Briefly

International

Carbon cuts may be cheaper than first thought

A 2-year project using 11 different models has calculated, in contrast to previous studies, that the cost of stabilizing CO_2 levels could be small, equivalent to setting back the growth of GDP by less than 1% over 100 years. In some scenarios it is estimated that there could even be benefits to global GDP through, for example, increased investment in new technologies. The cheapest scenarios can only be realized by enforcing the restriction on carbon emissions from industry, which means that the USA will need to sign any future version of the Kyoto Protocol. Europe is also required to do more, especially in the area of investment in energy technologies. The findings remain controversial, however, with not all economists believing that the models would work in practice.

Source: *Nature* (2006), **441**(7091), 264–265.

Project launched to protect culturally important sites

Evidence of a link between sacred sites and high biodiversity has prompted the launch of an international initiative to conserve sacred areas. The project, backed by organizations such as indigenous peoples groups, the United Nations Environment Programme, and governments, has secured preliminary funding from the Global Environment Facility and is now working to raise over USD 1.7 million needed to start projects on the ground. The money will go to a number of sites across the globe that have been selected as pilot ecosystems for the initiative, including areas such as the Boloma-Bijagos archipelago in Guinea-Bissau, which contains habitats ranging from dry forests to coastal savannahs, and Wirikuta, said to be where the sun was born, in the Chihuahuan desert in Mexico, one of the world's most biologically diverse deserts.

Source: *UNEP press release* (18 March 2006) http://www.unep.org/Documents.Multilingual/Default.asp?DocumentID=471&ArticleID=5230&l=en

Hope for loggerheads...

A slight change in the way long-line fishing is carried out may reduce the accidental bycatch of Endangered loggerhead sea turtles. Studies carried out along the southern coast of Spain found that by baiting hooks with mackerel instead of squid and fishing slightly deeper than normal, loggerhead bycatch was reduced by 80%. The size of the target species catch, in this case swordfish, was unaffected by the change in fishing technique. Over 20,000 loggerhead turtles are caught on long-line hooks off the southern coast of Spain every year.

Source: *Earthwatch press release* (7 March 2006).

... and sharks

The winning entry of this year's Smart Gear competition, sponsored by WWF, may save the lives of thousands of sharks normally caught on hooks set to catch fish such as tuna and swordfish. Michael Hermann, of the USA company Shark Defense, found that by placing strong magnets just above the hooks on long-lines certain shark species were repelled because they are able to detect magnetic fields. The prize money of USD 25,000 will go towards further development and testing of this idea.

Source: http://www.panda.org/news_facts / newsroom / news / index.cfm?uNewsID=68540

Deep-sea volcanoes release greenhouse gas

Håkon Mosby, a mud volcano located 1,250 m below the surface of the Norwegian Sea, has been unmasked as a source of methane, a greenhouse gas accounting for *c*. 15% of global warming. The volcano was found to be releasing a huge column of methane bubbles, each encased in a tough skin that prevented oxidation of the gas until it reached the surface waters. It is estimated that Håkon Mosby releases several 100 t of methane every year in this way, leading to fears that deep-sea volcanoes may be significant contributors to global warming. However, no one is sure how many volcanoes there are in the world's seas and oceans, and it is unlikely that they are all active at the same time, so it is impossible at this stage to establish a significant link between deep-sea methane and atmospheric methane.

Source: *New Scientist* (2006), **189**(2541), 11.

Investors back Principles for Responsible Investment

A group of the world's largest institutional investors, representing >USD 2 trillion in assets owned, have signed up to the Principles for Responsible Investment, which mark the start of a United Nations effort to encourage such investors to consider the environmental and social impacts of their investments. The six voluntary Principles are supported by a set of 35 possible actions that investors can take to integrate environmental, social and corporate governance considerations into their investment activities. At the launch of the Principles in the New York Stock exchange, the UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan announced that the UN Joint Staff Pension Fund, which has *c*. USD 30 billion in assets, has signed on to the Principles.

