

Wildlife in a changing climate



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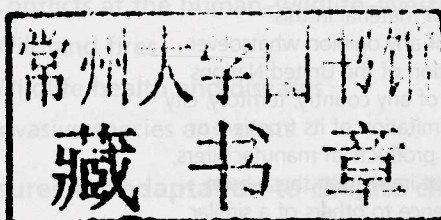
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Contributors	v
Foreword	vi
Acknowledgements	vii
1. Summary	3
2. Introduction	5
3. Major climate-induced changes	9
3.1 Disturbance and extreme weather events	11
3.2 Ecosystem and landscape changes	15
3.2.1 Coasts	15
3.2.2 Mountains	18
3.2.3 Forests	23
3.2.4 Savannahs, grasslands and steppes	26
4. Consequences of climate change	31
4.1 Altered ecosystems and landscapes	31
4.2 Changes in species distribution, composition and interactions	37
4.3 Conflict at the human-wildlife interface	38
4.4	39
4.5	40
4.6	41
5. Measures to address climate change	42
5.1 Maintaining current ecosystems	42
5.2 Adapting management to address climate change	45
5.3 Restoring damaged or changing ecosystems	46
5.3.1 Mangrove restoration	46
5.3.2 Inland waters restoration	47
5.3.3 Forest restoration	47
5.3.4 Savannah and grassland restoration	47
5.4 Adopting integrated land and landscape approaches	48
5.4.1 Wildland fire management	48
5.4.2 Management of protected areas	48
6. Conclusions	49



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Cover images, clockwise from left:

The Lemuroid ringtail possum (*Hemibelideus lemuroides*), particularly the white form, may be at the verge of extinction (photo: Mike Trenerry); the population of the 'i'iwi (*Vestiaria coccinea*) is declining (photo: John Kormendy); and the golden toad (*Bufo perigrines*) is considered extinct (photo: Charles H. Smith). All have been affected by climate change.

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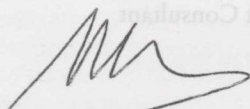
Foreword

For the past twenty years climate change has been high on the international agenda. Together with desertification, soil degradation and biodiversity loss, it is widely recognized as the major environmental threat the world is facing. Evidence is increasing that warming and other climate-related changes are happening more quickly than anticipated, and prognoses are becoming worse.

This publication analyses and presents how climate change affects or will likely affect wild animals and their habitats. Although climate change has already been observed and monitored over several decades, there are not many long-term studies on how the phenomenon is affecting wildlife. There is growing evidence, however, that climate change significantly exacerbates other major human-induced pressures such as encroachment, deforestation, forest degradation, land-use change, pollution and overexploitation of wildlife resources. Case studies are presented in this book that describe some of the body of evidence, in some instances, and provide projections of likely scenarios, in others.

An emphasis of this paper is on tropical terrestrial ecosystems. Subtropical, temperate and boreal regions, as well as coastal areas and inland waters, are covered to a lesser degree. These climatic zones and ecosystems are interconnected in many ways, and in particular for animals, there are no strict boundaries between them.

The publication not only highlights climate-induced changes and their likely consequences, but it also provides useful and up-to-date information on how these could be addressed by skilful measures of adaptive management. The findings and suggested measures explore current knowledge and propose a way forward. As climate change is ongoing, there is a need for more concerted research to inform policy and improved monitoring of its implementation. The increased knowledge would allow to better address this urgent issue and further improve climate policy.



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changing climate

Contents

Contributors	v
Foreword	vi
Acknowledgements	vii
1. Summary	3
2. Introduction	5
3. Major climate-induced changes	9
3.1 Disturbance and extreme weather events	11
3.2 Ecosystem and landscape changes	15
3.2.1 Coasts	15
3.2.2 Mountains	18
3.2.3 Forests	23
3.2.4 Savannahs, grasslands and steppes	26
4. Consequences of climate change	31
4.1 Altered ecosystems and landscapes	31
4.2 Changes in species distribution, composition and interactions	37
4.3 Conflicts at the human–wildlife–livestock interface	38
4.4 Wildland fires	40
4.5 Wildlife health and diseases	44
4.6 Invasive species and pests	51
5. Measures for adaptation to climate change	57
5.1 Maintaining current ecosystems	57
5.2 Adapting management to address climate change	58
5.3 Restoring damaged or changing ecosystems	60
5.3.1 Mangrove restoration	60
5.3.2 Inland waters restoration	61
5.3.3 Forest restoration	65
5.3.4 Savannah and grassland restoration	67
5.4 Adopting integrated and landscape approaches	69
5.4.1 Wildland fire management	71
5.4.2 Management of invasive species and wildlife diseases	75
6. Conclusions	79
7. References	83

