

Conserving the World's Megafauna and Biodiversity: The Fierce Urgency of Now

WILLIAM J. RIPPLE, GUILLAUME CHAPRON, JOSÉ VICENTE LÓPEZ-BAO, SARAH M. DURANT, DAVID W. MACDONALD, PETER A. LINDSEY, ELIZABETH L. BENNETT, ROBERT L. BESCHTA, JEREMY T. BRUSKOTTER, AHIMSA CAMPOS-ARCEIZ, RICHARD T. CORLETT, CHRIS T. DARIMONT, AMY J. DICKMAN, RODOLFO DIRZO, HOLLY T. DUBLIN, JAMES A. ESTES, KRISTOFFER T. EVERATT, MAURO GALETTI, VARUN R. GOSWAMI, MATT W. HAYWARD, SIMON HEDGES, MICHAEL HOFFMANN, LUKE T. B. HUNTER, GRAHAM I. H. KERLEY, MIKE LETNIC, TAAL LEVI, FIONA MAISELS, JOHN C. MORRISON, MICHAEL PAUL NELSON, THOMAS M. NEWSOME, LUKE PAINTER, ROBERT M. PRINGLE, CHRISTOPHER J. SANDOM, JOHN TERBORGH, ADRIAN TREVES, BLAIRE VAN VALKENBURGH, JOHN A. VUCETICH, AARON J. WIRSING, ARIAN D. WALLACH, CHRISTOPHER WOLF, ROSIE WOODROFFE, HILLARY YOUNG, AND LI ZHANG

In our recent perspective article, we noted that most (approximately 60 percent) terrestrial large carnivore and large herbivore species are now threatened with extinction, and we offered a 13-point declaration designed to promote and guide actions to save these iconic mammalian megafauna (Ripple et al. 2016). Some may worry that a focus on saving megafauna might undermine efforts to conserve biodiversity more broadly. We believe that all dimensions of biodiversity are important and that efforts to conserve megafauna are not in themselves sufficient to halt the dispiriting trends of species and population losses in recent decades. From 1970 to 2012, a recent global analysis showed a 58 percent overall decline in vertebrate population abundance (WWF 2016). Bold and varied approaches are necessary to conserve what remains of Earth's biodiversity, and our declaration in no way disputes the value of specific conservation initiatives targeting other taxa. Indeed, the evidence is clear that without massively scaling up conservation efforts for all species, we will fail to achieve internationally agreed-upon targets for biodiversity (Tittensor et al. 2014).

However, megafauna remain strong candidates—and we believe the strongest candidates—to serve as “umbrellas” for the conservation of many species and ecosystems (Caro 2010). This is because megafauna typically

have large habitat requirements relative to those of other species; therefore, conserving megafauna necessitates conserving large tracts of landscapes and the diversity of species and ecosystem processes they contain (Kerley et al. 2003b). As such, efforts to protect the world's rapidly dwindling megafauna populations should be viewed as complementary to, not in conflict with, the conservation of other species across the taxonomic and body-size spectra.

Biodiversity is not evenly distributed on planet Earth, and some countries house far greater concentrations of biodiversity than others. Indeed, most of the world's terrestrial species diversity can be found in the top 17 most biodiverse countries (Mittermeier et al. 1997). These 17 countries support populations of at least two-thirds of all nonfish vertebrate species and three-quarters of all higher plant species (Mittermeier et al. 1997). A surprising number of threatened megafauna species are also found within these biodiversity-rich countries (figure 1), underscoring the fundamental compatibility of targeted efforts to conserve ecosystems containing both megafauna and biodiversity as a whole. Accordingly, significant co-benefits should arise from future conservation efforts in countries that are rich in both threatened megafauna and overall biodiversity in areas where the distribution of megafauna overlaps

significantly with the distribution of many other species.