Source: http://www.ens-newswire.com/ens/apr2006/2006-04-28-01.asp

Increased fossil fuel exploration raises risk of oil spill in Arctic

As Arctic ice melts, the area is becoming more accessible to oil and gas companies. According to some USA estimates the Arctic contains a quarter of the world's undiscovered reserves of fossil fuel, and incentives to access these resources will increase as temperatures and energy prices rise. There are fears, however, that increased activity in the Arctic region will make oil pollution in the area more likely, because of icebergs, spills and pipe corrosion. Oil pollution in the Arctic is particularly serious, as bacteria that break down oil can only survive the Arctic extremes during the short summer. New technologies, such as making rigs mobile so that they can avoid collisions with icebergs, are being developed to minimize the risk of oil pollution.

Source: *Marine Pollution Bulletin* (2006), **52**, 243.

Natural recovery often best for contaminated sediments

New research has shown that natural recovery may be the best way of dealing with contaminated sediments, even though this may be at odds with public concern. Activities such as dredging or capping pose risks to the workers, local people and the environment. Intrusive methods may even make things worse, by changing the geochemical conditions of the sediment. The report's authors suggest that in some cases natural processes such as weathering, sediment burial and contaminant transformation

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are enough to reduce toxicity, and they recommend careful evaluation of the risks posed by decontamination operations, to prevent environmental harm.
Source: *Marine Pollution Bulletin* (2006), **52**, 127.

Viagra helps seals

Until 1998 the 152 million men suffering from erectile dysfunction had no simple, effective solution to the problem. In some cases these men turned to Chinese traditional medicine, which includes the prescribing of threatened animal and plant parts. In 1998, however, the drug Viagra became available, and there is some evidence to suggest that its use is having a beneficial role in reducing consumption of threatened species. For example, trade in Canadian harp seal penises, traditionally used as a remedy for erectile dysfunction, has remained low despite a resurgence in trade of seal pelts and oil. According to some researchers this reflects a permanent decline in demand following the availability of new, effective drugs for treating erectile dysfunction.
Source: *Environmental Conservation* (2005), **32**, 235–238.

Over one fifth of bird species under threat

BirdLife's annual evaluation of the state of the planet's birds has found that 1,210 species are threatened with extinction, which, when combined with the number of Near Threatened species, gives a total of 2,005 species at risk. The number of birds on the Critically Endangered list is 181, and now includes the purple-backed sunbeam *Aglaeactis aliciae* from Peru and the Uluguru bush-shrike *Malaconotus alius* from Tanzania. It is not only tropical species that have been suffering declines; loss of nesting habitat and agricultural intensification in its European breeding grounds have resulted in the listing of the black-tailed godwit *Limosa limosa* as Near Threatened. It is not all bad news, however; the Seychelles fody *Foudia sechellarum* has been downlisted to Near Threatened as a result of habitat management and conservation measures.
Source: http://www.birdlife.org/news/news/2006/05/redlist.html

New primate species

The first new primate species to be discovered in Bolivia for 60 years, the golden palace monkey or Madidi titi monkey *Callicebus aureipalatii*, serves to highlight the importance of the area in which it was found. The Madidi protected area is thought to be the most diverse protected area in the world, with over 900 bird species recorded despite large areas of the park never having been visited by biologists. Population estimates for *C. aureipalatii* suggest that the monkey's survival is relatively secure as long as potential threats to the Madidi protected area, such as petroleum exploration and exploitation, are monitored. Elsewhere, the results of a molecular study of Malagasy lemurs belonging to the sportive genus *Lepilemur* support the classification of eight sportive leumr taxa as independent species, and high genetic differences between three distinct *Lepilemur ruficaudatus* populations indicate that these should be separated at the species level.
Source: *Primate Conservation* (2006), **20**, 29–39 & *BMC Evolutionary Biology* (2006), *doi* 10.1186/1471-2148-6-17.

