



NEWSLETTER

SOUTH LAKE SIMCOE NATURALISTS

SLSN is an incorporated not-for-profit Member of Ontario Nature.

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(www.slsnc.ca)

Research Partner with The Zephyr Society of Lake Simcoe (www.zephyrsociety.ca)

Member: Rescue Lake Simcoe Coalition

Member: Ontario Greenbelt Alliance

Note: Please renew your membership to receive future Newsletters

Meetings and Outings

Meetings: All Meetings start at 7:30 p.m. at the York Region Police Building Meeting Room (Baseline Road between McCowan and Civic Centre Road) unless noted otherwise. Members events (insurance compliance). Visitors welcome.

York Regional Police, 3 District Community Meeting Room
3527 Baseline Road, Georgina.



Tuesday, Oct. 11 **Insect Decline Crisis – Re-visited: We know that insect species are being Lost across the planet:** Club members research and presentation. This will be a more in-depth review and analysis of an expose article in the December 2015 “Canadian Geographic” Magazine. **“Insects are by far the most populous species on Earth, and they seem to be disappearing. So why aren’t more people concerned?”** This serious wildlife and planetary conservation issue needs urgently to be explored by us all. **Please read the article – pp. 51-56 Canadian Geographic, Dec. 2015 at the local library, or on-line for the conversation.**

- *Paul Harpley will provide a brief presentation primer in preparation for the S. E. Sutton Chimney Swift habitat Survey (Wed. Oct 12) evening as well as information about the future research. He will also provide a brief update on the important provincial Greenbelt Review and implications for South Lake Simcoe.*

Tuesday, Nov. 8 **Butterflies of the Rouge National Urban Park: Annual Autumn Event.** Don’t miss this must-see conservation biology presentation! Everyone welcome. **Park Ecologist Leonardo Cabrera** will be our guest presenter. There will be a small silent auction and baked goods for sale as in past years. Club members are asked to please donate a few, but unique auction items AND home-baking. ***Paid up Club members reserve seats with \$2.00 donation. Non-members \$5.00. The event is at the Egypt Hall.*** Phone Paul 905-722-8021 or Norma 905-476-4747 for further information.

Outings: All regular outings – Note: **Paid-up members may participate (for insurance compliance).**

2016 AUTUMN

Wednesday, Oct.12 **Chimney Swift Roost and Nest location Study:** Club members and researchers with the Zephyr Society of Lake

Simcoe have confirmed active Chimney Swift populations in South-west Sutton. An Ontario endangered species, Chimney Swifts in Sutton in areas including development proposals, this initial survey of habitat areas will be undertaken in preparation for detailed research in 2017. Meet at 5:00 p.m. at the Tim Horton's in Sutton on Dalton Rd, to be part of this important project. Dress for the weather. Bring binoculars etc.

Sunday, Oct. 23 **Autumn Birding and Nature Study:** The annual Autumn Birding trip along Lake Simcoe will concentrate on waterfowl and shorebirds, this year to the east. Rare migrants can sometimes turn up unexpectedly so be prepared. Later in the day we may do some hiking and general nature study in one of our local natural areas. Meet at 7:30 a.m. at the Tim Horton's in Sutton on Dalton Road. Dress for the weather. Bring binoculars etc.

Sunday, Jan. 1 **Sutton Christmas Bird Count:** The Annual Count this year is an official Audubon Society and Bird Studies Canada Count. Call Paul to register 905-722-8021. Coordinated by Paul and Debra Harpley.

Date in January **Rouge National Urban Park Winter Bird Count:** Call to register 905-722-8021. Date to be announced by National Park later in the year. Area 10.

Date in February **Winter Trail Outing:** A traditional club afternoon adventure in a Regional Forest location in the South Lake Simcoe area. Actual details of the trip will depend on weather and existing conditions snowshoeing, skiing, hiking. Meet at Coffee Time, Highway 48 south of Baldwin at 1:00 p.m. Dress for the weather. Phone 905-722-8021 if you plan to participate.

Date late February **Deer Census in Rouge Park National Park:** Call to register 905-722-8021. Date to be announced later based on winter weather conditions.

