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Elaine Paterson, IUCN Media Relations, t+44 1223 331128, email elaine.paterson@iucn.org

Goska Bonnaveira, IUCN Media Relations, m +41 792760185, email goska.bonnaveira@iucn.org

[In Japan]

Cheryl-Samantha MacSharry, IUCN Media Relations, t+44 1223 331128, email samantha.macsharry@iucn.org

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Unsustainable food systems threaten wild crop and dolphin species

Tokyo, Japan, 5 December 2017 (IUCN) – Species of wild rice, wheat and yam are threatened by overly intensive agricultural production and urban expansion, whilst poor fishing practices have caused steep declines in the Irrawaddy Dolphin and Finless Porpoise, according to the latest update of The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species™. Today's Red List update also reveals that a drying climate is pushing the Ringtail Possum to the brink of extinction.

Three reptile species found only on an Australian island – the Christmas Island Whiptail-skink, the Blue-tailed Skink (*Cryptoblepharus egeriae*) and the Lister's Gecko – have gone extinct, according to the update. But in New Zealand, conservation efforts have improved the situation for two species of Kiwi.

“Healthy, species-rich ecosystems are fundamental to our ability to feed the world's growing population and achieve the UN Sustainable Development Goal 2 – to end hunger by 2030,” says IUCN Director General Inger Andersen. “Wild crop species, for example, maintain genetic diversity of agricultural crops that can adapt to a changing climate and ensure food and nutritional security. Today's IUCN Red List update raises the alarm about their decline and stresses the urgency to address it – for the sake of our own future.”

Unsustainable agriculture and urbanisation threaten wild crop species

Twenty-six species of wild wheat, 25 species of wild rice and 44 species of wild yam have been assessed for The IUCN Red List, many for the first time, thanks to funding from the IUCN–Toyota strategic partnership to expand knowledge of threats to global biodiversity. In total, three species of wild rice, two species of wild wheat and 17 wild yam species are threatened. Deforestation and urban expansion alongside pressures from intensive agriculture, particularly over-grazing and extensive use of herbicides, are the primary threats to these species.

Cross-breeding modern crop cultivars with crop wild relatives adds necessary genetic diversity, improving resistance to drought, disease and pests – all of which are likely to become increasing problems in a changing climate. A recent study has found that almost three-quarters (72%) of crop wild relatives are not adequately preserved in gene banks and conservation *in situ* in the wild remains challenging. Crop wild relatives are highly economically valuable, contributing US\$115 billion annually to the global economy, and there is potential to significantly expand this in future.

“The genetic diversity provided by crop wild relatives will allow us to develop more resilient crops in the era of climate change, helping ensure food security. We ignore the fate of these species at our own peril,” explains **Nigel Maxted, Co-chair of the IUCN SSC Crop Wild Relative Specialist Group**. *“Assessing crop wild relatives for The IUCN Red List gives us in-depth information on the threats these species face.*

Thanks to the new assessments, we can now act systematically to conserve crop wild relatives by reducing overly intensive agricultural practices such as overgrazing and indiscriminate herbicide use.”

Climate change threat to Australian Ringtail Possum

Australia’s increasingly dry and hot climate has led to a dramatic decline of the Western Ringtail Possum (*Pseudocheirus occidentalis*), which has moved from Vulnerable to Critically Endangered due to a fall in species numbers by over 80% in the past ten years.

The Possum was once widespread in peppermint (*Agonis flexuosa*) and tuart (*Eucalyptus gomphocephala*) forests in Western Australia, but is now limited to fragmented coastal habitats. Attempts to re-establish the species in Lane-Poole Conservation Park, about 100 km south of Perth, have failed largely due to poor food quality resulting from a drying climate. Western Ringtail Possums require relatively high quality food – particularly peppermint leaves – due to their specialised digestive systems.

The Western Ringtail Possum is susceptible to heat stress and can overheat at temperatures above 35°C, increasingly common in this part of Australia. Possum numbers have also been impacted by urban development and predation from the Red Fox (*Vulpes vulpes*) and feral cats (*Felis catus*), logging, fire outbreaks and inappropriate fire management regimes.