Cold water corals at risk from fishing nets and ocean warming

Unlike their tropical cousins cold water coral reefs exist in permanently dark and cold environments at depths of 50–5,000 m. Despite these seemingly inhospitable conditions the corals have thrived; the largest cold water coral reef, the Sula Ridge Complex near the Norwegian coast, was first colonized 10,000 years ago, and is now 35 m tall and 14 km long. However, the threats to these fragile corals are mounting. Not only are they affected by deep water trawling practices, as fishermen turn to deeper waters as fish stocks dwindle, but changes in ocean acidity, brought about by increased oceanic CO_2 absorbtion may prevent calcification of the coral reef skeletons. Cold water corals are particularly vulnerable, as waters rich in aragonite, a form of calcium carbonate used by corals may not run deep enough in the future to reach the cold water reefs.
Source: http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2006/05/0501_060501_coral.html

Europe

Baltic Sea protected

A number of marine areas, including the Canary Islands, the Galápagos Islands and the Baltic Sea have been classified by the International Maritime Organization as Particularly Sensitive Sea Areas. The designation, which can be used to protect marine and coastal areas, requires ships to take special care when navigating through these waters. Two areas in the Baltic, Hoburgs Bank and Norra Midsjöbanken, have been declared as 'areas to be avoided', especially by shipping activities. The Baltic Sea is one of the most heavily used maritime areas in the world, and is also an important site for migratory sea birds and wildfowl, as well as for marine mammals.
Source: *Marine Pollution Bulletin* (2006), **52**, 126.

Bald ibis travel from Jersey to Jerez

Twelve Critically Endangered bald ibis, seven males and five females, were driven from the Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust in Jersey to Jerez Zoo by their keepers at the end of March to take part in a captive breeding programme in the Spanish zoo. The resulting offspring will be the focus of a project to learn how to reintroduce the birds into the wild. The conditions in southern Spain are similar to the areas in Syria and Morocco where the last remaining wild bald ibis populations occur, and it is hoped that the reintroduction project in Spain will facilitate future reintroduction projects for the species.
Source: http://www.durrellwildlife.org/index.cfm?p=322

Songbird trapping continues on Santorini

Every autumn thousands of migrating birds are caught on the Greek island of Santorini. The birds, which include goldfinches, chaffinches and greenfinches, are lured to man-made pools called limnes, which are often baited with captive birds. Once caught, males are kept as caged birds and females are eaten. This practice contravenes the European Commission's Wild Birds Directive, and some limnes were destroyed in 2005, although no trappers were arrested. The practice looks set to continue, however, with only six forest rangers available to cover the 24 islands of the Cyclades archipelago.
Source: *World Birdwatch* (2006), **March**, 5.

Migratory songbird declines linked to climate change

A study examining nine Dutch populations of the migratory pied flycatcher *Ficedula hypoleuca* have found that there has been a 90% population decrease in areas where the peak in their food, caterpillars, occurs earlier in the spring

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as a result of warmer weather. At sites where food peaks are latest there has been only a small reduction in the flycatcher population of *c*. 10%. Spring migrants such as the pied flycatcher have an inflexible migratory programme, and although there is evidence they start their egg laying earlier, the birds are unable to advance their arrival date to keep up with the temporal changes in their food supply.
Source: *Nature* (2006), **441**(7089), 81–83.

UK gives permission for EU's largest wind farm

Scottish Power has been given the go-ahead to build the EU's largest onshore wind farm on 55 km^2 of moorland and forest south of Glasgow. Once the 140 wind turbines start to turn at Whitelee farm in 2009 they will generate a peak of 322 megawatts of electricity, equivalent to the average power demand of 200,000 houses. Whitelee farm will prevent the emission of 650,000 tonnes of CO_2 per year, and will supply 5% of the capacity needed to meet Scotland's target of using 40% renewable energies by 2020.
Source: *New Scientist* (2006), **190**(2550), 6.