**Members please consider writing and submitting an article to the Talon Newsletter.
Submit to one of the Executive members.**

Georgina Council takes Direct Action for Conservation – Finally!

This past week at a regular Georgina Council meeting on the evening of Wednesday September 28 Council was taking final suggestions/recommendations on our community response to the important Provincial Coordinated Landuse Review Process which in our area means the Greenbelt. I was at Council and made presentation regarding two key conservation refinements to the Greenbelt our organization, the South Lake Simcoe Naturalists (Ontario Nature) has been advocating since 2005 when the original Greenbelt was established (by the –government following the ORM Act and plan of the Harris Gov.).

We believe the shrinking of the Pefferlaw Secondary Plan developable area and liberating undevelopable areas formally to the provincial Greenbelt, and formal establishment of Urban River Valley designations into the urban river areas of Keswick, Sutton/Jackson's Point and Pefferlaw must be a part of the new Greenbelt in 2016, same as the Province has recently acted on in rivers draining south off the Oak Ridges Moraine into communities in the south in Toronto and area (eg. Rouge, Humber etc.). At this point the Province is not designating our rivers here in Georgina in its Proposed Plan (2016) in spite of clear River Valley Connections at these urban locations for the Maskinonge, Black and Pefferlaw Rivers, important rivers draining north off the Oak Ridges Moraine into sensitive Lake Simcoe.

At the meeting council reiterated the shrinking of the Pefferlaw Secondary Plan area and its incorporation of this as a recommendation for Growing the Greenbelt there. Our insistence on the very important Urban River Valley designations on our rivers in our Town/Villages areas was recognized by Council at the meeting and they directed staff to make this change to Georgina's comments to the Province reflecting this. This is commendable.

One troubling misunderstanding was the assertion by one Georgina Councillor Sebo, Ward 4 that the Lake Simcoe Act in itself was protecting our area rivers with the implication that our rivers cannot be improved through future landuse planning, conservation actions and new and emerging science understandings (like those recommendations supported that evening with regard to Greenbelt improvements) meant, or worse, need not be. As someone intimately involved with the evolution and establishment of the Lake Simcoe Act and Plan, and in various formal and informal arenas acting to apply it in South Lake Simcoe and beyond I want to make it clear this is not an accurate perception. Much work remains to be done beyond the Act and Plan for our rivers, streams and creeks and ultimately Lake Simcoe. Phosphorous reduction in Lake Simcoe is proceeding with help of the act, but much more remains to be done. There was also a comment that implied communities south of our watershed in the Lake Ontario watershed had somehow less protection than our area. An inaccurate perception again. Those well-known Toronto and area rivers (indeed from Niagara to Kingston and north to the Oak Ridges Moraine) that have been recently designated Urban River Valleys have the same provincial, regional and municipal protections, and are arguably more and intensively monitored than rivers in our watershed and have oversight of the Great Lakes Act that has been informed by our Lake Simcoe Act and is being greatly strengthened now as I write this.

I commend Georgina Council for acting on these two recommendations with leadership and directing staff to act now. It is however **very late in the game**, with final comments due at the Province at the end of the month, and the Region of York is also moving on recommendation but of a general not specific enough action to our communities. My consultations with senior Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing staff have uncovered that they have little or no understanding or details of actions of our community and municipality in regard to these conservation matters surrounding the Greenbelt, accept through our submissions to them. The most appropriate actions of staff and Council now must be to announce these two recommendations loud and clear in writing, verbally and politically in Newmarket at the Region, and in Toronto at Queen's Park **now!** **This is the great conservation advocacy work remaining for our municipality and Council, or their (and our) wishes will not be heeded.**

What we can do ourselves now!

Our most important contribution to conservation of our urban water areas at this time is to continue to encourage the Town, the Region of York and the Province of Ontario in the strongest ways possible, to act on these recommendations of formal incorporation into the Greenbelt now! SLSN members, please contact local councillors, Regional councillors and our local M.P.P. and advise them to act to ensure these change happen. It is imperative action happens now as the province is trying to grow and strengthen the Greenbelt in their current Review. At this point the Draft Provincial Greenbelt Plan does not incorporate these important conservation actions. Phone me at 905-722-8021 for further information.

