



The Rt Hon Lord Goldsmith of Richmond Park  
Minister of State for Pacific and the Environment  
Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs  
2 Marsham Street  
SW1P 4DF

3<sup>rd</sup> December 2020

Dear Minister,

We, the undersigned, are writing to you at a moment of profound and immediate crisis for our planet. The United Nations' most recent Global Biodiversity Outlook Report has shown that humanity has failed to achieve the 20 global biodiversity targets set a decade ago – only six have been partly met.

We know that on a personal and political level you are acutely aware that global biodiversity faces a series of complex and interlinked challenges. We are keen to work with you and all interested parties to achieve our mutual objective of turning the tide of biodiversity loss, in order to safeguard our planet for future generations.

As you know, the destruction of natural habitats and the unrelenting extinction of species deprives us not only of the colour and splendour that they bring to our lives — the undeniable, inherent value of their existence — but also of the understated yet essential role they play in nature's contributions to humanity. These include the food we eat and the air we breathe; medicines, resources and technology from and inspired by nature; the enhancement of our local and national economies; and the as-yet unknown options for humanity as highlighted by the Intergovernmental Panel on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES).

While the threats to biodiversity are pervasive, they are particularly acute for those irreplaceable species that represent our world's evolutionary heritage. With no or few close relatives, Evolutionarily Distinct and Globally Endangered [EDGE] species represent entire branches of the Tree of Life, making them unique in the way they look, live and behave. Globally, we stand to lose ~50 billion years of evolutionary history across terrestrial vertebrates alone.

The extraordinary nature of such unique species means that they act not only as testament to our planet's evolutionary story, but comprise the rich diversity of life that is a storehouse of benefits for us and future generations. These benefits can range from the regenerative healing abilities in *Ambystoma* salamanders, to ecosystem engineers. We are already inherently drawn to the uniqueness of well-known distinct species such as the giant panda, great apes, elephants and rhinos. Yet, despite this, many of the world's most distinctive species remain overlooked by policymakers and conservationists alike. If they disappear, there will be nothing like them left on the planet.

All EDGE species are threatened with extinction, including those found here in the United Kingdom, and beyond in its Overseas Territories and Crown Dependencies. However, though 94% of UK biodiversity exists in our Overseas Territories, there continues to be a significant gap in funding and attention for terrestrial species in these regions. This situation offers the UK a unique opportunity: to demonstrate global guardianship for all evolutionarily distinct and overlooked species.

The UK has already achieved some EDGE species conservation successes, both here and overseas. For example, the UK has played an important role in reintroducing the Northern Bald



Ibis back into Europe, bringing the Mauritian Round Island Keel-scaled Boa back from the brink of extinction and maintaining seed banks for species such as the Bermuda Cedar — as well as supporting a range of international projects through Darwin Initiative funding. In Wales, the Angelshark is protected under UK legislation and is the focus of conservation attention by a collective of NGOs, communities and the Welsh Government. However, the once common Atlantic Puffin has actually become more threatened in recent years. Although the UK is committed to supporting biodiversity, it is now essential that we go further — and fast.

As a leader in global environmental initiatives, the UK has the power to make a difference. The forthcoming fifteenth meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity (COP15) presents a historic opportunity to achieve global transformative change, and the UK will have a pivotal role to play in delivering a strong global commitment to biodiversity in a revised framework.

**We therefore call on you, Minister, to ensure that at COP15 the UK Government negotiates for the conservation of our evolutionary heritage, through protecting evolutionarily distinct species across the Tree of Life. Specifically, this includes:**

- **Incorporating a focus on evolutionary history into Species Goals and Targets, to demonstrate the value of this aspect of biodiversity as a global concern; to include:**
  - **Adopting the Phylogenetic Diversity indicator (as used by IPBES)<sup>1</sup>, which tracks our impact on the planet's evolutionary heritage, as an effective measure for valuing biodiversity in Nature's Contributions to People**
  - **Adopting the EDGE indicator<sup>1</sup>, tracking the conservation status of our most evolutionarily distinct and threatened species, and informing Parties on where to enhance conservation attention for these overlooked species**
- **Incorporating the value of evolutionary history and conservation of EDGE species into the UK's national biodiversity strategies, and mobilising resources for their conservation. For example: through Darwin Initiative funding allocations, and increased resources towards terrestrial diversity in the Overseas Territories.**

Failure to act now will have untold consequences for our shared future on this planet. The UK pushing for these objectives is integral to the fight against global biodiversity loss and environmental degradation — and would play a crucial role in rebuilding a healthier world.

We hope that we can rely on your support in this vital endeavour.

Yours Sincerely,

Dr Nisha Owen, Director of Conservation, On the EDGE Conservation

Dr Matt Walpole, Senior Conservation Director, Fauna & Flora International

Ali Hood, Director of Conservation, The Shark Trust

Kirsty Schneeberger MBE, Chief Executive Officer, Synchronicity Earth

Dr Andrew Terry, Director of Conservation and Policy, Zoological Society of London

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<sup>1</sup> The production of these two indicators has been committed to by the IUCN SSC Phylogenetic Diversity Task Force.



Olivia Couchman, EDGE Programme Manager, Zoological Society of London

Professor Alexandre Antonelli, Director of Science, Kew Gardens

Dr Mike Pienkowski, Chairman, UK Overseas Territories Conservation Forum

Nida Al-Fulaij, Grants Manager, People's Trust for Endangered Species

Dr Lesley Dickie, Chief Executive Officer, Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust