

Foreword

There is a strong tendency at the moment for conservation to focus on ecosystems, and the services that the ecosystems provide to humans. There is, of course, nothing wrong with this tendency, providing that is not carried out to the exclusion of a simultaneous focus on species. Unfortunately, with modern trends, species are often ignored by those who are supposed to be conserving them. As a result, important species, particularly those less familiar to us, can slip under the radar.

The red panda is one such species, and therefore this book is important, first, because it makes this animal more familiar to us, and secondly because it draws attention to its current plight. The status of the red panda in the wild is relatively unknown, but it is often assumed to be more common than is in fact the case. There are reasonable numbers in zoos, but captive breeding programmes are failing to deliver.

So why the great interest in the red panda? Why is it special? First, it is undeniably a uniquely attractive species. It is one of the most strikingly patterned and vividly coloured of all mammals.

Scientists have long focused on the red panda's controversial taxonomy. Is it a bear, is it a procyonid (raccoon relative), is it a panda, or is it a unique family on its own? All these have been hypothesized. Does this matter? It is a unique species regardless of its true taxonomic status. It is either

the only procyonid in the Old World, or a very aberrant bear, or the closest living relative to the giant panda, or just unique – a living fossil, the last of its kind.

The red panda is comparatively little known. Until comparatively recently, most of our knowledge of the species in the wild was derived from a 19th century naturalist, Brian Hodgson. Even today most of our knowledge of red panda biology has been obtained in captivity. There is an urgent need for more field studies to enable conservation in the wild. This volume provides an overview of current knowledge and indicates where further research is needed.

The red panda has a spectacular home – the Himalayas, one of the global hotspots for conservation. The Himalayas have a unique flora and fauna, and are also of great cultural significance to the local people. Himalayan rivers provide drinking water to a large number of people, but this region is under threat from global warming. Indeed, climate change is proceeding faster at higher elevations, and this could destroy this region if we do not act quickly. The red panda is a classic flagship species. It is well placed to function as a focus for the region and its problems.

There are a good number of red pandas in zoos around the world. These have the potential to become a valuable educational and public relations resource to teach people about the conservation needs of the

important Himalayan region. Today, the future of the red panda hangs in the balance. Its survival in the wild is questionable and its survival in captivity is not secure. This unique species must not be allowed to become extinct; and its habitat must not be destroyed. I commend this book to the reader as a timely reminder of the problems confronting the red panda

and the Himalayan regions, and of what we all stand to lose should it be allowed to die out. I thank the editor and authors for their dedication and thoroughness in producing this remarkable book.

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Commission*