Time is running out. Direct Action be us all is absolutely necessary, Now.

Paul Harpley, President

South Lake Simcoe Naturalists

York Region Forest News

The Region's ash tree removal contractor will be undertaking work in Dainty Tract, Patterson Tract, Eldred King Tract and Hall Tract of the York Regional Forest beginning on October 18th, 2016. The operation is expected to last until December 20th, 2016.

Also, the Region's contract for an Accessible Trail in the Hall Tract will soon be commencing. The successful contractor, Mopal Construction Ltd., has been provided with a start date of October 17, 2016. However, due to diminishing 2016 operable time, they have requested the contractor start as soon as they can. They plan to have this work completed November 14, 2016, if weather permits.

Water Problems in Ontario



Did you know that in Ontario every year **1 billion plastic bottles go either to a landfill, or worse: into our environment including our Great Lakes?** Shockingly, only half of the 2 billion single use plastic bottles bought by Ontarians each year are recycled. And many of these are water bottles produced by companies, like Nestlé, who only pay \$3.71 for every million litres of precious water they extract from our lakes, rivers and aquifers.

We must stop plastic bottles from polluting our environment and is our plan to make that happen:

Step 1: Create a deposit return program – Ontario is one of only two provinces in Canada that doesn't have a program in place.

Step 2: Use the funds to implement water protection programs – The money from returned bottles could be used for a water protection fund.

Step 3: Encourage Ontarians to drink tap water – Ontario has some of the cleanest, safest tap water in the world.

Step 4: Make industrial users pay their fair share – If bottled water is going to be produced, these companies should pay much more. Right now bottled water companies, like Nestlé continue to draw upwards of *3 million litres of water per day* at a minimal price. We are practically *giving away* our precious freshwater.

Let's fix Ontario's plastic pollution problem and clean up the Lakes!

Ashley Wallis

Water Program Manager

Petition: http://action.environmentaldefence.ca/p/dia/action3/common/public/?action_KEY=19586&Email

Tell Ontario to fix the permitting system for bottled water companies

Premier Kathleen

Wynne has asked

Environment

Minister Glen

Murray to review

permit conditions

for bottled water

companies. This is

long overdue.



Currently, water takers like water bottlers pay only **\$3.71 for a million litres of water**. This means that a company like Nestlé could fill an Olympic size swimming pool for less than \$10! As a result of these extremely low rates, the Ontario government recovers only **1.2 per cent of the \$16.2 million** it spends on water conservation and management programs. It's time for water takers to pay more.

But it's not just a matter of money. The province also needs to ensure that water takings don't deplete our precious water resources, harm the environment, or threaten communities' access to clean drinking water.

In the midst of a drought across much of southern Ontario, water bottling giant Nestlé has

continued to draw upwards of 3 million litres of water per day from an aquifer located just outside of Guelph in Aberfoyle, Ontario. Studies show that ecosystems in that area are periodically stressed by low water levels. And local groups report that water levels in the aquifer that supplies Nestlé's production have dropped 1.5 metres from 2011 to 2015.

It's time to fix the permitting system for these water takers. Tell Ontario that water is for life. Not for profit.

Your message will be sent to Premier Kathleen Wynne and Environment Minister Glen Murray.

Climate Politics Continuing

I'm flabbergasted.

This weekend, Trudeau's Environment Minister McKenna told CTV that the Liberal government is sticking with Harper's embarrassing, science-free climate targets. Um, excuse me?!

These are targets she herself has previously referred to as "unambitious" and "the floor, not the ceiling" of what Canada should be doing.

This, from a government elected on promises to tackle the climate crisis and undo Harper's destructive climate legacy? Who do they think they're fooling?

Well, if Trudeau won't lead on climate with real, science-based carbon emissions targets, then our only choice is to stop climate-destroying mega-projects like Kinder Morgan ourselves.

We've built a tool for Canadians to use to send letters opposing Kinder Morgan straight to Justin Trudeau and the Ministerial Panel reviewing the project, but we need to get the word out about it.

On cleaning up the corrupt National Energy Board and now on climate, Trudeau and his team are blowing it, following precisely in Stephen Harper's footsteps.