Abundant evidence shows that many megafauna populations are strong interactors whose loss causes direct and indirect effects on other species and ecosystem functions (Beschta and Ripple 2009, Estes et al. 2011, Dirzo et al. 2014, Ripple et al. 2014, 2015). In many instances, megafaunal extinction will cause disproportionate ecological disruption relative to the loss of other smaller animals. This is due not only to the large body size of megafauna but also to the limited functional redundancy both within megafaunal guilds (e.g., Pringle et al. 2014) and between megafauna and other animals. For example, jaguars (*Panthera onca*) are the primary nonhuman predators of adult tapirs (*Tapirus* spp.) in Latin America, only lions (*Panthera leo*) routinely kill African buffalo (*Syncerus caffer*) and giraffe (*Giraffa camelopardalis*) across Africa, and gray wolves (*Canis lupus*) and bears (*Ursus* spp.) alone are responsible for the vast majority of predation on large herbivores in most Holarctic regions. The accumulated (and in our view unequivocal) evidence that megafauna frequently fulfill unique and far-reaching functional roles does not imply that other species should be ignored or that taxon-centric programs should supersede systems-based approaches; it simply underscores the crucial importance of

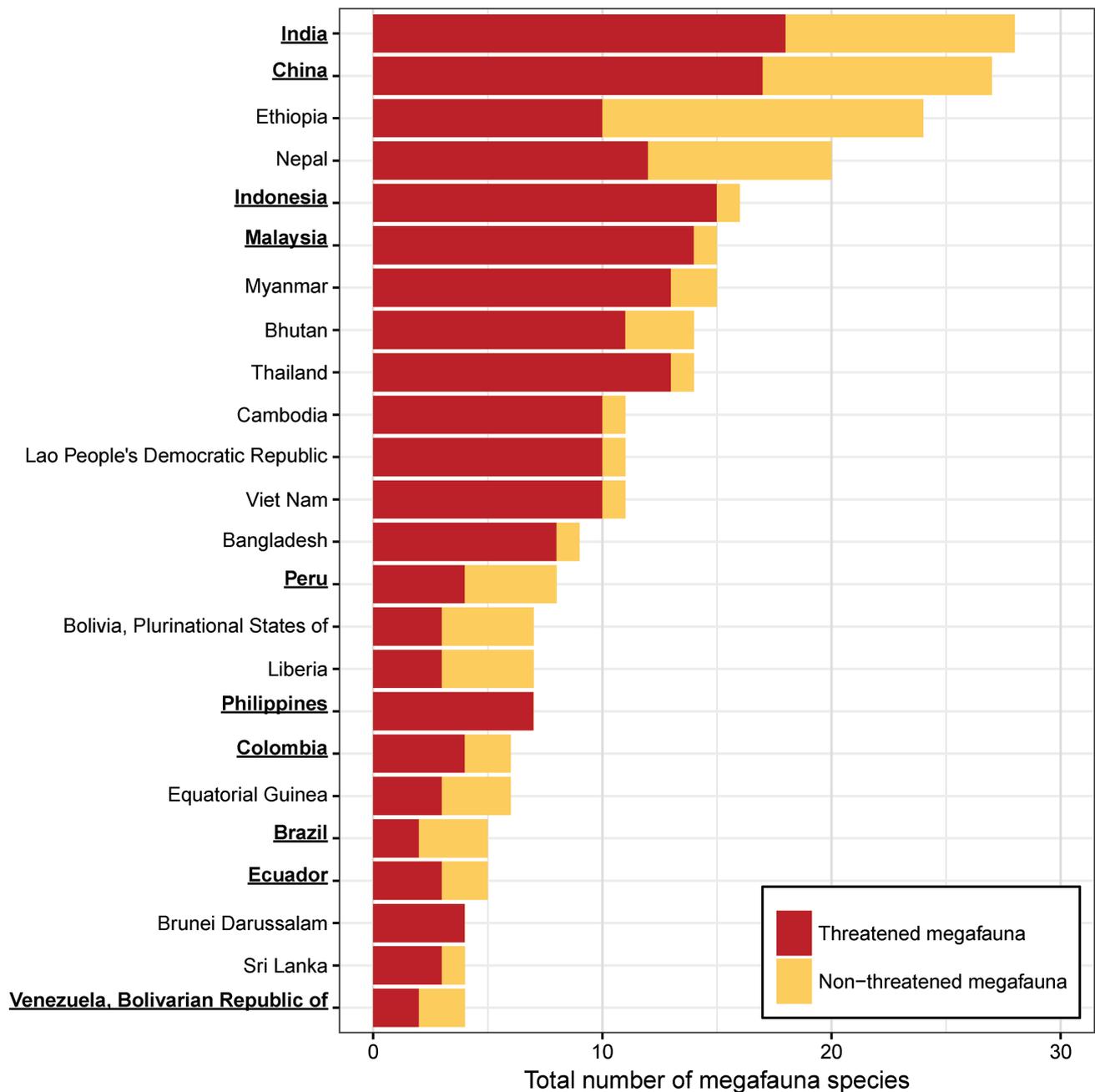


Figure 1. The number of mammalian terrestrial megafauna species found in countries with at least four megafauna species overall and at least 40 percent of their megafauna threatened; the countries underlined with bold labels are biodiversity-rich countries (Mittermeier et al. 1997). Each species was treated as present in a country if it was listed as native to that country on its IUCN Red List species fact sheet page (IUCN 2015). Threatened megafauna are those with IUCN Red List status vulnerable, endangered, or critically endangered. Of the 17 biodiversity-rich countries, more than half (10) appear in this figure. Many of the other countries listed in the figure also have relatively high levels of biodiversity because they are located at low latitudes where productivity and biodiversity are high. The megafauna in this figure are terrestrial carnivores greater than or equal to 15 kilograms in size and herbivores greater than or equal to 100 kilograms in size, as defined in Ripple and colleagues (2014, 2015).

not allowing relict megafaunal populations to vanish.

Without passing judgment on the appropriateness of conservation triage—a complicated topic beyond

the scope of this article—we appreciate that funding for conservation is finite and that great care is needed when considering resource allocation. But it would be a mistake to assume

that conservation funding has already peaked and that therefore allocation decisions are a zero-sum game. Our call to develop new funding mechanisms is rooted in the evidence that

large animals evoke strong emotional responses in many people, providing powerful routes to develop new conservation funders and leaders (Batt 2009, Clayton and Myers 2009). We are not the first to call for additional conservation resources to achieve conservation gains. Even with increased investment, however, careful prioritization will still be necessary to inform decisions about which areas to protect and which actions to undertake for particular species (e.g., McCarthy et al. 2012). Although trade-offs are inevitable, we welcome all ethical efforts to grow the resource base for biodiversity conservation at large so that such trade-offs may be fewer and less painful. Although funding for conservation is often not easily substitutable among causes or from one conservation target to another, evidence suggests that much of the current public support for conservation might diminish if megafauna species were made less of a focus (Kerley et al. 2003a). One way to increase conservation gains is to focus on megafauna species with special public appeal, using them to create support and funding that could also help less charismatic species (Macdonald et al. 2015).

