

At Zakouma NP, four out of six reintroduced black rhino died, but a further reintroduction may be on the cards.



CONSERVATION

Another rhino reintroduction in Chad looks likely

Following the deaths of four reintroduced black rhinos in Chad's Zakouma National Park last October, the park manager, Leon Lamprecht, expects a second attempt to re-established them in November 2020.

Zakouma's rhinos were lost in 1972 as the park was ravaged by poaching. Since taking charge of its management in 2010 the non-profit conservation organisation, African Parks, has turned around Zakouma's fortunes through effective anti-poaching measures.

It was felt secure enough by May 2018 to reintroduce six black rhinos sent here from Marakele National Park in South Africa. Yet despite seeming in healthy condition throughout Zakouma's wet season, four of them, including both bulls, died within a two-week period.

Lamprecht says post-mortems have shown a sudden loss of condition led to a reduction of fat around their organs: "We're still not sure of the primary cause of this but whatever it was triggered secondary complications such as West Nile Virus that proved fatal. They were ultimately maladapted as coming from Southern Africa everything was foreign to them".

Two female rhinos remained alive in what Lamprecht calls 'survival of the fittest'. He says they will be monitored over the next wet and dry season cycles. "If they survive well we will bring in further rhinos. We're confident these two will be the founders of a healthy Central African rhino population". Mark Stratton

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Nature in brief

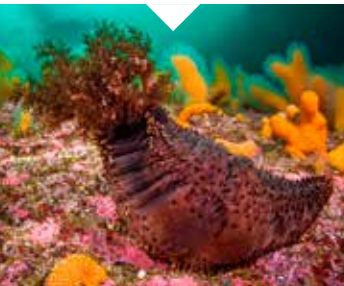
Cold water balloon

Like their terrestrial namesakes, sea cucumbers aren't known for their athleticism. But *Journal of Animal Ecology* reports that they are able to travel for miles on ocean currents by inflating themselves with water to achieve neutral buoyancy.



Fishers return

In January, six fishers (relatives of martens) were released in the Northern Cascades forests in the Pacific Northwest. This begins a multi-year programme to restore fishers (wiped out by past trapping) to a prime wilderness of North America.



Primates under threat

A new titi discovered in Mato Grosso, Brazil, has been named *Plecturocebus grovesi* to honour primatologist Colin Groves. It is predicted that 86 per cent of its 10,000ha forest habitat will disappear by 2040.



Lions predate fur seals

Namibia's Skeleton Coast lions have been hunting marine animals. Scientist PE Stander says three lionesses killed 18 seals, 60 cormorants and two greater flamingos in 18 months – 86 per cent of everything they ate.

BEHAVIOUR

Russia's polar bear puzzle

When 52 polar bears paid a prolonged visit to a village in the Russian Arctic from December to February last winter, many residents became too scared to leave their homes, a state of emergency was declared and military patrols began. But widespread international media reports that this 'invasion' resulted from loss of sea ice linked to global warming were misleading, say regional commentators.

"This is an on-site, human-made problem," expedition leader Mats Forsberg told *The Barents Observer*. Belushya Guba, the main settlement on the archipelago of Novaya Zemlya, is beside a deep bay, usually free of extensive sea ice in the last 30 years. This is the first time that the village, largely home to Russian military personnel and their families, has had a problem with wintering polar bears.

The likely cause, says a polar bear scientist, is that sea ice conditions last November allowed the bears to come ashore. Ice then temporarily retreated, stranding them, but reached land again in January. By this time, the bears – looking well fed in photographs and used to both humans and to scavenging at local dumps – stayed ashore.

So although ice melt continues to be a major problem for polar bears, this winter visitation by so many could be linked to growing numbers of people and rubbish in the Arctic, and not lack of sea ice. **Kenny Taylor**

FIND OUT MORE The effects of human food on bears: bit.ly/freerangebears



Bears are finding easy pickings in an Arctic town.

TRUTH OR FICTION?

Insects are going extinct

If the rate of decline continues, could all insects really disappear within a century?



Spraying pesticides on crops threatens many insects, including the wall brown.

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THE EXTRAORDINARY PHENOMENON of an impending insect armageddon was first raised by scientists in a 2017 paper highlighting declines of flying insects in German nature reserves of 75 per cent over a 25-year period (Meet the Scientist, September 2018).

Then research published in early 2019 really set alarm bells clanging: "The conclusion is clear," reported a study in *Biological Conservation*. "Unless we change our ways of producing food, insects as a whole will go down the path of extinction in a few decades."

But Dave Goulson, one of the

"There is no way every insect species is going extinct, unless we fry the planet in a nuclear war."

UK's leading insect experts and a vocal campaigner on the impact of agricultural pesticides on invertebrates, says this claim is over the top. "There is no way that every insect species is going extinct, unless we completely fry the planet in a nuclear war," he says. "Tough, adaptable insects will be with us forever."

That's not to say there isn't a serious problem. According to Goulson, the insects most at risk are the specialised ones that reproduce slowly, such as by only one generation a year: many species of British butterfly are a good example. "We could easily lose some of the most beautiful insects and

some of the most useful ones, too," Goulson says. He doesn't just mean pollinators – many insects are food for birds, lizards, frogs and fish, while others do an important job feeding on and recycling dead animals.

One of the biggest problems is a lack of information. There are few long-term studies of insect populations, with that from Germany being one of the best-known. The UK Butterfly Monitoring Scheme, running since 1976, is, Goulson says, probably the best dataset for any insect group in the world. "It shows generalist species have declined by

about 40 per cent in that time ... not as rapid as the German study – and more specialist butterflies are down by about 70 per cent."

Despite the headlines, Dave Goulson doesn't see any dramatic shifts in land management policy to avert the approaching apocalypse. "We are sleepwalking to catastrophe," he says. **James Fair**



DAVE GOULSON is professor of biology at the University of Sussex.



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