Asian dolphin and porpoise species threatened by unsustainable fishing

The Irrawaddy Dolphin (*Orcaella brevirostris*) and Finless Porpoise (*Neophocaena asiaeorientalis*) have both declined, moving from the Vulnerable to the Endangered category. Numbers more than halved over the past 60 years for the Irrawaddy Dolphin, and over the past 45 years for the Finless Porpoise.

Both species live only in shallow waters near shore, and both have populations confined to freshwater systems, which makes them extremely vulnerable to human activities. They are prone to accidental entanglement in non-selective fishing nets – the primary cause of their decline. Further causes of decline include the overfishing of prey and habitat destruction.

*“The Irrawaddy Dolphin is revered by many communities and dolphin tourism is an important feature of local economies in parts of India and Cambodia,” says **Randall Reeves, Chair of the IUCN SSC Cetacean Specialist Group.** “While the protected status of both species means that deliberate hunting or capture is rare or non-existent, protection from entanglement and other threats is either lacking entirely or largely ineffective. Without practical solutions to this problem, the declines of dolphins and porpoises are bound to continue for the foreseeable future.”*

In the Mekong River, the majority of Irrawaddy Dolphin deaths in recent years have been caused by entanglement in gillnets – ‘curtains’ of fishing net that hang in the water. Gillnets are the largest global threat to marine mammals. Efforts to ban or at least manage their use have, in many areas, been ineffective, resulting in declines of many species of whales, dolphins and porpoises, including the Critically Endangered Vaquita porpoise (*Phocoena sinus*) and the Baiji dolphin (*Lipotes vexillifer*), which is listed as Critically Endangered but likely already Extinct.

Invasive species and habitat loss pushing Japanese reptiles towards extinction

One third of the 46 endemic Japanese snakes and lizards newly assessed for The IUCN Red List are listed as threatened. Populations of these reptiles are small and fragmented, which increases their vulnerability to changes in habitat. Across Japan, species declines have been accelerated by habitat loss resulting from unsustainable agriculture and urban development. Collection for the pet trade and threats from invasive species, such as the Indian Peacock (*Pavo cristatus*) and the introduction of the Japanese Weasel (*Mustela itatsi*) to some of the smaller Japanese islands, are also to blame.

Now listed as Critically Endangered, the Kikuzato’s Stream Snake (*Opisthotropis kikuzatoi*), endemic to Kumejima Island and the rarest of all snakes in Japan, was relatively common until the mid-1990s. This species declined dramatically over the past 15 years due to predation from the invasive Bullfrog (*Lithobates*

catesbeianus), Japanese Weasel and Indian Peacock, with the snake's small and fragmented range accelerating the decline. Pollution and incidental capture as bycatch have also impacted species numbers.

Similar threats also affect the Banded Ground Gecko (*Goniurosaurus splendens*), endemic to Tokunoshima Island and Miyako Grass Lizard (*Takydromus toyama*), endemic to the Miyako Islands, both of which enter The IUCN Red List as Endangered. Funding from the IUCN–Toyota partnership has enabled the assessments of these Japanese reptile species.

Mysterious extinctions on Australia's Christmas Island

Three reptile species endemic to an Australian island have gone extinct in the wild – Lister's Gecko (*Lepidodactylus listeri*) – and two scincid lizards, the Blue-tailed Skink (*Cryptoblepharus egeriae*) and the Christmas Island Forest-skink (*Emoia nativitatis*).

Overall, populations of Christmas Island reptiles have declined rapidly since the 1970s. While the reason for their decline remains unclear, predation by the invasive Wolf Snake (*Lycodon capucinus*), introduced to the island in the mid-1980s may be to blame. The introduction of a novel disease and changes in island ecology following the introduction of the Yellow Crazy Ant (*Anoplolepis gracilipes*) may have placed further pressure on these reptile species. Efforts to establish a captive breeding programme for the Forest Skink failed in 2013 and the species has now been moved from Critically Endangered to Extinct. Although captive breeding populations are now well-established for the Lister's Gecko and the Blue-tailed Skink, both species have been declared Extinct in the Wild.

Island populations of endemic species are particularly susceptible to decline due to their small populations, limited genetic diversity, lack of immunity to novel diseases and naivety towards introduced predators, according to the Red List.

Kiwi species recover as conservation efforts pay off

Intensive predator control on small New Zealand islands has led to the re-categorisation of the Okarito Kiwi (*Apteryx rowi*) and the Northern Brown Kiwi (*Apteryx mantelli*) from Endangered to Vulnerable, according to today's Red List update.