For these reasons, we believe that megafauna, with their unique socioeconomic and cultural values and their ability to harness public and political support, have the power to lift many conservation boats (Macdonald et al. 2015). For example, in Africa, several countries have set aside vast tracts of land for conservation and have a firm political commitment to preserving those lands. This is due in part to appreciation of the megafauna they contain, as well as to notions of the importance of preserving natural heritage for future generations (e.g. see the Ugandan Constitution; www.ulii.org/node/23824). In other cases, political assistance for conservation is mostly the product of popular support. Because of their charisma, megafauna have more potential than most taxa to engender that kind of support. If we cannot muster the political will to save even the widely appreciated megafauna, then our prospects seem grim.

Our declaration was necessary because despite being among the most cherished species by the public, many megafauna populations and species are steadily sliding toward extinction. We have yet to implement mechanisms that will save these species, so our declaration highlights the urgent need to raise additional support and identify alternative approaches—especially those that integrate support to and from local communities and that consider the rights of future generations and broader society. Our rallying call is certainly not “megafauna to the exclusion of all else” but could perhaps better be framed with reference to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s famous lines: “We are now faced with the fact that tomorrow is today. We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now. In this unfolding conundrum of life and history, there is such a thing as being too late. This is no time for apathy or complacency. This is a time for vigorous and positive action.”

Megafauna need immediate attention, and, yes, other species do as well. As concerned conservation scientists, we invite everyone to join the effort to confront the fierce necessity of “how?” in the fierce urgency of now.

Supplemental material

Supplementary data are available at *BIOSCI* online.

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William J. Ripple (bill.ripple@oregonstate.edu), Robert L. Beschta, Michael Paul Nelson, Luke Painter, Christopher Wolf, and Thomas M. Newsome are affiliated with the Global Trophic Cascades Program of the Department of Forest Ecosystems and Society at Oregon State University, in Corvallis; TMN is also with the Desert Ecology Research Group of the School of Biological Sciences at the University of Sydney, in Australia; the Centre for Integrative Ecology at the School of Life and Environmental Sciences at Deakin University, in Geelong, Australia; and the School of Environmental and Forest Sciences at the University of Washington, in Seattle. Guillaume Chapron is affiliated with the Department of Ecology at the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, in Riddarhyttan.