But with flows of displaced climate refugees already destabilizing many countries, we don't have time for business as usual Harper-style.

Kinder Morgan's pipeline expansion would be the equivalent of adding 34 million more cars to Canadian roads, and with the "unambitious" GHG targets Minister McKenna is willing to accept, this is just another nail in the coffin of Canada's plan to lead on climate.

2016 will likely go down as the hottest year in recorded history—this is an all-hands-on-deck moment for humanity.

But powerful fossil fuel interests are getting desperate, trying to squeeze the last few billions out of their reserves. It is these same interests who have flooded the Kinder Morgan Ministerial panel with 16,000 pro-pipeline comments and are putting pressure on Justin Trudeau to push this project through.

That's why, with your help, we organized to level the playing field, and made sure when the Ministerial Review Panel were on their tour that they heard loud and clear from the majority of British Columbians that we do not want this project to threaten our coast and our climate.

In the last five days, more than 5,300 Dogwood supporters like you have submitted heartfelt, personal letters to the panel, telling them that our communities do not grant permission for this project.

But we only have 12 more days until the panel cuts off public comments, and we need to get thousands more people on board if we're going to make an impact.

Christina

Dogwood Project, Climate Reality, 2016-09

P.S. With Trudeau abandoning his climate promises, it is going to be up to you and thousands of other Dogwood supporters to do the heavy lifting and stop the oil sands-expanding pipelines in their tracks.

UN's Sustainable Development Goals

Not even the rap version of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (sample lyric: "Carbon-free energy is goal number 7 / And how to achieve it is a question that's pressing") is going to change the snoozefest image that most people have of the UN General Assembly. But for those attending this year's confab, there is a sense of excitement, even urgency.

It's Ban Ki-Moon's last assembly as UN secretary-general. The race to succeed him has been hotly contested, with nine candidates still in the running. And compared to when Ban was picked a decade ago, the world's great powers, the US included, seem to want a more active UN to tackle the problems facing the planet.

The big ones are climate change and refugees. Officials hope to soon secure the ratifications required to bring last December's Paris accords on climate into force. That would tie countries into cutting carbon emissions enough to halt the worst of global warming. But it probably won't be enough to prevent widespread weather disasters, climate-related conflicts—and, consequently, mass migrations.

The number of displaced people, mainly driven from their homes by conflict, is already at an all-time high. Leaders are expected to sign a grand declaration on the rights of refugees and migrants this week. Whether it will achieve anything remains to be seen; the political winds in many countries are blowing more isolationist. And poorer nations, where 86% of the world's

refugees reside, are getting restless at having to house them while far richer countries complain about immigrants.

That means the UN's next leader will have a tough job—but also, potentially, a higher profile than the self-effacing Ban. For the UN, it will be nice to feel relevant again.—*Gideon Lichfield*

Quartz News Service 2016-09-18

Fastest CO2 increase on record

By Eleanor Imster in EARTH | June 15, 2016

The recent El Niño has driven a rise in atmospheric CO2. Scientists expect it to surpass 400 parts per million for the year and stay there at least a human lifetime.



Image via University of Exeter, U.K.

Climate scientists report that the human-caused rise in atmospheric concentration of carbon dioxide is getting an extra boost this year from El Niño, resulting in the fastest annual increase of CO₂ levels on record.

According to a paper published June 13, 2016 in the journal *Nature Climate Change*, 2016 will be the first year with concentrations above 400 parts per million (ppm) all year round. Even if human emissions began to decline, say the scientists, concentrations will likely remain above this point for at least a human lifetime.

Richard Betts, of University of Exeter, is the paper's lead author. He said in a statement:

The atmospheric carbon dioxide concentration is rising year-on-year due to human emissions, but this year it is getting an extra boost due to the recent El Niño event – changes in the sea-surface temperature of the tropical Pacific Ocean. This warms and dries tropical ecosystems, reducing their uptake of carbon, and exacerbating forest fires. Since human emissions are now 25 percent greater than in the last big El Niño in 1997-98, this all adds up to a record CO₂ rise this year.