Both species of Kiwi have been facing threats including habitat loss and predation by introduced mammals, such as stoats (*Mustela erminea*) and feral cats. The Northern Brown Kiwi is also threatened by predation from ferrets (*Mustela furo*) and dogs.

Government and community conservation efforts have focused on predator control, and removing and incubating eggs for release into the wild. The Okarito Kiwi has increased from 160 individuals in 1995 to between 400 and 450 adults today. Overall, Northern Brown Kiwi populations are estimated to be growing by over 2% per annum, although unmanaged populations continue to decline.

The re-categorisation of the Kiwis forms part of a wider assessment of New Zealand birds, which highlights that many endemic species are in decline, often as a result of invasive species.

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For more information or interviews please contact:

Elaine Paterson, IUCN Global Species Programme, t +44 (0)1223 881128, email elaine.paterson@iucn.org

Goska Bonnaveira, IUCN Media Relations, m +41 792760185, email goska.bonnaveira@iucn.org

Cheryl-Samantha MacSharry, IUCN Media Relations, t +44 (0)1223 881128, email samantha.macsharry@iucn.org – based in Japan for the week commencing 04/12/17

Notes to editors

IUCN–Toyota Partnership: Funding from the five-year partnership between IUCN and Toyota Motor Corporation has enabled the addition of both the crop wild relatives and Japanese reptiles to The IUCN Red List. This partnership is driven by the Toyota Environmental Challenge 2050, which aims to reduce the negative impacts associated with automobiles to zero and beyond, whilst simultaneously making positive impacts on society.

Examples of other species that have been added in this update

Bhutan Endemic Plants: Almost all (99%) of Bhutan's endemic plants have been added to The IUCN Red List for the first time. Of the 125 species added, almost a quarter are considered as threatened, mostly as a result of habitat loss and degradation (mainly from urban expansion and infrastructure development) and unsustainable harvesting. Threatened species include two Critically Endangered orchid species (*Oreorchis sanguinea* and *Cheirostylis sherriffii*), threatened by road widening and land use change, and the Endangered *Neopicrorhiza minima*, a plant used locally in traditional medicine for treating colds and minor ailments, which is threatened by unsustainable harvesting.

Birds: Over one-quarter (26%) of the 238 bird species reassessed for the latest IUCN Red List update have been uplisted to higher threat categories and 28% of bird species have been downgraded to a lower threat category. The Maccoa Duck (*Oxyura maccoa*), native to parts of south and east Africa, has been uplisted from Near Threatened to Vulnerable due to a 30-49% decline in numbers; pollution, entanglement in gillnets and habitat loss from agriculture and urban development are all to blame. Worrying new information from the North American Arctic lists the iconic Snowy Owl (*Bubo scandiacus*) as threatened for the first time. The Owl jumps from Least Concern to Vulnerable, with its population – which is much smaller than previously thought – declining by 30-49% in three generations. Climate change is among a number of threats to the species, affecting snowmelt which in turn reduces availability of rodent prey. In Asia, the once-abundant Yellow-breasted Bunting (*Emberiza aureola*) has been uplisted from Endangered to Critically Endangered; prior to 2004 this species was listed as Least Concern. Illegal trapping of the Bunting for food in China is a key threat. More positive news comes from the Galapagos (Ecuador), where the population of Floreana Mockingbird (*Mimus trifasciatus*) has recovered sufficiently to be downlisted from Critically Endangered to Endangered following a succession of successful breeding seasons.

More details on the New Zealand birds will be issued by BirdLife International, the IUCN Red List authority on birds, on 12 December. For more details about the BirdLife International press release on 12 December, please contact Shaun Hurrell, BirdLife Communications Officer, +44 (0)1223 747555, email shaun.hurrell@birdlife.org

Supporting quotes

“Healthy biodiversity is increasingly important to human wellbeing and food security as we face the challenges of climate change. By supporting The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species, Toyota is helping conserve the growing number of species at risk of extinction, including the newly assessed crop wild relatives and Japanese reptiles,” says **Mr. Toshio Niimi, Executive General Manager, Toyota Motor Corporation.** *“These new assessments of wild rice, wheat and yam species will help ensure we can adapt our crops to a changing climate, while the reptile assessments will help preserve Japan’s unique biodiversity from looming threats such as habitat loss and invasive species.”*

