

Springboard into Comprehension



Main Idea Number 15 Orchard Street
Piracy in the Modern Age

Compare and Contrast

Back from the Brink

Two Dying Seas

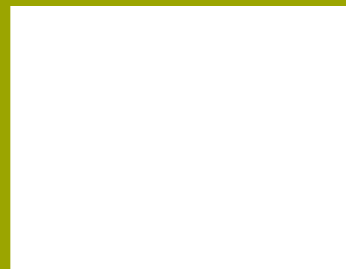
Fact and Opinion What's the Real Story?
On the Ball

Cause and Effect Inventions by Women
Use It, Wear It

Bias and Prejudice My Way or the Highway?
Whaling

Figurative Language The Book of Banjo Paterson
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RA 11.5–12.5



Explanation

Back from the Brink



Written by Greg Pyers



Back from the Brink



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WRITTEN BY GREG PYERS

On the Brink

Today, many animal species are on the brink of dying out completely, or **extinction**. However, with help from people, these species can still be saved. Many species have been brought back from the brink of extinction. Thanks to the efforts to save them, these species still have a future.

In the past, natural phenomena caused extinction. Sudden disasters sometimes wiped out species. Extinction could also happen slowly. Some animals did not adapt to gradual environmental change or new, rival species taking over their habitat. Now, because of human activity, the scale and speed of extinction is greater than ever before.

People have destroyed many of the wild areas where species once lived. This **habitat loss** is a major cause of extinction. People also bring rival species into areas where they force out native species. Species like this are called **introduced species**.

However, people have also begun to realize the effects of their activity and are trying to do something about it. In some cases, people have been able to halt the slide towards oblivion and bring species back from the brink.

An artist's impression of the disastrous meteorite that may have caused the extinction of the dinosaurs



Cane toads such as this one, brought to Australia by people, have forced out native species.



CONSERVATION STATUS



The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) ranks at-risk species according to the level of danger that they face.

Mauritius Kestrel



The Mauritius kestrel is a small, reddish-brown bird with black markings. It has short wings, a long tail, and long legs, and is found on the island of Mauritius in the Indian Ocean. Its habitat is subtropical rainforest.

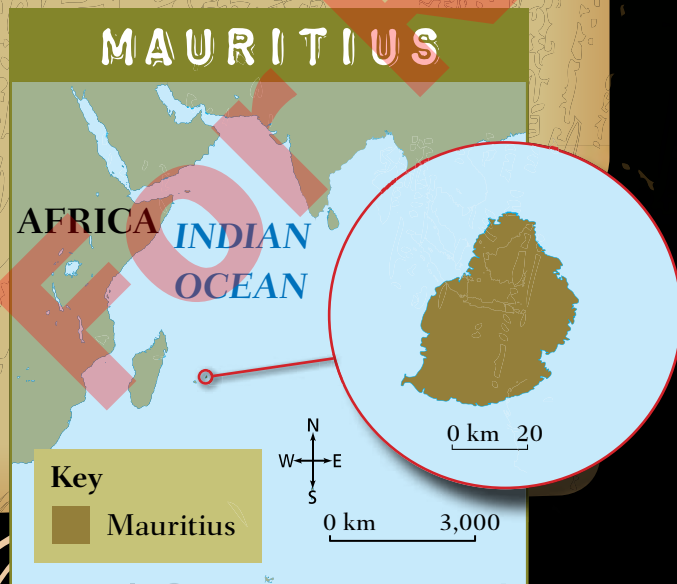
Falling Population

The population of Mauritius kestrels began to fall in the eighteenth century. Instead of just visiting, people came to Mauritius to live. People who move permanently and begin new communities like this are called **settlers**. The settlers cleared the forest for farming, causing habitat loss. They also brought new species. These introduced species included rats, cats, and mongooses.

In the 1950s and 1960s, kestrel numbers, already low, declined drastically. This was caused by the use of insecticides, such as DDT, to kill insect pests. Kestrels absorbed DDT into their bodies after eating poisoned insects. The DDT made the shells of kestrel eggs so thin that they cracked easily. In 1950, there were several hundred kestrels left. By 1974, there were only four. Mauritius kestrels were now the rarest birds in the world.



A Mauritius kestrel, at one time the world's rarest bird



Saving the Species

People realized that, if the kestrels were to be saved, quick action was needed. In 1973, a program began to help them recover. It established an area where the kestrels and their habitat are legally protected, or **nature reserve**. In 1984, scientists began to breed the birds in a controlled environment. This is called a **captive breeding program**.

