

Private Members' Business

More than 105 species, subspecies or populations of plants and animals are listed as threatened or endangered and more than 111 are considered vulnerable. It is our problem too. We can count ourselves very fortunate to have not only the hon. member for Davenport working on the problem but also the Minister of the Environment.

In the modern world, species extinction is alarming not because it happens but because of why it happens and the rate at which it happens. In the days of the dinosaurs species disappeared at the rate of roughly one every thousand years. By the Middle Ages extinction rates began to accelerate rapidly because of increasing human intervention in the environment. Between 1600 and 1900, as human beings learned to kill more and more efficiently, species were lost at a rate of one every four years. In the years between 1900 and 1975 the disappearance rate climbed to about one species per year. Today biologists estimate human beings destroy from one to three species per day. Some predict that by the end of the century the rate will have accelerated to one per hour and that up to 15 per cent of all species now on earth will be gone.

Protecting the species that are threatened today entails far more than merely restricting hunting and trapping. In our modern, industrialized world habitat destruction and environmental contamination are the most hazardous perils to our endangered species.

• (1815)

Each of them is far more deadly and more subtle than the gun or trap and far more difficult to control. Canada's wildlife habitats are vanishing very quickly.

Millions of hectares of marshes, swamps and other wetlands which are extremely important for waterfowl and as breeding grounds for fish have already been destroyed.

In the interests of what we thought was progress they have been drained or filled in for highways, airports, housing and industrial complexes. They have been absorbed by expanding farmlands and flooded behind large power dams. Forests have been cleared and grasslands have been fenced off, ploughed under or paved over.

Too many of Canada's wetlands have already been lost. Up to 71 per cent of prairie wetlands have been degraded by agricultural practices. In southern Ontario over 70 per cent of wetlands have been lost. The problem of wetlands is particularly serious. A dramatic decline in the waterfowl population is taking place.

Canada's modern lifestyle with its heavy dependence on industrial, household and agricultural chemicals also poses a serious risk to endangered species. Modern society puts species in jeopardy in many ways. Acid rain can kill pond and other aquatic life and has a negative effect on soils and forest growth. Unless it is stopped it is quite possible acid precipitation will begin to take a toll on endangered species.

Some wildlife biologists already believe that acid rain is at least a partial culprit in the population declines of some species of waterfowl and amphibians.

Although the environment minister has proposed draft legislation in this field, it is important to note Canada does not yet have a national endangered species act. Legislation is in force in only four provinces.

Unfortunately endangered animals, birds and plants do not recognize provincial or even international boundaries. For this reason it is imperative that Canada have a federal presence in this area.

In terms of our international commitments Canada must have clear, strong legislation protecting and rehabilitating our endangered and threatened species.

As my hon. friend said before, Canada's responsibility goes back to the UN Conference on Sustainable Development and the Environment in Rio in 1992. Canada was among if not the first nation to sign the convention on biodiversity when delegates of some 150 nations arrived at a consensus on what needs to be done. We can be proud of this but we can be even more proud once we have adopted strong legislation backing up our commitment.

I thank the hon. member for Davenport for his unflinching devotion to the cause of protecting our vulnerable wildlife. I also commend both the member and the Minister of the Environment for joining forces to ensure that strong law protecting threatened species and their habitats becomes a reality.

Mrs. Jane Stewart (Brant, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it is a pleasure to join in the debate on this bill.

Our colleague from Davenport has worked his whole career in the area of environmental sustainability and environmental support. I am pleased to support him in the efforts he brings to the House to help us understand and continue with his striving to support the environment and in this case endangered species in Canada.

• (1820)

One of my favourite things to do in my riding of Brant is to go into the schools, public schools or high schools. Without a doubt in every circumstance the issue of the environment is always raised.