Natural world on red alert

A report compiled over two years details the ever-increasing species of flora and fauna facing extinction

By Devika Bhat

The polar bear and hippopotamus have joined the list of species facing the threat of extinction, according to a report to be released this week. More than 16,000 species of animals, birds, fish and plants are registered as under serious threat of becoming extinct on the Red List of Threatened Species compiled by the World Conservation Union (IUCN). The number is up from just over 15,500 last year.

The study, which examines the status of more than 40,000 species most in need of conservation attention, says that one in three amphibians, a quarter of the world’s coniferous trees, one in eight birds and one in four mammals are under considerable risk. Of 547 shark and ray species listed, 20 per cent are considered to be threatened with extinction.

The report, compiled over two years by scientists from around the world, provides one of the most comprehensive indications of progress in meeting targets to reduce the rate at which species become endangered. The increase in the latest list is partly because more species have been examined than before.

Among the worst affected are polar bears. The report says that the impact of climate change is being increasingly felt in the Arctic, where the level of sea ice in the summer is expected to decrease by 50 to 100 per cent over the next 50 to 100 years. As a result, the polar bear population is predicted to decline by more than 30 per cent in the next 45 years, and the species has moved up the IUCN list to be classified as “vulnerable”, threatened with global extinction.

More unexpected is the decline of the common hippo, listed as under threat for the first time, largely because of a dramatic fall in numbers in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

Achim Steiner, director general of the IUCN, said: “The 2006 IUCN Red List shows a clear trend: biodiversity loss is increasing, not slowing down.”

In 1994 the DRC came only second to Zambia in hippo populations — with 30,000, compared with Zambia’s 40,000 — but numbers have since plummeted by 95 per cent, primarily because of unregulated hunting of them for meat and ivory from their teeth. The lesser-known pygmy hippo, a forest creature which exists in small numbers in West Africa, has similarly been affected by illegal logging and loss of habitat.

Several marine groups have been included in this year’s list. The angel shark has been declared extinct in the North Sea and the common skate upgraded from “endangered” to “critically endangered”. Both were once commonplace on European fish counters. Freshwater fish appear to fare little better, having experienced some of the most drastic falls in numbers, with 56 per cent of 252 endemic freshwater Mediterranean fish at risk of extinction.

Mark Wright, science adviser for the World Wide Fund for Nature, said that the study’s findings were “sad but not surprising”. “For freshwater species, not only do they face loss of habitat, but there’s also the issue of water pollution and poor management of water systems,” he said. “In Africa, governments understandably want to develop and improve their countries, but this must be done in a way that is environmentally sustainable.”