Abrupt u-turn on Maltese hunting laws

The threat of a formal infringement procedure by the European Commission has prompted the Maltese government to change its hunting laws practically overnight. Migrating birds such as western marsh harriers and black-winged stilts are shot illegally, while other birds, including species with declining European populations such as turtle doves, are shot legally on the island. The new law's provisions will shorten the hunting season for some species, to avoid the migration and breeding season, will make trapping of a number of species illegal, and will also make it illegal to use speed boats to hunt birds at sea. Problems remain, however; the hunting of quail and turtle doves will be permitted to continue, and it remains to be seen how Malta will tackle the problem of illegal hunting.
Source: http://www.birdlife.org/news/news/2006/04/malta.html

North Eurasia

Putin orders proposed pipeline to be moved

A plan to route an oil pipeline along the watershed of Lake Baikal has been scuppered following the intervention of the Russian President Vladimir Putin. The pipeline, which will transport 1.6 million barrels of oil a day between Siberian oil fields and the Pacific Coast, is to be rerouted to more than 40 km away from the lake, as opposed to the original distance of just 800 m proposed by the oil company Transneft. Lake Baikal, the world's deepest lake, is highly prone to earthquakes, and its unique fauna and flora would have been at risk of permanent damage from oil spills had the pipeline's original course been followed.
Source: http://www.waterconserve.org/articles/reader.asp?linkid=55644

Most Russian forest fires started by people

Over the past few years anthropogenic climate change has been held responsible for anomalies in temperature and rainfall in northern Russia, and has also been linked to the exceptional forest fires in the region. Using data from 3 years when large fires occurred in northern Russia (1998, 2002 and 2003) it has been shown that while fires are twice as likely to occur during years of anomalous weather, only 13% of fire ignition was the result of natural disturbance; 87% of fires resulted from human activity. Fire has been the main process of physical change in the boreal biome since the last ice age, but the increase in fires started by people has serious implications for the global carbon budget.
Source: *Nature* (2006), **440**(7083), 436–437.

Sub-Saharan Africa

Camera-trap survey proves survival of pygmy hippo

A survey in Sierra Leone has resulted in the first ever photograph of a wild pygmy hippo *Hexaprotodon liberiensis*. The pygmy hippo, categorized as Vulnerable on the IUCN Red List, has a highly fragmented population and has been declining rapidly, leading to fears that it was on its way to extinction. However, the recent survey has shown that despite the civil war in Sierra Leone the pygmy hippo is managing to survive. This is probably because the hippo occurs in inhospitable marshes and forests, which have protected it from subsistence hunting by rebel soldiers.
Source: *New Scientist* (2006), **190**(2547), 16.

Chinese-built dam threatens people and environment in Sudan

An independent review of a hydropower dam being built in Sudan using Chinese money and expertise has criticized the project for giving insufficient thought to the environmental and social consequences of flooding hundreds of square kilometres of land. Although the Merowe dam will more than double the amount of electricity produced by Sudan, the first environmental impact assessment was completed just 1 year before construction started in 2003. Additionally, this assessment was carried out by the company acting as engineering consultants for the dam project, contrary to rules governing such projects. The problem is not restricted to the Merowe project; China appears to be considering, or has started work on, at least 12 dam projects in Africa, and it is feared that few African countries have the political will or infrastructure to ensure that rigorous environmental and social standards are adhered to.
Source: *Nature* (2006), **440** (7083), 393–394.

Giant jumping rat free to go on jumping following protection order for its habitat

A protection order covering one of the world's most important areas of tropical deciduous forest, the Menabe region in Madagascar, has secured the future of the threatened jumping rat, flat-tailed tortoise and narrow striped mongoose, as well as many other species inhabiting this ecologically important region. Staff from Britain's Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust have been working with the Madagascar government since the early 1980s to conserve Madagascar's unique wildlife, which is at risk from slash-and-burn agriculture, commercial logging and subsistence hunting. The protection order prohibits logging, mining and deforestation in the Menabe region.
Source: http://www.durrellwildlife.org/index.cfm?p=326

Artificial breeding island for lesser flamingos

Kamfers Dam, in the Northern Cape, is to have an artificial breeding island built for the 36,000 lesser flamingos that occur there. Although the birds have attempted to breed at the Dam, no chicks have been hatched, because of human disturbance and receding water levels during the breeding season. Lesser

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flamingos breed at three sites in Africa, all of which are threatened by anthropogenic factors. The new island will be S-shaped, 25 * 250 m in size and will be located 200 m from the shore. The island will have at least 200 nest turrets, and it is hoped that these will be used by lesser flamingos once the dam is completed in time for next year's breeding season.
Source: *Africa Birds and Birding* (2006), **11**, 13.

