Here’s a good summary  on the species issue (another major natural resource and indicator) from Peter Foster of the National Post.

# What biotic holocaust?

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National Post, Peter Foster ·

Declaring a species extinct is a ticklish business. How do you establish that something has disappeared off the face of the earth? Just this week, it was announced that tigers have been discovered in an Indian rainforest from which they were thought to have been wiped out three decades ago. Figures on species loss, however, are more than a thorny scientific matter. They are intensely political.

In yesterday's column, I pointed out the massive discrepancies between "official" figures for species extinction and the figures on display at the prestigious Field Museum in Chicago.

There are now 41,415 species on the "Red List" of the World Conservation Union (IUCN), 16,306 of which are allegedly "threatened with extinction." But "threatened" is not extinct. Indeed, to appear on the Red List virtually guarantees a frenzy of costly restorative action, which is, by a large, a good thing (as long as humans aren't sacrificed in the process).

However, when it comes to actual recorded extinctions, the IUCN acknowledges 785 over the past 500 years. That is, around 1 1/2 a year. The Field Museum claims species are going extinct at the rate of 30,000 annually. That's quite a difference. Oscar Wilde's Lady Bracknell famously declared that: "To lose one parent, Mr. Worthing, may be regarded as a misfortune; to lose both looks like carelessness." We might similarly reflect that to lose one and a half species a year is a cause for sorrow; to claim there are another 29,998.5 that went extinct without us knowing their names is, well, suspicious.

I contacted the Field's PR department and was originally told that the 30,000 figure was taken from the work of Edward O. Wilson, a "world-renowned scientist." True. But E.O. Wilson isn't just any old Pulitzer Prize-winning Harvard boffin. He has an intriguing background in scientific controversy.

In the 1970s, Prof. Wilson was at the centre of an academic slugfest over the implications of Darwinism for human nature and human society. In his book Sociobiology, Prof. Wilson claimed that to understand society, we had to understand man's evolved biological nature. For this quite obvious suggestion he was pilloried by Marxist academics as a determinist, genocidal racist, and promoter of the capitalist "status quo." These slurs were particularly painful to the professor, since he considered himself, like most academics, particularly at Harvard, "of the left."

According to the brilliant book Defenders of the Truth, by Ullica Segerstralle, the attacks on Prof. Wilson led to a remarkable personal transformation. By the end of the 1980s, Prof. Wilson had "reinvented" himself, she wrote, "from Wilson I, the politically incorrect sociobiologist, to Wilson II, the politically correct environmentalist ? Here Wilson -- supported by a general neo-catastrophist trend with tales of dinosaur deaths, asteroids, and the like -- was able to make a convincing case for the importance of the preservation of biodiversity."

Since the alleged catastrophic loss of biodiversity was yet another alleged adverse side-effect of "untrammelled" capitalism, Prof. Wilson was now once more on-side with his old buddies on the left. Significantly, he is a member of the board of the David Suzuki Foundation. According to the Suzuki Web site, Professor Wilson believes that "The David Suzuki Foundation embodies the principles of scientific environmentalism."

Does that ring any alarm bells about objectivity?

In fact, the huge extinction figures come from pure assumptions, which are based on the alleged implications of "habitat loss." These assumptions relate to the "background" rate of extinction, the number of undiscovered species on earth, and how much present rates of extinction might be above background rates due to human activity. They are , in other words, axe-grinding speculation. Cubed.

The calculations work like this: You assume that the "background" rate of extinction is, say, one species per million species per year. Then you estimate that there are 30 million species on earth (versus the 1.9 million so far classified). Then you assume that the present rate of extinction is, what the hell, say a thousand times the background level. Hence you arrive at a figure of 30,000 by assuming vast numbers of species that have never been identified and may not exist, the vast majority of which are, moreover, not pandas but notional bugs and bacteria.

This means that the most egregious error at the Field Museum exhibit is the claim that "because the Earth is home to far more species than we've identified, there are surely many species going extinct unnoticed." But all the claimed 30,000 extinctions are "unnoticed." The Field cannot name any of them.

This is not considered a problem by the most radical proponents of global action to prevent the ravages of capitalism. Gro Harlem Brundtland, whose 1987 UN report is in many ways at the root of socialism's highly successful environmental counterthrust, has put it this way: "The library of life is burning, and we don't even know the titles of the books."

Prof. Wilson's figures have come under attack, but only by the brave. Dr. Patrick Moore, the now apostate founding member of Greenpeace, suggested that the only place you could find the alleged plethora of lost species was in Prof. Wilson's computer: "They're actually electrons on a hard drive."

Similarly, Bjorn Lomborg, in his much reviled but little refuted book, The Skeptic-al Environmentalist, noted that actual observations of habitat loss in no way backed up apocalyptic extinction estimates. For example, he pointed out that the forest of the Eastern United States had been reduced to fragments totalling just 1% to 2% of its previous area. This had resulted in the recorded extinction of one forest bird!

You might imagine that the slight matter of a factor difference of 20,000 in extinction figures would lead to some disagreement between the World Conservation Union and the Field Museum, but no. Just as the old revolutionary slogan was "No enemies on the left," so the present variant is "No environmental exaggeration is too great in a good cause." Indeed, the IUCN appears clearly frustrated that it is bounded by actual observed science in doing its godly environmental work. Its assumptions of invisible species loss is right up there with that of the Field, in fact, way out in front of it. Nevertheless, its "hard" figures, despite the hysterical spin put on them, suggest that the "biotic holocaust" is a myth. In a good cause, of course. Donate today.

Further requests for information from the Field eventually produced a reply from the scientist in charge of the extinction exhibit. He concluded, after appropriate citations from "the literature," that "the overwhelming consensus of scientists studying biodiversity around the world is that Earth is currently involved in a period of incredible species loss."

Incredible indeed.