The rising trend in CO₂ was first recorded at Hawaii's Mauna Loa Observatory in 1958. The early measurements were around 315 parts per million of carbon dioxide. Sixty years later this has been rising at an average rate of 2.1 parts per million (ppm). Using a seasonal climate forecast model and statistical relationship with sea temperatures, scientists forecast the rise this year to be a record 3.15 ppm. The average concentration in 2016 is forecast to be 404.45 ppm, dropping to 401.48 in September before resuming their ongoing rise next year.

Carbon dioxide concentrations show modest ups-and-downs with the seasons. Plants draw down CO₂ in the summer and release it again in the autumn and winter. Betts said:

Carbon dioxide at Mauna Loa is currently above 400 parts per million, but would have been expected to drop back down below this level in September. However, we predict that this will not happen now, because the recent El Niño has warmed and dried tropical ecosystems and driven forest fires, adding to the CO₂ rise.

Since natural processes only remove carbon dioxide from the atmosphere gradually, levels will remain high even if human emissions began to decline. Scientists expect the concentrations to now remain above 400 parts per million for at least a human lifetime.

The 400 ppm value (400 molecules of CO₂ for every one million molecules in the atmosphere) is a symbolic milestone for scientists – it has no particular significance for the physics of the climate system. The reason it has resonance is that the last time atmospheric CO₂ was regularly above 400 ppm was 3 to 5 million years ago – before modern humans existed. Betts told the BBC.

There's nothing magical about this number. We don't expect anything suddenly to happen. It's just an interesting milestone that reminds us of our ongoing influence on the climate system.

Ralph Keeling of the Scripps Institution of Oceanography is a co-author on the paper. He said:

Back in September last year, we suspected that we were measuring CO₂ concentrations below 400 parts per million for the last time. Now it is looking like this was indeed the case.

Bottom line: According to a paper published June 13, 2016 in the journal *Nature Climate Change*, 2016 will be the first year with atmospheric CO2 concentrations above 400 parts per million all year round. Climate scientists report that the human-caused rise in atmospheric concentration of carbon dioxide is getting an extra boost this year from El Niño, resulting in the fastest annual increase of CO2 levels on record.

Invasive Species Centre

September 2016



Executive Director Greetings

It has been almost a year since the Invasive Species Act for Ontario received Royal Assent. Since that time the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry staff and partners have been busy behind the scenes to prepare for the Act coming into effect on November 3rd of this year. The Invasive Species Centre is proud to have contributed to those efforts. Read more about the work that we've been doing in partnership with the MNRF below.

As we head into the season of harvest and thanksgiving I would like to thank my team of dedicated staff, board and all of the funders and partners that we work with to prevent the introduction and spread of invasive species in Canada. The work that we are all doing will help get us closer to a goal of a Canada where land and water are protected from invasive species.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that appears to read 'Nancy'.

Ontario's Invasive Species Act becomes Law November 2016!

On November 3, 2016, the Ontario Invasive Species Act, 2015, comes into effect. This statute provides Ontario with the power to make regulations prescribing priority invasive species and classifying them as either prohibited or restricted. This standalone piece of legislation was developed with the intent of holistically preventing and managing the introduction and spread of invasive species throughout Ontario and is the first of its kind in Canada.

Though species covered by this Act only represent a small fraction of the total number of invasive species that have already been introduced or have even become established in Ontario, by proposing the below listed priority species for regulation, Ontario is taking a significant step in ongoing efforts to prevent the introduction and spread of these and other invasives in the province. Additionally, the Ontario Government's objective in this regard is to continue to work with new and existing partners to fulfill the actions set out in the 2012 Ontario Invasive Species Strategic Plan, including the ongoing programs being developed and delivered by the Invasive Species Centre, the Ontario Federation of Anglers and Hunters Invading Species Awareness Program and the Ontario Invasive Plant Council.