“The extinctions of two reptiles on Christmas Island are an intriguing ‘whodunit’, as their cause remains unclear,” says **John Zichy-Woinarski, Professor of Conservation Biology at Charles Darwin University, Australia and IUCN Commission Member.** *“These extinctions remind us how crucial it is to identify the primary causes of species decline, to inform robust monitoring and conservation programs for threatened and declining species. In this case, the extent and severity of decline was revealed too late to save these Christmas Island reptiles.”*

Quotes from IUCN Red List Partners

“Invasive alien species were the major driver of bird extinctions in recent years, and continue to impact hundreds of threatened species, particularly on islands,” states **Dr Ian Burfield, Global Science Coordinator, BirdLife International.** *“Fortunately, the Kiwi downlistings show that there is hope. New Zealand is a world leader in tackling invasive species, and has developed techniques that have been adapted and used successfully all over the world. What we need now are more resources to scale up these efforts and deploy them on many other islands, before it is too late.”*

“After years of working to protect marine mammals, it is of great concern to see the recent dramatic declines in several species of dolphins and porpoises,” states **Dr Thomas E. Lacher, Jr. from Red List Partner Texas A&M University and Member of the IUCN Red List Committee.** *“The likely extinction of the Baiji dolphin, the highly urgent Critically Endangered status of the Vaquita, and the decline in status of the Irrawaddy Dolphin and the Finless Porpoise from Vulnerable to Endangered should be a wake-up call that the threats to Cetaceans continue, requiring our continued vigilance. Most importantly it reinforces the need for aggressive conservation action.”*

“The finless porpoise is primarily threatened by anthropogenic impacts such as coastal development and fisheries bycatch,” says **Leah Gerber, Director of ASU’s Center for Biodiversity Outcomes, IUCN’s newest Red List partner.** *“Because they have a ‘slow’ life history (i.e., long gestation, late sexual maturity), finless porpoises are slow to respond to conservation interventions. Acting now is critical to the persistence of the only species in the Genus Neophocaena and the most basal living member of the porpoise family.”*

“Wild yams gave us the steroids used to make the original contraceptive pill and are seasonal starchy staples in Madagascar and

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elsewhere. Their cultivated cousins that were domesticated from wild yams feed around 100 million people in Africa alone,” says **Paul Wilkin, Head of Natural Capital & Plant Health and yam researcher at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew**. “Conservation of crop wild relatives (CWRs) such as yams is being undertaken by RBG Kew and other organisations to make sure that these plants are available to provide food and medicines worldwide, now and in the future. They will also be sources of key traits to breed improved, future-proof crop varieties. These assessments enable the most threatened species of yams and other CWRs to be prioritised effectively for conservation actions.”

Global figures for the 2017-3 IUCN Red List of Threatened Species:

TOTAL SPECIES ASSESSED = 91,523

(Total threatened species = 25,821)

Extinct = 866

Extinct in the Wild = 69

Critically Endangered = 5,583

Endangered = 8,455

Vulnerable = 11,783

Near Threatened = 5,967

Lower Risk/conservation dependent = 219 (this is an old category that is gradually being phased out of The IUCN Red List)

Least Concern = 44,148

Data Deficient = 14,433

The figures presented above are only for those species that have been assessed for The IUCN Red List to date. Although not all of the world's species have been assessed, The IUCN Red List provides a useful snapshot of what is happening to species today and highlights the urgent need for conservation action. Relative percentages for threatened species cannot be provided for many taxonomic groups on The IUCN Red List because they have not been comprehensively assessed. For many of these groups, assessment efforts have focused on threatened species; therefore, the percentage of threatened species for these groups would be heavily biased.

For those groups that have been comprehensively assessed, the percentage of threatened species can be calculated, but the actual number of threatened species is often uncertain because it is not known whether Data Deficient (DD) species are actually threatened or not. Therefore, the percentages presented above provide the best estimate of extinction risk for those groups that have been comprehensively assessed (excluding Extinct species), based on the assumption that Data Deficient species are equally threatened as data sufficient species. In other words, this is a mid-point figure within a range from x% threatened species (if all DD species are not threatened) to y% threatened species (if all DD species are threatened). Available evidence indicates that this is a best estimate.