Case studies

Box 1	Cyclones threaten survival of the cassowary	13
Box 2	Elephants supplied with water during drought	14
Box 3	Climate change drives an increase in tiger attacks in the Sundarbans	17
Box 4	Climate change affects gelada baboons in mountain highlands	19
Box 5	Mountain gorillas in the Virunga mountains face new threats as their habitat changes	21
Box 6	Ecosystems changing on the Himalayan plateau	22
Box 7	Amazon forests' carbon cycle out of balance due to drought and higher temperatures	25
Box 8	Mediterranean cork oak savannah and its rich biodiversity under increasing stress	29
Box 9	Growing biofuel demand leads to mass forest conversion	32
Box 10	East African high mountains – not only losing their glacier caps	33
Box 11	European and North American birds show similar northward shifts	35
Box 12	Flooding aggravates conflict between farmers and crocodiles	39
Box 13	Disastrous fires in 2009 fuelled by climate change	42
Box 14	African lions decimated by climate-influenced pathogens	46
Box 15	Avian malaria and climate change in the Hawaiian Islands	47
Box 16	Climate change affecting migration routes and disease risk	48
Box 17	The pine processionary moth conquers Europe	53
Box 18	Invasive species and human health	54
Box 19	Mangrove restoration helps people and wildlife in Gazi Bay	61
Box 20	Wetland restoration brings power to the people	62
Box 21	Restoring wetland connectivity in Somerset	63
Box 22	Peatland restoration brings multiple benefits	64
Box 23	Restoration of dry tropical forests aided by birds and mammals	66
Box 24	Grassland and herbivore recovery after drought in Amboseli	68
Box 25	Protecting the winter habitat of reindeer through fire management	74
Box 26	Coypu invasion and eradication in Europe	77

1. Summary

The world already faces a biodiversity extinction crisis, and it is likely to be made worse by climate change. This paper examines the likely ecosystem and landscape changes that will occur in forests, mountains, wetlands, coastal areas, savannas, grasslands and steppes. Impacts on the physical conditions, weather patterns and ecosystem functioning of terrestrial, freshwater and marine wildlife will be examined. The focus is on tropical terrestrial wildlife and its habitats, but other fauna, ecosystems and geographical regions are covered as well.

Wildlife in a changing climate

The impacts of climate change will include permanent changes in physical conditions, such as snow cover, permafrost and sea level along with increases in both the irregularity and severity of extreme weather events like droughts, floods and storms, which will lead to changes in ecosystems and ecosystem functioning. Degraded ecosystems are expected to be less resistant to climate change than intact ones.

This paper explores several main consequences for wildlife, including:

- **Ecosystem changes:** These include geographical and altitudinal shifts, changes in seasonality and rates of disturbance, changes in species composition and a rapid increase in invasive species.
- **Species interactions:** Impacts on wildlife species include changes in species distribution, abundance and interactions, for example through shifting phenology and mistiming.
- **Human-wildlife conflicts:** These are likely to increase as humans and wild species compete for the same dwindling resources.
- **Wildland fires:** Increased drought, the drying out of previously wet areas as well as human interference and pressure are leading to more frequent and disastrous fires in ecosystems that are poorly adapted to such events.
- **Health and disease:** Wildlife, humans and livestock will be threatened by the emergence and increased spread of pathogens, geographically not across species boundaries, due to climate, landscape and ecosystem changes.

Also considered are a number of responses to climate change:

- **Maintaining current ecosystems:** This is crucial, particularly where ecosystems are reasonably intact and therefore likely to withstand climate change. A strong and effective network of protected areas is a critical element of this strategy.
- **Adaptive management:** Protection alone will not be enough, however, as ecosystems change around us. Wildlife biologists are now considering new approaches and more radical steps, including the relocation of protected

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1. Summary

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areas, perhaps on a temporary basis, to allow migration to suitable conditions; translocation of species that have lost optimal ecological conditions; artificial feeding of wildlife in times of emergency; and modification of habitats. All of these approaches are accompanied by risks and costs and will require that strong safeguards are in place to be successful.