José Vicente López-Bao is with the Research Unit of Biodiversity at Oviedo University, in Mieres, Spain. Sarah M. Durant and Rosie Woodroffe are with the Institute of Zoology at the Zoological Society of London, Regents Park. David W. Macdonald and Amy J. Dickman are with the Wildlife Conservation Research Unit of the Department of Zoology at the University of Oxford and the Recanati-Kaplan Centre, in Abingdon, United Kingdom. Peter A. Lindsey and Luke T. B. Hunter are affiliated with Panthera, in New York. PAL is also affiliated with the Mammal Research Institute of the Department of Zoology and Entomology at the University of Pretoria, in Gauteng, South Africa; LTBH is also affiliated with the School of Life Sciences at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, in Durban, South Africa. Elizabeth L. Bennett, Simon Hedges, and Fiona Maisels are affiliated with the Wildlife Conservation Society, in New York; FM is also with the School of Natural Sciences at the University of Stirling, in the United Kingdom. Holly T. Dublin is affiliated with the IUCN Species Survival Commission's African Elephant Specialist Group at the IUCN Eastern and Southern African Regional Office, in Nairobi, Kenya. Jeremy T. Bruskotter is affiliated with the School of Environment and Natural Resources at The Ohio State University, in Columbus. Ahimsa Campos-Arceiz is with the School of Geography at the School of Environmental and Geographical Sciences, The University of Nottingham Malaysia Campus, in Semenyih, Malaysia. Richard T. Corlett is affiliated with the Center for Integrative

Conservation of the Xishuangbanna Tropical Botanical Garden at the Chinese Academy of Sciences, in Menglun, Yunnan, China. Chris T. Darimont is with the Department of Geography at the University of Victoria and the Raincoast Conservation Foundation, in British Columbia, Canada. Rodolfo Dirzo is affiliated with the Department of Biology at Stanford University, in California. James A. Estes is with the Department of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology at the University of California, in Santa Cruz. Kristoffer T. Everatt, Matt W. Hayward, and Graham I. H. Kerley are affiliated with the Centre for African Conservation Ecology at Nelson Mandela University, in Port Elizabeth, South Africa; MWH is also with the School of Biological Science and the School of Environment, Natural Resources, and Geography at Bangor University, in Gwynedd, United Kingdom, and the Centre for Wildlife Management at the University of Pretoria, in South Africa. Mauro Galetti is affiliated with the Departamento de Ecologia at the Universidade Estadual Paulista, in Rio Claro, Brazil; MG is also with the Department of Bioscience, Ecoinformatics, and Biodiversity, Aarhus University, in Denmark. Varun R. Goswami is with the Wildlife Conservation Society, India Program, in Bangalore, India. Michael Hoffmann is with the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Species Survival Commission, in Gland, Switzerland. Mike Letnic is affiliated with the Centre for Ecosystem Science at the University of New South Wales, in Sydney, Australia. Taal Levi is affiliated

with the Department of Fisheries and Wildlife at Oregon State University, in Corvallis. John C. Morrison is affiliated with the World Wildlife Fund-US, in Hope, Maine. Robert M. Pringle is affiliated with the Department of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology at Princeton University, in New Jersey. Christopher J. Sandom is with the School of Life Sciences at the University of Sussex, in Brighton, United Kingdom. John Terborgh is affiliated with the Nicholas School of the Environment and Earth Sciences at Duke University, in Durham, North Carolina. Adrian Treves is with the Nelson Institute for Environmental Studies at the University of Wisconsin, in Madison. Blaire Van Valkenburgh is affiliated with the Department of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology at the University of California, Los Angeles. John A. Vucetich is with the School of Forest Resources and Environmental Science at Michigan Technological University, in Houghton. Aaron J. Wirsing is with the School of Environmental and Forest Sciences at the University of Washington, in Seattle. Arian D. Wallach is with the Centre for Compassionate Conservation in the School of Life Sciences at the University of Technology, Sydney, Australia. Hillary Young is affiliated with the Department of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Li Zhang is affiliated with the Institute of Ecology at the Beijing Normal University, in PR China.

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