Ontario Invasive Species Regulations Now Posted for Public Review and Comment

As the most efficient and cost-effective invasive species management strategy is prevention, a key objective of the Invasive Species Act is to prevent new invasive species from arriving and establishing in Ontario. Bighead carp, silver carp, grass carp, black carp, snakehead, stone moroko, zander, wels catfish, killer shrimp, yabby, golden mussel, hydrilla, Brazilian elodea, water soldier, European water chestnut, and parrot feather would be prohibited in Ontario under the proposed Regulations which support the implementation of the Invasive Species Act. In addition to these aquatic invasives, Ontario is proposing a regulation which would classify phragmites, dog strangling vine, and Japanese knotweed as restricted species under the Invasive Species Act, 2015. In assessing the risks posed by these species to Ontario, all the proposed species were found to have the potential to cause, or are causing significant negative impacts to the natural environment. The ecological impacts posed by these species were also determined to be likely to result in negative social and economic impacts, such as reduced recreational opportunities, aesthetic value or increased infrastructure maintenance costs.

This regulatory proposal has been posted for a 33 day public review and comment period which began September 8, 2016. If you or your organization have any questions or comments, they can be submitted online for consideration, [here](#), by October 11, 2016. For more information visit the ISC [website](#) or the [Environmental Registry](#).

Experts' Meetings on Risk Assessments

Risk assessments are an instrumental tool for determining how likely it is for an invasive species to establish itself in Ontario, and estimates the extent of damage and impact that can be expected. In Ontario, all ecological and socio-economic risk assessments must follow a standardized guideline that allow unbiased levels of risk to be assigned for arrival, survival, spread, and establishment of a species.

Since the autumn of 2015, the ISC has hosted three risk assessment peer review workshops in partnership with the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry (OMNRF). The workshops brought together experts on various aquatic invasive species to discuss the risks these species pose to Ontario waters. These experts represent non-profit organizations, academia, as well as provincial and

federal governments. The workshop style allows experts to discuss, share knowledge, and eventually reach a consensus as to what level of risk each species poses to Ontario. To date, the ISC has hosted workshops to review seven aquatic species total.

Following the conclusion of these workshops, participants provided extensive comments and suggestions for each written report so that the respective authors could create a finalized version. These risk assessments are now being used to inform new regulations on invasive species that will fall under Ontario's new Invasive Species Act that comes into force November 3, 2016.

International Conservation News

Ivory poachers driving rare bird to extinction

By Nigel Collar, 28 Sep 2016



At 1.5 metres long the Helmeted Hornbill is the largest of its kind in Asia © Michaela Koschova

A sudden explosion of demand for the Helmeted Hornbill's casque as "ivory" is plunging the species to extinction at frightening speed. Yesterday the government of Indonesia once again explained the issue during the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) - a gathering of 182 nations currently underway in Johannesburg, South Africa.

Perhaps the single most iconic bird species in what remains of the great dipterocarp forests of the Greater Sundas (Peninsular Malaysia, Sumatra and Borneo) has suddenly been discovered to be plunging at frightening speed towards extinction. In November 2015, BirdLife placed the **Helmeted Hornbill** *Rhinoplax vigil* on the IUCN Red List in the highest category of threat: Critically Endangered. The reason: a sudden explosion of demand for the "ivory" that its casque (the "horn" on the top of its bill) uniquely possesses.

At 1.5 metres long the Helmeted Hornbill is the largest of its kind in Asia; but this is the least of its remarkable features. It has a surprisingly short, spiky bill, a thick, carunculated bare neck which is deep red in the male and whitish in the female, as well as much the longest tail of any hornbill, with

wonderful black and white central feathers greatly prized by the indigenous peoples of the forest.

It also has a very striking sheer-fronted casque rising over the front of its head. Other hornbill casques are ornamental and hollow, but the casque of the Helmeted Hornbill has evolved into a weapon of sorts. “Very striking” is an apt term, because the casque is used in rarely seen aerial jousts in which two birds fly from a treetop in opposite directions, circle round and swoop at each other, cracking their casques together in mid-air in a spectacular contest for supremacy. Casque-butting has been thought to be an elaborate ritual for deciding who gets to stay in a tree to eat its fruit, but it may be more to do with wider territoriality and is perhaps closely related to pair bond reinforcement.

Whatever the explanation, these contests have evidently driven the evolution of the solid front to the casque of the Helmeted Hornbill; old males develop particularly awesome structures. For millennia, indigenous people in the Sundaic rainforests have used the casques of hunted birds to carve various kinds of ornament; when these were traded with Chinese merchants over a thousand years ago, the interest in China in hornbill “ivory” was ignited.