Seal predation devastates Cape gannet breeding season

The breeding colony of Vulnerable Cape gannets on South Africa's Penguin Island, which numbers up to 11,000 pairs, deserted its breeding site during 2005 as a result of nocturnal attacks by Cape fur seals. Observations suggest that a few sub-adult male fur seals have developed the habit of charging into gannet colonies and catching birds before they can escape. An estimated 200 adult gannets were caught in this way before the colony left the area. Seal predation of sea birds in the waters around Penguin Island is not a new phenomenen; it is implicated in the local extinction of the bank cormorant, and many of the African penguins that come ashore to moult bear scars indicative of seal attacks.
Source: *Africa Birds and Birding* (2006), **11**, 60–67.

New species of giant-pill millipedes discovered in Fort Dauphin region

Researchers from the Museum König, Bonn, Germany have discovered two new species of giant-pill milipede belonging to the endemic Malagasy genus *Sphaeromimus*: *S. inexpectatus* and *S. splendidus*. These two species, along with another milipede *Zoosphaerium alluaudii*, rediscovered during the expedition, are each endemic to three forest patches in the south-eastern Malagasy littoral forest ecosystem. The forest patches in the Fort Dauphin region belong to one of the world's most threatened ecosystems, with <3,000 ha remaining, and are under threat from fire, logging and a planned mining project. The discovery of these giant-pill milipedes illustrates the high levels of endemicity within individual forest patches, as well as the rich diversity of insects inhabiting the Malagasy littoral forest ecosystem.
Source: *Zootaxa* (2005), **1097**, 1–60.

Illegal ivory trade burgeoning in Angola

A report by TRAFFIC and WWF reveals that Angolan markets are being used by poachers to sell illegal ivory to the lucrative ivory markets in China, Europe and the USA. In June 2005 alone at least 1.5 t of ivory products, equivalent to the tusks of 300 elephants, passed through Angola's markets. Angola is particularly attractive to ivory smugglers, as it is the only African country not to have signed up to CITES, and the report's authors believe that by signing up to CITES, Angola would take the first step towards reducing the illegal ivory trade. Other African countries have offered to help with enforcement should Angola choose to become a signatory to CITES.
Source: New Scientist (2006), **190**(2547), 6.

Bushmeat consumption sustainable in parts of West Africa

An examination of the bushmeat trade in Takoradi, Ghana's third largest city, has found that the numbers of animals caught for the trade are within theoretically sustainable limits. The study focused on 10 mammal species, mostly small antelopes and rodents, which make up 84% of the meat sold. Although hunters catch over 1 million kg of these mammals every year, their numbers do not seem to be decreasing. It would appear that the vulnerable species have been wiped out by hunting years ago, and the remaining species reproduce quickly and are adaptable to changes in their habitat. The study's authors suggest that hunting should be allowed to continue in areas where it has been occurring for years, but that problems arise in areas where forests are opened for hunting for the first time.
Source: *Journal of Applied Ecology* (2005), **42**, 460–468.

Frequency of forest fires highest in Africa

The tradition of using fire to convert forest to agriculture or grassland means that Africa is the continent with the highest rate of forest fires. The frequency of fires is particularly high in northern Angola, southern DRC, southern Sudan and the Central African Republic. The net rate of forest loss is also high in Africa, with a loss of >4 million ha between 2000–2005, second only to the rate of forest loss occurring in South America. However, >50% of African countries have established new forestry policies and laws in the last 15 years, and two thirds now have an active national forestry management programme in place.
Source: http://www.globalwitness.org/press_releases/display2.php?id=358

African glaciers could vanish in 20 years

The glaciers on the Rwenzori Mountains have shrunk from 6.5 km² to <1 km² in the past 100 years, and field surveys and satellite mapping have concluded that they may disappear in their entirety during the next 2 decades. The melting of the ice is linked to increased temperatures, which have been rising since the 1960s, while there has been no significant increase in the amount of precipitation.
Source: *New Scientist* (2006), **190**(2552), 7.

