

# Overstating the value of the IUCN Red List for business decision-making

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## Abstract

The relationship between business and conservation is growing increasingly closer, with the recognition that collaboration can lead to better outcomes for biodiversity. Bennun et al. introduce the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species (the Red List) to inform businesses' mitigation of biodiversity impacts; and subsequently how it can be improved to further increase its effectiveness. While we applaud this ever-closer union of business and conservation, we believe the authors overinflate the value of the Red List in decision-making, do not account for its limitations and therefore do not justify their conclusions for improving the Red List for business use. We are concerned this focus on wide application of the Red List promotes it as a “one-stop-shop” and could lead to discounting of more appropriate approaches.

## KEYWORDS

biodiversity, biodiversity indicators, environmental impact assessment, strategic environmental assessment, structured decision-making

The relationship between business and conservation is growing increasingly closer, recognizing that collaboration could lead to better outcomes for biodiversity. Bennun et al. (2017) introduce the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species (the Red List) to inform businesses' mitigation of biodiversity impacts and subsequently how it can be improved to further increase its effectiveness. The Red List is a global-scale inventory of the conservation status of animals, plants and fungi, used to document those species most in need of conservation attention (Mace et al., 2008). While the Red List is one of many useful conservation tools, it is often used for purposes for which it was not designed, and as such requires caution (Possingham et al., 2002). We are concerned that Bennun et al. (2017) overinflate the applicability of the Red List across the entire project life (from screening to decommissioning), promoting it as a “one-stop-shop” for business decision-making, which could lead to discounting of more appropriate approaches. In addition, their

recommendations fail to address the fundamental constraints of using a global-scale database for site-level management.

Bennun et al. (2017) state the Red List is most important early in the screening phase of developments, with increasing need for interpretation and site-specific data later in the project life. However, avoidance of impact is the most effective way of protecting biodiversity from development, which needs to be informed by site-level information from the start (Phalan et al., 2018). In the authors experience site-level surveys can be of variable quality and best targeted at filling gaps in the Red List. However, we contend that this should be motivation to improve the time, cost and scope of site-level surveys at the very earliest stages of project conception in order to effectively inform biodiversity sensitive project design. Furthermore, the authors recommend to strengthen the Red List's consistency and coverage (e.g., increasing the number of assessed taxa, geographic coverage, and range maps); however this will not improve site-level

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business application. The Red List is fundamentally coarse, meaning even if all species are assessed, its global scale and infrequent updates will remain of limited use to site-level projects who operate at meter-square resolutions and monthly to annual reporting cycles (Hoffmann et al., 2008; Martin et al., 2015).

Bennun et al.'s (2017) recommendations for strengthening the Red List means significant time and cost to hard-working volunteers, but at the same time they state the cost of the Red List is prohibitive to some businesses. Should the business community be serious about addressing their most critical knowledge gaps (e.g., noise sensitivity of primates the authors mention), they must engage other sectors and invest in doing so, rather than just hoping the Red List community does so for them. The Red List is a rich dataset that is used widely but its limitations and appropriateness must always be considered. It cannot and should not be seen as the silver bullet to any biodiversity problem and wider expertise and careful selection of the most appropriate tools for the job will always be required.

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