The IUCN Red List threat categories are as follows, in descending order of threat:

Extinct or Extinct in the Wild

Critically Endangered, Endangered and Vulnerable: species threatened with global extinction.

Near Threatened: species close to the threatened thresholds or that would be threatened without ongoing conservation measures.

Least Concern: species evaluated with a lower risk of extinction.

Data Deficient: species for which there are insufficient data to determine extinction.

Critically Endangered (Possibly Extinct): this is not a new IUCN Red List category, but is a flag developed to identify those Critically Endangered species that are in all probability already extinct but for which confirmation is required; for example, through more extensive surveys being carried out and failing to find any individuals.

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About The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species™

The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species™ (or The IUCN Red List) is an invaluable resource to guide conservation action and policy decisions. It is a health check for our planet – a Barometer of Life. It is the world's most comprehensive information source on the global conservation status of plant, animal and fungi species. It is based on an objective system for assessing the risk of extinction of a species should no conservation action be taken.

Species are assigned to one of eight categories of threat based on whether they meet criteria linked to population trend, population size and structure and geographic range. Species listed as Critically Endangered, Endangered or Vulnerable are collectively described as 'Threatened'.

The IUCN Red List is not just a register of names and associated threat categories. It is a rich compendium of information on the threats to the species, their ecological requirements, where they live, and information on conservation actions that can be used to reduce or prevent extinctions. The IUCN Red List is a joint effort between IUCN and its Species Survival Commission, working with its IUCN Red List Partners – Arizona State University, BirdLife International; Botanic Gardens Conservation International; Conservation International; NatureServe; Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew; Sapienza University of Rome; Texas A&M University; and Zoological Society of London.
www.iucnredlist.org <https://www.facebook.com/iucn.red.list> <https://twitter.com/IUCNRedList> <http://support.iucnredlist.org/>

About IUCN

IUCN is a membership Union uniquely composed of both government and civil society organisations. It provides public, private and non-governmental organisations with the knowledge and tools that enable human progress, economic development and nature

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conservation to take place together. Created in 1948, IUCN is now the world's largest and most diverse environmental network, harnessing the knowledge, resources and reach of more than 1,300 Member organisations and some 10,000 experts. It is a leading provider of conservation data, assessments and analysis. Its broad membership enables IUCN to fill the role of incubator and trusted repository of best practices, tools and international standards.

IUCN provides a neutral space in which diverse stakeholders including governments, NGOs, scientists, businesses, local communities, indigenous peoples organisations and others can work together to forge and implement solutions to environmental challenges and achieve sustainable development. Working with many partners and supporters, IUCN implements a large and diverse portfolio of conservation projects worldwide. Combining the latest science with the traditional knowledge of local communities, these projects work to reverse habitat loss, restore ecosystems and improve people's well-being. www.iucn.org <https://twitter.com/IUCN/>

About the Species Survival Commission

[The Species Survival Commission](#) (SSC) is the largest of IUCN's six volunteer commissions with a global membership of around 7,073 experts. SSC advises IUCN and its members on the wide range of technical and scientific aspects of species conservation, and is dedicated to securing a future for biodiversity. SSC has significant input into the international agreements dealing with biodiversity conservation.

About Arizona State University (ASU)

Ranked #1 in the US for innovation, Arizona State University (ASU) is a new model for American higher education, combining academic excellence, entrepreneurial energy and broad access. It serves more than 70,000 students in metropolitan Phoenix, AZ. ASU champions intellectual and cultural diversity, and welcomes students from all fifty states and more than one hundred nations across the globe. ASU's Center for Biodiversity Outcomes (CBO) is a partnership between the Julie Ann Wrigley Global Institute of Sustainability (GIOS) and the School of Life Sciences (SoLS) via partnerships with NGOs, companies and governmental organisations. Follow CBO's work on [Twitter](#) (@BiodiversityASU).

