

Cat manifesto

1. Preamble

1.1 Cats have been part of the environment, culture and mythology of human beings for thousands of years. The lion, in particular, has been widely used as a symbol of royalty and state to the present day. In pre-Colombian civilisations in Mexico and Central America, the jaguar had high ritual significance. The tiger has figured in the art and culture of the great civilisations of Asia. Domestic cats were revered in ancient Egypt, and in many countries today they rival the dog as a beloved companion of man.

1.2. Nevertheless, almost all species of wild cats are declining seriously in numbers because of human impact; some subspecies are already extinct; and others are on the brink of extinction.

1.3. The extinction of species of wild cats would be an inestimable loss to the world, not least because of their ecological role as predators. It behoves us to make every effort to prevent it, because human activities are largely responsible for their deteriorating status.

2. Why Cats Should Be Conserved

2.1. Human beings have no right to eliminate other species. Indeed, in view of the extent of human domination of the natural environment, we have a responsibility and obligation to all species and to our descendants to perpetuate their existence. Extinction is forever.

2.2. The decline of a carnivore generally alters the ecological balance of its biological community. Cats are linked through predation to herbivores, which are, in turn, linked to each other through competition and to plant communities by their foraging. They are particularly sensitive to environmental disturbance, and the decline or disappearance of these vulnerable cat species serves as an indicator of changes in their ecosystem, which may be the result of natural phenomena or, as is increasingly the case in present times, of the impact of human activities. These changes frequently involve a deterioration in the human environment, such as the loss of forests and grasslands and their valuable animal and plant products, or impairment of water supplies essential to human life and agriculture. Furthermore, large cats, being at the pinnacle of the food chain, need considerable space, and are, therefore, key species in determining the area required to define an appropriate ecosystem.

2.3. In addition to the ecological consequences of the disappearance of these carnivores, many people feel a sense of inner loss when such magnificent and mysterious animals are gone from the wild.

3. Problems Faced by the Cats

3.1. Accelerating loss of habitat has now reached a critical stage as the human population continues to soar. In many cat ranges, remaining habitat represents but a small percentage of what existed in the past, and what remains could be wiped out in the near future.

3.2. Cats have long been hunted. They are killed because they have been viewed as competitors for prey. They are killed because they have taken livestock. They are killed for sport, and their body parts are used in some places as medicine. Young cats are captured for pets. And some, especially spotted cats, are killed for the fashion trade, which has often led to over-exploitation.

3.3. At the same time, the disappearance of natural prey has frequently deprived cats of their normal sustenance and contributed to conflict with humans and their livestock, leading inevitably to reprisal killing of cats, often including those not actually involved.

3.4. Where cat populations have been reduced to small numbers they are increasingly vulnerable to extinction due to fortuitous local events, such as epidemics, fires and floods. Some scientists also fear the possibility of deterioration through inbreeding depression and loss of genetic diversity in the long term, which might reduce the ability of small populations to adapt to changes in their environment.

4. The Decline of the Cats

4.1. Cat populations have long been in decline and today every indicator suggests that declines are accelerating and have reached, in some cases, a critical stage.

4.2. The Asiatic lion is a classic example of decline because of human impact. Ranging 2,000 years ago from Asia Minor to Central India, it was hunted and exterminated, so that by the beginning of this century only a few survived in India's Gir forest. Fortunately, conservation efforts have succeeded in maintaining a lion population in the Gir, but it is confined to this single habitat, and thus is still dangerously vulnerable.

4.3. In 1947 the last recorded Asiatic cheetahs in the Indian sub-continent were shot. The subspecies still survives in Iran, but only in small numbers in fragmented habitat.

4.4. The Bali tiger is thought to have already become extinct before 1940, and during this present decade of the 1980s, its neighbour, the Javan tiger appears to have passed into oblivion. No trace of the Caspian tiger has been found for several decades, and reports suggest that the Amoy tiger, which is endemic to China, is on the verge of extinction, and that other subspecies of tiger may have vanished from the wild there by the end of the century.

4.5. The Indian or Bengal tiger had declined to dangerously low numbers by 1970, but has recovered as a result of dedicated, internationally-supported conservation programmes implemented by the Indian and Nepalese governments. Nevertheless, it will remain vulnerable unless these programmes continue.

4.6. Among the small species, the Iriomote cat, endemic to a Japanese island east of Taiwan, is nearly extinct because of destruction of its habitat and human over-exploitation of its natural prey.

4.7. These examples of the decline of the cats and of suitable habitat are representative of the general situation throughout their world range.

5. Problems of Cat Conservation

5.1. There is still only limited knowledge of the distribution, numbers, biology and behaviour of almost all species of cat. Research to increase understanding of these factors is essential to the planning and implementation of effective conservation measures.

5.2. Economic planners and decision-makers often fail to recognize the importance for human welfare of wild lands, including ecosystems of which cats are part. Consequently, development programmes are carried out with little or no consideration of the longer-term impact, which may result in the decline and extinction of many species, including cats, as well as impoverishing the human environment.

5.3. As a result of increasing fragmentation of habitat and the pressure of human activities in their vicinity, large cats may become problem animals, particularly through livestock predation, and in rare cases taking human life. Demands may then arise for elimination, not only of the offending animals, but of all the large cats in the area.

5.4. Insufficient resources are made available to pursue necessary research, and to implement protective measures and conservation management of natural habitats of cats, often because of failure to recognize their ecological significance and through lack of political will.

6. How Cats Can Be Conserved

6.1. Protected habitats of sufficient size and productivity to support viable populations of cats must be preserved, and linking corridors maintained wherever possible.

6.2. The distribution of each species and the habitat available to it needs to be established in detail down to the level of discrete populations.

6.3. Legislation to ensure long-term conservation of cat species and their prey, including controls on trade, national and international, must be passed and enforced.

6.4. Conservation of cats has to be reconciled with the needs of humans. Some conflict may be inevitable in areas where agriculture or livestock farming impinges on cat habitats, but it should be minimized by appropriate management measures. For many cats, and particularly large cats, parks and reserves may not be adequate. Land-use patterns in adjacent areas need to be designed so that they are compatible with use by both humans and cats.

6.5. Local people must feel that efforts are being made to protect their interests. Information about the role of cats and ways to conserve them should be part of conservation education at all ages and levels of the community, including the politicians, officials, industrialists and businessmen who are the decision-makers.

6.6. Captive propagation programmes should be considered as an important precaution to serve as a genetic and demographic reservoir, which could, in appropriate circumstances, be used to reinforce wild populations.

6.7. All these measures should be included in an overall conservation strategy for each species to ensure its survival.

7. Conclusions

7.1. Species need not be lost provided action is taken to conserve them. Experience has shown that seemingly desperate situations can be reversed, if protection is given to species and their ecosystems.

7.2. The Cat Specialist Group is pledged to do all in its power to achieve the conservation of all cat species, and appeals for the cooperation of all people to ensure that these magnificent animals continue to coexist with humans as they have through the