, has the highest

density of the Indian or greater one-horned rhinoceros *Rhinoceros unicornis* anywhere in its range. The area, dominated by moist savanna grasslands, was designated a wildlife sanctuary in 1987. With c. 80 rhinos Pabitora is an important habitat for this Endangered species. However, the area is facing serious threats such as encroachment, road construction, overgrazing, poaching, high floods and increasingly heavy tourism.

Source: *Pachyderm* (2005), 38, January–June, 82–88.

### Snow melt causes large ocean plant blooms

A decline in winter and spring snow cover over South-west Asia and the Himalayas is creating conditions for more widespread blooms of ocean plants in the Arabian Sea. The decrease in snow cover has led to greater differences in both temperature and pressure systems between the Indian subcontinent and the Arabian Sea, generating monsoon winds that mix ocean water in the western Arabian Sea. This leads to better growing conditions for phytoplankton, which have increased by more than 350% in the past 7 years. Increases in phytoplankton can lead to oxygen depletion in the water column and eventually to a decline in fish populations.

Source: *Marine Pollution Bulletin* (2005), 50(6), 615.

### Tigers vanish from Indian reserves

Tigers have completely vanished from Sariska Tiger Reserve, the closest to new Delhi, since mid 2004. Tigers are also missing in Ranthambhore reserve, and 30 have disappeared in the last 3 years from the Panna Tiger Reserve. The Prime Minister called an emergency meeting of the National Board for Wild Life and set up a Task Force to propose action to tackle the situation. He also decided to establish the long delayed National Wild Life Crime Prevention and Control Bureau and ordered the Central Bureau for Investigation to investigate the disappearances. The Ministry of Environment and forests announced that an all India Tiger Census would take place in November, with cooperation from independent and international experts, including from IUCN. The report of the Task Force, delivered in August, concluded that humans are the main danger to tigers, and recommended that villages be moved away from tiger habitat.

Source: *Cat News* (2005), 42, 4; *New Scientist* (2005), 187(2512), 5.