# Opinion & Analysis

# Plunder for resources destroying fabric of our planet

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The ravages our evolutionary triumph have wrought on other species will impact on all our lives

THE PAST, it has been remarked, is a foreign country; they do things differently there. Since the end of the last Ice Age around 12,000 years ago, humanity has expanded its numbers and power like no other species before. Today we dominate every habitable nook and cranny on the surface of the Earth.

Where there are winners, there are losers too. Our astonishing evolutionary triumph has come at a fearsome price for many of the millions of other species with whom we share this planet home.

Ahead of the UN's World Biodiversity Day tomorrow, the International Union for Conservation of Nature has updated its "Red List" of threatened species. It now shows 1,227 bird species as threatened with extinction – the highest level ever recorded. Of these, 192 are critically endangered.

In common with most of what we call the developed world, Ireland's biodiversity has long been reduced to a fraction of its natural level. Habitat destruction and land conversion to meet our needs is the principal driver of species loss. While these pressures have intensified in recent decades, the pattern is anything but new.

On just one English estate between 1819 and 1826, a total of 295 adult and 60 juvenile golden eagles were killed. The reason for this carnage was to preserve fish and game on the estate for "sport". Golden eagles have been extinct in Ireland for over a century, until recent attempts at their reintroduction. While on the Killarney lakes in August 2007, I had the privilege of a close-up sighting of a pair of golden eagles in the wild. Since then, one or both of these magnificent animals has been poisoned, most likely by local landowners. There was better news last week, as the Department of the Environment announced that a pair of eagles had hatched two chicks in the Glenveagh National Park in Donegal.

Minister for the Environment John Gormley described this as "a flagship biodiversity project which has the potential to attract much-needed tourism into the Donegal area". Tourists are unlikely to travel to see more dead eagles. Gormley is promising tough new regulations which will make it illegal to leave out poisoned meat or fish-based bait, for any reason.

Far more than eagles are at risk. It's currently estimated that one in six migratory birds crossing Europe is killed either by shooting or trapping. Italians are particularly enthusiastic, killing an estimated 200 million birds a year. They even take their hobby on holidays; tours of Italian hunters arriving in Ireland have been known to shoot almost anything with feathers.

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The Mediterranean island of Malta is on the migratory path between Africa and Europe. It has 16,000 registered hunters – out of a total population of just 400,000. They blast and net millions of migrating birds, in defiance of EU and international bans. To beat the embargos, some hunters are now heading out in boats to shoot the exhausted birds even before they reach the island. One 63-year-old Maltese hunter, Alfred Zammit, without a hint of irony, explained: "It's the thrill of the chase, the feeling of being at one with nature."

In the gory annals of mass slaughter in the wild, there are few stories more instructive than the fate of the North American passenger pigeon. They once numbered at least five billion – as many as today's entire American bird population.

So vast were flocks of migrating passenger pigeons that their appearance was likened to a solar eclipse. An account in 1873 reported a mile-wide flock that passed overhead continuously for nearly nine hours.

Commercial hunting got under way in earnest by the mid-19th century. On a single day in July 1860, over a quarter of a million birds were processed in one depot in Grand Rapids, Michigan. The butchery was complete when the last bird died in captivity in 1914.

A similar fate befell the great auk, a flightless bird that was once plentiful in colder northern hemisphere countries, including Ireland. The world's last colony of great auks, numbering about 50, was discovered on a tiny island off the coast of Iceland in 1835. Nine years later, on July 3rd, 1844, the last breeding couple on the island were strangled and their egg smashed. Museums hastened the auks' demise by hunting for the now-rare birds to be stuffed as valuable exhibits.

We now know that birds are descended from the dinosaurs, and are a tangible link to the earth's ancient past. The crisis they now face is just one of the many rapidly unravelling threads in the Earth's fabric of biodiversity. Humanity's relentless plunder of the natural world for "resources" has triggered what scientists describe as Earth's sixth extinction, which is already in full swing. Species are disappearing at the astonishing rate of up to 50,000 a year.

"Biodiversity underpins the health of the planet and has a direct impact on all our lives," said World Wildlife Fund director James Leape. Try telling that to our economists, who continue to tag critical natural services, such as pollination, protecting watersheds and soil erosion as free "externalities". Once in a while, sense prevails. New York city had been facing a bill of up to $8 billion for developing water filtration services. They opted instead to invest a fraction of this amount in protecting the ecosystem of the nearby Catskill mountains, and let nature do the rest.

National biodiversity week runs until May 25th