

Dangers of crying wolf over risk of extinctions

Sir— Media coverage of conservation research is usually welcomed by the scientists involved, but there are pitfalls to heed. Damaging simplifications of research findings may expose conservationists to accusations of crying wolf, and play directly into the hands of anti-environmentalists. For example, in January 2004 it was widely reported in the UK print media that one million species would go extinct by 2050. The original report (*Nature* **427**, 145–148: 2004) however, was based on 1,103 species and clearly stated that — as a consequence of climate change over the next fifty years — a variable proportion of land animals and plants might eventually go extinct.

We reviewed 29 reports in the local and national UK press, and found that many of the errors could be traced back to the press releases and agency newswires. In the first press release, from the lead author's university, the figure of a million species appears along with the claim that a quarter of all land animals and plants may go extinct — but *eventually*, not by 2050. Newswires ranged from the cautious (“Hundreds of species of land plants and animals around the globe could vanish or be on the road to extinction over the next 50 years if global warming continues” — Dow Jones International) to the sensational (“Global warming could wipe out a quarter of all species of plants and animals on earth by 2050” — Reuters).

Unsurprisingly, subsequent newspaper articles in the national and local press were highly inaccurate: 21 of the 29 reports we reviewed claimed that a million or more species would be extinct by 2050. Two reports even claimed that one-third of the entire world's species would become extinct. No reports specified the full range

of uncertainty (5.6% to 78.6% of the species studied would be committed to future extinction) and only two correctly stated that most species would become extinct well after 2050. (Full details of our survey can be seen at www.geog.ox.ac.uk/research/biodiversity/pubs/index.html).

Politicians and conservationists repeated these statements. The European Union's environment commissioner Margot Wallström, for example, commented on “the recently published study that suggests global warming could wipe out a third of the planet's species by 2050”.

How can the conservation community prevent a repeat of such wide-scale media misrepresentation? Practical steps might be for high-profile journals to restrict press releases in the climate-change arena to research papers that present clear and unequivocal findings, and for scientists to write to newspaper editors, trustees of major charities and politicians to clarify misleading media articles. More generally, any institute, journal or individual involved in putting out a press release has a responsibility to ensure it is both accurate and perfectly clear.

Richard J. Ladle, Paul Jepson, Miguel B.

Araújo, Robert J. Whittaker

Biodiversity Research Group, School of Geography & the Environment, Oxford University, Mansfield Road, Oxford OX1 3PS, UK