
Keystone Species and the Importance of Raising Endangered Species Awareness

Endangered Species Awareness

Extinction is a natural occurrence that transpires at a natural rate of about one to five species per year. Scientists estimate we're now losing species at 1,000 to 10,000 times that rate, with dozens going extinct every day. There is no mystery that our human activity can be damaging to animals and their habitats. People are unaware of the impact that the extinction of some species may cause. There are animals in this world that are vital to the ecosystem, yet their populations are dropping. Many of these endangered animals are keystone species. A keystone species is defined as a species on which other species in an ecosystem largely depend, such that if it were removed the ecosystem would change drastically.

Perhaps ecosystems would collapse if some keystone species disappeared, but how could this happen and why should we care? The Earth is currently experiencing a mass extinction of life; one out of six mass extinctions that have occurred throughout our planet's history (based on scientific estimations). Since the number of species on Earth is an estimation, it is challenging to accurately determine how many species are becoming extinct. However, according to the World Wildlife Fund, scientists believe between 10,000 and 100,000 species cease to exist every year due to habitat loss, resource depletion, climate change, and other factors. How could this be? Wouldn't we hear about these organisms on the news? Perhaps the projected tens or hundreds of species going extinct each day are not the cute or beautiful creatures we are taught to care about. In fact, you may not be aware of many species that are actually very important to our own existence! If we lose keystone species, extinction rates will dramatically increase. We cannot afford to be losing more species!

When I was little I heard stories about people being attacked by a large fish with sharp teeth. It struck 6 year old Mike Feltham with fear to discover that these victims were beach-goers just like me. I was constantly alert every time I was in the ocean, but my family would try to comfort my fear by telling me that there weren't sharks in New England waters. As I got older, seeing the movie "Jaws," which portrayed sharks as man-eating monsters, only heightened my fear. After that, even when I stepped in a swimming pool I was paranoid, because it felt like something was there. Then, upon turning 11, my fear developed into a curiosity when I watched an annual shark week program on the discovery channel. Seeing these magnificent creatures swim and hunt gave me a feeling of awe. One diver said something I'd never forget, "[By] getting in the water with this animal I am entering it's home." Its home is not our home. It was later revealed in more shows that many species of sharks are very low in numbers because of our human activity. This perplexed me that the most fearsome creature in all of the ocean was being killed off by us humans.

So really, who are the monsters; us or them? They rarely mistake us for their prey and in return for this confusion we develop wild stories that promote fear and hate towards these animals. On average 100 million sharks are killed per year by humans and the US averages just 19 shark attacks each year and one shark-attack fatality every two years. They are beautiful animals that we have given the image of a monster to. They must be preserved because the role of sharks is

to keep other marine life in healthy balance and to regulate the oceans. Removing sharks could seriously upset that balance to the point where the ecosystem may collapse. This is a prime example of endangered species in need of our protection because sharks are vital to the ecosystems of the ocean and can be found in every ocean around the world.

Many ecologists consider apex predators like sharks, killer whales, and wolves to be keystone organisms, since they maintain the balance of biodiversity and resource availability. From the top to the bottom of the food chain, all of these endangered species have been greatly affected by our human activity. As species are disappearing so too are our alternatives for future discoveries and advancements. The impact due to the loss of variety of life in the world include fewer new medicines and greater vulnerability to the ecosystem. The extinction rate of endangered animals has increased a hundredfold over the last century, and we are to blame.

Just like humans, an individual plant or animal could not live by itself. It has to interact with the other organisms in its environment to survive. Removing one animal or plant species from the ecosystem will compromise the life of other organisms that interact with it. Leaving out a legacy of unique animals for the next generation is a desirable value. We would like our children also to enjoy the benefits that could be gained from wildlife species, not only of their mere existence but for the potential benefits that they can provide.

We must now answer the questions that determine a just topic for the Rotary Speech. Is it the truth? Yes, the loss of endangered species threatens the ecosystem which could become a potential threat to us. Is it fair to these animals that we take their homes and kill them to extinction? No, we share this planet. Will bringing awareness to and protecting species build goodwill and better friendships? Yes, animal conservation can bring communities together in order to save a species. Will it be beneficial to all concerned? Yes, Saving species will keep all the ecosystems of this planet in a healthy balance.

Nature is a beautiful thing and provides us with all the resources we own. It is our duty to conserve the multitude of animals that are affected by our human activities and fear. We are taking over other animals homes and causing species to go extinct that are important to the ecosystems. Keystone species must be preserved in any way possible because the collapse of a food chain could be a great threat to us too. Animals must be protected so that we may all thrive on this planet. If endangered animals die, it could cause a ripple effect and put us in danger too. Then us humans would become the endangered animal.