- *Restoring ecosystems*: Restoration will also be needed, particularly in ecosystems that are important for climate change resilience but are already badly degraded. These include mangroves, inland waters, forests, savannahs and grasslands.
- *Landscape approaches*: Actions taken in isolation are likely to fail, making integrated approaches vital. Examples of fire, invasive species and disease and pest management are included in the paper to allow consideration of how such integration might be applied in practice.

Addressing wildlife management among the multiple other concerns resulting from climate change will be challenging. Developing and communicating information on the value of wild species and ecosystems to humanity will be an important strategy in building political momentum for conservation, alongside ethical considerations. Developing, managing and retaining an effective system of protected areas is critical for success. The concept of “mainstreaming” biodiversity conservation needs to be applied consistently and carefully. Finally, as we embark on a period of great uncertainty, further research and careful monitoring are needed to ensure that adaptive management and other new approaches can succeed in responding to existing and newly emerging climate pressures.

2. Introduction

The world is undergoing an extinction crisis – the most rapid loss of biodiversity in the planet's history – and this loss is likely to accelerate as the climate changes. The impact of climate change on wildlife is already notable at local, regional and global levels. The direct impact on species that humans make use of or with which we compete, affects human communities in a very immediate way: the loss of biodiversity is our loss as well. Arguably, we also have an ethical responsibility to address the rapid increase in the rate of global species extinction that has been caused by our own actions.

Climate change is expected to become one of the major drivers of extinction in this century as a result of changes in the breeding times of species and shifts in distributions caused by the variation in temperatures and precipitation regimes. It has been estimated that 20–30 percent of plant and animal species will be at higher risk of extinction due to global warming and that a significant proportion of endemic species may become extinct by 2050 as a consequence. Some taxa are more susceptible than others. For example, 566 of 799 warm-water reef-forming coral species are at risk of becoming endangered because of the increasing climate change, as are about 35 percent of birds and 52 percent of amphibians. Moreover, the impact will likely be more severe on species that are already at risk of extinction: 70–80 percent of red-listed birds, amphibians and corals are considered susceptible to the effects of climate change (Vié, Hilton-Taylor and Stuart, 2008).

When climate change disrupts ecosystems that provide global services, the implications are even more serious. With regard to rainfall generation, the potential impact on food security is huge because weather systems that water crops in the temperate world can be traced back to evapotranspiration in the three main tropical forest blocks (as demonstrated by precipitation simulations showing rainfall patterns over the course of a year). Average annual temperatures have risen steadily over recent decades and an even higher increase is predicted for the years ahead. This is most pronounced in Africa where current climate models project a mean temperature rise of 3–4 °C across the continent by the end of this century, approximately 1.5 times the global average increase (Kleine, Buck and Eastaugh, 2010; Seppälä, Buck and Katila, 2009).

All global ecosystems are likely to be affected by climate change to a greater or lesser extent. Forests cover approximately one-third of the global land surface. They provide essential services that support human livelihoods and well-being, support the majority of terrestrial biodiversity and store about half of the total carbon contained in land ecosystems, including in the peat of some tropical forest soils. Tropical and subtropical forests contain many biodiversity hotspots. There are still major gaps in knowledge about the impacts of climate change on forests,

associated wildlife and people and how adaptation measures can best be tailored to local conditions. The productivity of tropical forests is projected to increase where water is available in sufficient quantity. In drier tropical areas, however, forests are projected to decline (Seppälä, Buck and Katila, 2009). Major impacts are also predicted elsewhere, particularly in polar ecosystems, inland waters, grasslands and in the oceans, where climate-driven acidification is perhaps the most extreme threat of all (Parry *et al.*, 2007).

Even moderate climate change, as projected in both unavoidable and stable scenarios, would put some wildlife at considerable risk; worst-case scenarios would see catastrophic losses. Thomas *et al.* (2004) conclude that “for scenarios of maximum expected climate change, 33 percent (with dispersal) and 58 percent (without dispersal) of species are expected to become extinct. For mid-range climate change scenarios, 19 percent or 45 percent (with or without dispersal) of species are expected to become extinct, and for minimum expected climate change 11 percent or 34 percent of species (again, with or without dispersal) are projected to become extinct.” According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC; Parry *et al.*, 2007), roughly 20–30 percent of vascular plants and higher animals on the globe are estimated to be at an increasingly high risk of extinction as temperatures increase by 2–3 °C above pre-industrial levels. The estimates for tropical forests exceed these global averages. It is very likely that even modest losses in biodiversity would cause consequential changes in ecosystem services (Parry *et al.*, 2007; Seppälä, Buck and Katila, 2009).

