

Nature at Risk Series January 2023

How many species can we “afford” to lose?

Brodhead Watershed Association

Did you ever pull a loose thread from a sock, or a cuff, or a waistband, only to find the whole thing start to unravel?

Nature is a little like that.

All of life is knitted together. All creatures large and small, plant and animal, fish and worm, from giant redwoods and whales to invisible-to-the-naked-eye bacteria, viruses, and nanobes are connected in a vast web.

Though we may not understand or recognize the value of every thread, there are none that are “unnecessary.” Which is what makes this period of epic loss and extinction so dangerous to life on earth.

The loss of our native ash tree is one example.

Since at least 2002, the emerald ash borer has been marching across our landscape, attacking ash trees. As the ash trees have died, countless other living things suffer.

Many kinds of birds, from wild turkeys and cardinals to nuthatches and woodpeckers, rely on a buffet of insects and seeds in ash trees. Squirrels, mice and other small mammals also feed on the seeds. Among native pollinators, some bees collect ash pollen for their larval chambers. Large white ash often form hollow cavities providing shelter for woodpeckers, porcupines, and bats. Some ash trees grow in moist soils, and their leaves feed tadpoles, caddisflies, and other aquatic critters, which themselves become food for fish and amphibians.

So pulling the thread called “ash tree” unravels lives in many directions. And we have no way of knowing what the consequences will be.

According to the World Resources Institute, “scientists have a better understanding of how many stars there are in our galaxy than how many

species there are on Earth.” Which means that in many cases, we don’t even know what we are losing.

Solutions?

You know the drill: Call on your local government representatives to protect forested land and wild habitat. Quit slashing forests. Keep water, air and soil pure. Reduce reliance on fossil fuels, and slow climate change. Support organizations that advocate for protecting natural resources, like Brodhead Watershed Association and Pocono Heritage Land Trust.

It’s not about “saving the Earth.” It’s about protecting the only home we’ve got.

For more information:

https://www.biologicaldiversity.org/programs/biodiversity/elements_of_biodiversity/extinction_crisis/

https://foreststewardsguild.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Ash-Recommendations_4.pdf

https://wwf.panda.org/discover/our_focus/biodiversity/biodiversity/