The scientists collected eggs and placed them into containers in which temperature and humidity are regulated, or **incubators**. The chicks that hatched in the incubators were hand-reared and released into the wild. The scientists provided food to help the chicks survive. They placed nest boxes in trees for the birds and guarded them from predators. Slowly, kestrel numbers increased. By 2000, there were about 800 Mauritius kestrels living in the reserve. From a population of four, a heartbeat away from extinction, the kestrels had been saved.

FAST FACTS

| | |
|---------------------|--------------------------------|
| Scientific name | <i>Falco punctatus</i> |
| Habitat | Subtropical rainforest |
| Diet | Geckos, insects, small rodents |
| Main threats today | Introduced predators |
| Conservation status | Vulnerable |
| Numbers in the wild | Increasing |



Mauritius kestrel chicks being hand-fed as part of the captive breeding program

Romer's Tree Frog



The Romer's tree frog is a small, brown amphibian. It has a white underside, a triangular snout, and a dark, X-shaped mark on its back. The Romer's tree frog is found on the islands of Hong Kong. Its habitat is forest, streams, and swamps.

Falling Population

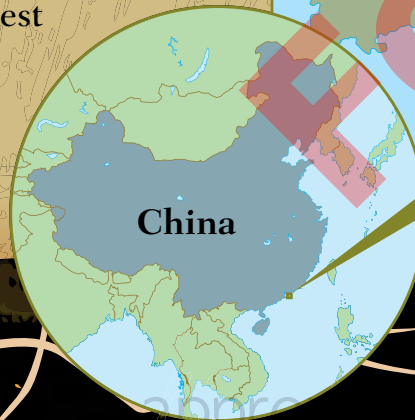
The total number of Romer's tree frogs living outside captivity, or the wild population, was quite small even before it began falling. The frogs were first discovered in 1952 in a cave on Lamma Island. The cave collapsed the next year and people feared the frogs were extinct. However, in 1984, the frogs were rediscovered on Lamma Island. They were later found on three other islands in Hong Kong.

Hong Kong is a densely populated area. Human activity has left very little habitat for Romer's tree frogs. In 1992, the frogs faced a new threat. The island of Chek Lap Kok contained one of the species' largest groups. Now, it was to be levelled to build the new Hong Kong International Airport.



A Romer's tree frog, found in the wild only in Hong Kong

HONG KONG REGION



- Key**
- Hong Kong Island
 - Chek Lap Kok
 - Lamma Island
 - Other parts of Hong Kong

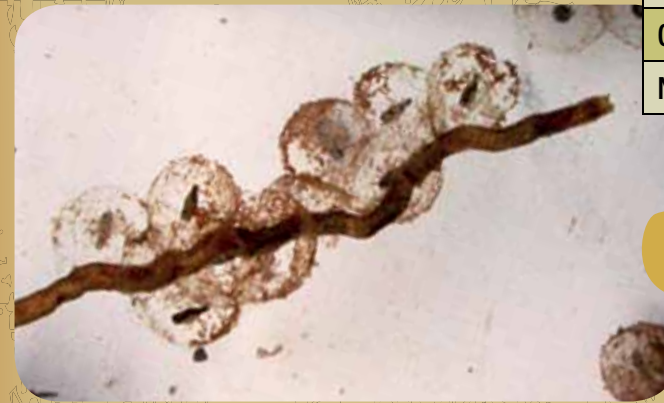
Saving the Species

People realized that if nothing was done to save the species, there was a very high risk of extinction. Scientists went to Chek Lap Kok. They collected 500 adult frogs, tadpoles, and eggs for a captive breeding program. Some animals were taken to the University of Hong Kong. Some were taken to Melbourne Zoo in Victoria, Australia. The frogs bred very well. In 1993 and 1994, more than 1,100 captive-bred frogs and 1,600 captive-bred tadpoles were released at eight sites.

Although the total number of tree frogs living in captivity, or captive population, is secure, the wild population is still at risk. At one of the eight sites, the program has failed and the frogs are gone. However, even after the building of the airport, there is still a small group of frogs on Chek Lap Kok. For the moment, the Romer's tree frogs are holding on.

FAST FACTS

| | |
|---------------------|--------------------------|
| Scientific name | <i>Chirixalus romeri</i> |
| Habitat | Damp areas of forest |
| Diet | Small insects |
| Main threats today | Habitat loss |
| Conservation status | Endangered |
| Numbers in the wild | Decreasing |



Romer's tree frog eggs in a captive breeding program in Hong Kong



The Romer's tree frogs were housed in big plastic buckets.