Helmeted Hornbill ivory casques © Chris R. Shepherd

Chinese craftsmen, working within an oral tradition that has left no trace of their techniques, made use of hornbill ivory to carve the most exquisite pieces, engraving them with traditional scenes and themes. Items from buckles to snuff boxes were made from the material; as a demonstration of their sheer genius, some of the carvers left the casque on the head of the bird, producing the most breathtakingly elaborate miniature scenes. The nineteenth century western craze for chinoiserie resulted in hornbill ivory products also being exported to Europe and America.

But the trade dwindled in the early twentieth century, while the Second World Hong Kong Customs and

Marine Police seize Helmeted Hornbills casques in an anti-smuggling operation, May 2015 (Hong Kong Customs and Marine Police) War seemed to kill it off completely. There was no evidence of any external trade during the second half of the century although, perhaps as a precaution, the Helmeted Hornbill was placed on Appendix I of CITES from the first implementation of the convention in 1975. BirdLife treated it as threatened in 1988, owing to fears over habitat loss, but further evaluation indicated that Near Threatened was a more suitable listing; it remained in this category from 1994 until the end of 2015.

But two years ago Yokyok Hadiprakarsa, an independent hornbill research expert based in Indonesia, began to uncover evidence that the species was the target of a new clandestine trade for its “ivory”. His further research, using Asian trading websites, now reveals that the demand for hornbill artefacts, far more crudely carved than in centuries past, suddenly took off in 2011, feeding a new interest among the Chinese nouveau riche. His work in West Kalimantan, checking on reports of confiscations and talking to villagers, foresters and officials, suggested that in 2012–2013 as many as 500 Helmeted Hornbills were being hunted in the province every month, a rate of 6,000 birds a year. The heads were then being smuggled to major ports in Sumatra and Java and thence to Hong Kong and Taiwan.

Separate studies by the Environmental Investigation Agency and by TRAFFIC South-East Asia have now confirmed the scale of the slaughter in Indonesia. The arrest this year of smugglers in Sumatra, in part to the credit of Indonesian staff of the Wildlife Conservation Society, has also indicated how wide and how fast the network of criminal gangs has spread in the rainforests of Sumatra and Borneo, with local hunters being recruited to go into the forest and shoot down every large hornbill in the hope that it would prove to be Helmeted. All the evidence suggests that this trade is simply an extension of the illegal trafficking of other wildlife products, as well as in drugs and other illicit goods, being conducted with ruthless efficiency across Indonesia’s two great islands.

BirdLife has moved as fast as possible to lend its support to the international conservation response that is clearly urgently needed to address this crisis. First, it conducted an emergency evaluation of the Helmeted Hornbill’s threat status. The new evidence concerning the pervasiveness of poaching in Indonesia, including reports from seasoned bird tour leaders that the species has suddenly become much harder to find, were obviously decisive; but the facts that the birds have such a low reproductive rate, with the female sealing herself into the nest cavity for around five months, and that killing the male who feeds her in the nest will certainly cause the chick’s death and possibly also the female’s, clearly also mean that populations will be unable to recover for many years. Moreover, the large emergent trees which bear the cavities in which the species habitually nests are commonly the target for logging operations. If being listed now as Critically Endangered has one consolation, it is that the species becomes eligible for support from a number of charitable sources.

The second step BirdLife took, through its regional division and national Partners, was to join forces with a group of conservationists in South-East Asia who are developing a plan of campaign to bring the crisis to world attention and to promote all possible measures to resolve it.

The group will be seeking to achieve a range of objectives: to promote awareness among consumers of both the illegality and the impact of the trade; to arouse expressions of concern by range states; to raise support from high profile sympathisers; to increase vigilance and activity by enforcement agencies at all levels; to involve NGO-backed protection units operating for other charismatic animals targeted by poachers; to create hornbill guardians among local citizenry; and to develop nest adoption schemes and community incentives for conservation.

To date, the gangs appear not to have moved into Malaysia or southern Thailand, but it is surely only a matter of time. Heading them off, while spiking their guns in Indonesia, is going to be a major undertaking in 2016; one for which the newly formed Helmeted Hornbill Working Group will need all

the help it can enlist.
