

# Habitat Loss

Habitat loss—due to destruction, fragmentation, or degradation of habitat—is the primary threat to the survival of wildlife in the United States. When an ecosystem has been dramatically changed by human activities—such as agriculture, oil and gas exploration, commercial development, or water diversion—it may no longer be able to provide the food, water, cover, and places to raise young that wildlife need to survive. Every day there are fewer places left that wildlife can call home.

## Major Kinds of Habitat Loss

**Habitat destruction:** A bulldozer pushing down trees is the iconic image of habitat destruction. Other ways people directly destroy habitat include filling in wetlands, dredging rivers, mowing fields, and cutting down trees.

**Habitat fragmentation:** Much of the remaining terrestrial wildlife habitat in the U.S. has been cut up into fragments by roads and



and fragmentation of habitats makes it difficult for migratory species to find places to rest and feed along their migration routes.

**Habitat degradation:** **Pollution**, **invasive species**, and disruption of ecosystem processes (such as changing the intensity of fires in an ecosystem) are some of the ways habitats can become so degraded, they no longer support native wildlife.

## Main Causes of Habitat Loss

**Agriculture:** Much of the habitat loss from agriculture was done long ago when settlers converted forests and prairies to cropland. Today, there is increasing pressure to redevelop conservation lands for high-priced food and biofuel crops.

**Land conversion for development:** The conversion of lands that once provided wildlife habitat to housing developments, roads, office parks, strip malls, parking lots and industrial sites continues, even during the current economic crisis.

**Water development:** Dams and other water diversions siphon off and disconnect waters, changing hydrology and water chemistry (when nutrients are not able to flow downstream). During the dry season, the Colorado River has little to no water in it by the time it reaches the Sea of Cortez.

**Pollution:** Freshwater wildlife are most impacted by pollution. Pollutants such as untreated sewage, mining waste, acid rain, fertilizers and pesticides concentrate in rivers, lakes and wetlands and eventually end up in estuaries and the **food web**.

**Climate change:** The emerging driver of habitat loss is **climate change**. Wildlife that need the cool temperatures of high elevations, such as the **American pika**, may soon run out of habitat. Coastal wildlife may find their habitat underwater as sea levels rise.

## How to Combat Habitat Loss

Combat habitat loss in your community by creating a **Certified Wildlife Habitat®** near your home, school, or business. Plant native plants and put out a water source so that you can provide the food, water, cover, and places to raise young that wildlife need to survive.

### Sources

In Search of Wildlife-friendly Biofuels: Are Native Prairie Plants the Answer?, Science Daily

Precious Heritage: The Status of Biodiversity in the United States. Stein, B.A., J.S. Adams and L.S. Kutner. Oxford University Press, New York: 2000.

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