About BirdLife

BirdLife International is the world's largest nature conservation Partnership. Together we are 120 BirdLife Partners worldwide – one per country – and growing, with almost 11 million supporters, 7,000 local conservation groups and 7,400 staff. As the official Red List Authority for birds for the IUCN Red List, BirdLife coordinates the process of evaluating all of the world's bird species against the Red List categories and criteria, in order to assess their extinction risk. Find out more about BirdLife and its Preventing Extinctions Programme at: www.birdlife.org

About Botanic Gardens Conservation International

There are an estimated 2,500 botanic gardens and arboreta in the world attracting 500 million visitors each year. Collectively, it is estimated that botanic gardens conserve at least one third of the world's plant species in their living collections. Botanic Gardens Conservation International (BGCI) is the pivotal centre of this network. Our members include the largest, most renowned gardens on the planet – Kew, New York, Missouri, Singapore, Sydney and Shanghai – but they also include many smaller gardens situated in the world's plant diversity hotspots. All of these member gardens share a commitment to making sure that no plant species becomes extinct, and a combined workforce of many thousands of horticulturalists and scientists is working towards that end. In short, we are the largest plant conservation network in the world.

About Conservation International (CI)

Building upon a strong foundation of science, partnership and field demonstration, CI empowers societies to responsibly and sustainably care for nature, our global biodiversity, for the long term well-being of people. Founded in 1987 and marking its 25th anniversary in 2012, CI has headquarters in the Washington DC area, and 900 employees working in nearly 30 countries on four continents, plus 1,000+ partners around the world. For more information, please visit www.conservation.org, or follow us on Facebook or Twitter.

About NatureServe

NatureServe is a non-profit conservation organisation dedicated to providing the scientific basis for effective conservation action. Through its network of 82 natural heritage programmes and conservation data centres in the United States, Canada and Latin America, NatureServe provides a unique body of detailed scientific information and conservation biodiversity expertise about the plants, animals and ecosystems of the Americas. www.natureserve.org

About the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew

The [Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew](#) is a world famous scientific organisation, internationally respected for its outstanding collections as well as its scientific expertise in plant diversity, conservation and sustainable development in the UK and around the world. Kew Gardens is a major international and a top London visitor attraction. Kew's 132 hectares of landscaped gardens, and Kew's country estate, Wakehurst, attract over 1.5 million visits every year. Kew was made a UNESCO World Heritage Site in July 2003 and celebrated its 250th anniversary in 2009. Wakehurst is home to Kew's Millennium Seed Bank, the largest wild plant seed bank in the world. Kew receives approximately just under half of its funding from Government through the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) and research councils. Further funding needed to support Kew's vital work comes from donors, membership and commercial activity including ticket sales.

About Sapienza University of Rome

With over 700 years of history and 110,000 students, Sapienza is the largest university in Europe, the second in the world after El Cairo: a city within the city. The University includes 11 faculties and 67 departments. In Sapienza there are over 4,500 professors, and 5,000

administrative and technical staff. Sapienza offers a wide choice of courses including 300 degree programmes and 200 specialised qualifications. Students coming from other regions are over 30,000 and the foreign students are over 7,000. Sapienza plans and carries out important scientific investigations in almost all disciplines, achieving high-standard results both on a national and on an international level. Eugenio Gaudio has been the Rector of Sapienza University since November 2014. <http://www.uniroma1.it/>

About Texas A&M University

From humble beginnings in 1876 as Texas' first public institution of higher learning, to a bustling 5,200-acre campus with a nationally recognised faculty, Texas A&M University is one of a select few universities with land-grant, sea-grant and space-grant designations. With an enrolment of about half men and half women, 25 per cent of the freshman class are the first in their family to attend college. Here, 39,000-plus undergraduates and more than 9,400 graduate students have access to world-class research programmes and award-winning faculty. Texas A&M has two branch campuses, one in Galveston, Texas, and one in the Middle Eastern country of Qatar. This research-intensive flagship university with 10 colleges was recently ranked first in the nation by *Smart Money* magazine for "pay-back ratio" (what graduates earn compared to the cost of their education). The *2011 U.S. News and World Report* ranked Texas A&M second nationally in their "Great Schools, Great Prices" category among public universities and 22nd overall. Many degree programmes are ranked among the top 10 in the country. www.tamu.edu

About the Zoological Society of London (ZSL)

Founded in 1826, the Zoological Society of London (ZSL) is an international scientific, conservation and educational charity: the key role is the conservation of animals and their habitats. The Society runs ZSL London Zoo and ZSL Whipsnade Zoo, carries out scientific research at the Institute of Zoology and is actively involved in field conservation in over 50 countries worldwide. www.zsl.org