As average global temperatures rise, the impacts on habitats and species will depend on many factors, including local topography, changes in ocean currents, wind and rainfall patterns and changing albedo. In addition to variations in the rate and extent of temperature increases at different latitudes, there may be changes in the length and severity of seasons, including decreases in temperature in some areas. Rainfall patterns may likewise be affected in terms of overall annual quantity, seasonal distribution of precipitation and year-by-year regularity. Extreme weather events, such as droughts and floods, are expected to occur more often. In particular, droughts are projected to become more frequent and intense in subtropical and southern temperate forests; this will increase the prevalence of fire and predisposition to pests and pathogens (Seppälä, Buck and Katila, 2009).

Natural ecosystems are not only threatened by climate change. Loss and degradation due to human encroachment, agricultural expansion for crop and rangelands, invasive species, over-harvesting and trade in natural resources (including wildlife), epidemic diseases, fires, and pollution still exceed the current impacts of climate change. It is widely recognized that measures to limit such non-climatic human-induced pressures can help reduce the overall vulnerability of ecosystems to climate change.

Non-timber forest resources, such as fuelwood, charcoal, non-wood forest products and wildlife sustain the livelihoods of hundreds of millions of people in forest-dependent communities. Most rural and many urban populations in developing countries rely on woody biomass as their main energy source and

depend on wild plant medicines for their healthcare. In many developing countries, bushmeat is an important source of protein, while for coastal communities or those living near freshwater, fish can be a major source of protein. In Central Africa, there is a very large and well-established trade in bushmeat products, which is driven mainly by consumer demand in major cities. Up to 5 million tonnes of bushmeat are believed to be consumed every year in the Congo Basin (Fa *et al.*, 2002; Kleine, Buck and Eastaugh, 2010; Seppälä, Buck and Katila, 2009) in a trade that is recognized as unsustainable and often illegal. Despite their importance to local communities, about 13 million hectares (ha) of the world's forests are lost due to deforestation each year (FAO, 2010a) and further large areas are also degraded.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC, 2007) identifies climate change as one of the main factors responsible for the current loss of biodiversity. Some aspects of biodiversity loss through, for example, deforestation and the draining of wetlands, will themselves exacerbate climate change by releasing centuries' worth of stored carbon.

Climate change affects different ecosystems in different ways, depending on the complexity and original characteristics of the system, geographical location and on the presence of factors that may regulate the extent of the changes. Degraded ecosystems are generally believed to be less resilient to climate change than intact and healthy ecosystems. The recorded increase in mean annual temperature is already affecting many ecosystems and scientific studies predict that future changes will be of much greater amplitude. The highest rates of warming have been observed at high latitudes – around the Antarctic Peninsula and in the Arctic – with the recorded reduction of the extent, age and thickness of ice occurring at unprecedented speed and even exceeding recent scientific predictions (Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity, 2010).

Increased temperatures affect physical systems, as ice melts and snow cover is reduced, as well as affecting biological systems through a series of direct and indirect pressures. Physical systems include deep snow, glaciers and permafrost. Increases in temperature can lead to a drastic unbalancing of the physical system, causing irreversible losses. The water cycle and hydrological systems are affected by changing temperatures, often indicated by dry riverbeds or floods due to increased runoff. In semi-desert areas, the decreased availability of water is already placing additional pressures on wildlife, which aggregate around limited water points and compete with domestic livestock (de Laow *et al.*, 2001). Reduced plant production as a consequence of reduced precipitation increases the probability of soil degradation due to overgrazing by wildlife and domestic animals. Many freshwater species are under serious threat of extinction as a result of rising temperatures and the disappearance of ponds and coastal lagoons (Wilcox, Guadagno and Ikkala, 2010).

Snow and ice melts in mountainous areas have been recorded as occurring at alarming rates. Such processes severely affect mountain ecosystems, which are particularly susceptible to increasing temperatures. The extent of snow cover in the Northern Hemisphere has decreased by about 10 percent since the late 1960s and 1970s (Parry *et al.*, 2007) and mountain vegetation zones are recorded to have shifted upwards.