South and South-east Asia

Heart of Borneo conservation initiative launched

Three Bornean governments, Brunei Darussalam, Indonesia and Malaysia, have declared their commitment to the Heart of Borneo conservation initiative officially launched at the end of March. The tri-country initiative is intended to preserve one of the most important centres of biodiversity on the Earth, which has yielded 361 new species in the past 10 years and is thought to harbour 6% of global biodiversity, but is at risk of deforestation. Only half of Borneo's forest cover remains intact, a considerable decrease from the 75% of forests remaining in the mid 1980s. The initiative is also credited with scuppering plans to create the world's largest palm oil plantation in Kalimantan, which was to cover 1.8 million ha.
Source: http://www.panda.org/about_wwf/where_we_work/asia_pacific/news/index.cfm?uNewsID=65000

International pressure causes Indonesia to rethink oil palm plantation

Plans for an oil palm plantation that would have covered nearly 18,000 km² of ancient rainforest along the Indonesia-Malaysia border have been altered, with Indonesia's Agriculture Minister announcing that only 10% of the land originally earmarked for the plantation would now be used. The announcement follows international

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protest at the plantation plans in support of local rainforest peoples and conservationists. One of the justifications for the plantation was the growing international demand for palm oil in food, animal feed and biofuels, although evidence from the last decade reveals that many areas where an oil palm plantation was planned were abandoned after the timber was removed.
Source: http://www.eng.walhi.or.id/kampanye/hutan/konversi/060412_palmoilplantation_/ and http://www.rainforestportal.org/issues/2006/05/press_release_indonesian_rainf.asp#more

Decentralization benefited Indonesian forest dwellers

The year after President Suharto stepped down after 32 years in office, Indonesia's Parliament granted powers over forests to district governments, who in turn issued logging permits to companies, in stark contrast to the system in place during Suharto's reign, where the central government controlled forests for the benefit of a small elite. The Ministry of Forestry believed that the new system encouraged deforestation and illegal logging, and they succeeded in halting the system in 2004. However, evidence suggests that decentralization was beneficial to forest dwellers, with 94% of households getting payments from companies, compared with 1% before. The environment also benefited, with a significant number of households reporting that logging caused fewer problems for farming and forest product collection.
Source: http://www.cifor.cgiar.org/docs/_ref/polex/english/2006/2006_04_17.htm

New goldmine threatens bay in northernmost Sulawesi

Villagers from Rinondoran Bay are protesting against plans to develop a goldmine at the village. PT Meares Soputan Mining have already started construction at the site, and estimate that the mine will produce 25,500 kg of gold over 6 years. However, the company plans to dump 6–8 million t of waste into the sea, and the villagers fear that heavy metals, cyanide compounds and arsenic likely to be present in the waste will have an adverse effect on the seas around Rinondoran Bay, an important source of fish for local people. In addition, the mine concession overlaps with the Tangkoko Dua Saudara Nature Reserve. Waste from another goldmine, 200 km south, has been held responsible for ill-health among villagers, and declining fish stocks, and the mine's owners are being prosecuted by the Indonesian government for violating environmental law.
Source: *Down to Earth* (2006), **68**, 8–9.

Canal re-routed to avoid courser's habitat

Jerdon's courser *Rhinoptilus bitorquatus*, a Critically Endangered nocturnal wader, was considered lost for most of the 20th century until its rediscovery in 1986. At the time of its rediscovery, the entire population of the courser (25–200 individuals) was threatened by the construction of an irrigation project, the Telugu-Ganga canal. This threat was alleviated by the swift action of the authorities, who created the Sri Lankamalleswara Wildlife Sanctuary to protect the species. In 2005 forestry officials put a stop to unauthorized work on the canal that had commenced around the border of the Sanctuary, and in January 2006 the Irrigation Department announced that the canal would be rerouted to avoid the courser's scrub-jungle habitat.
Source: *World Birdwatch* (2006), **March**, 4.

New species of mole found

An expedition to Vietnam's Chu Yang Sin National Park recorded a species of mole thought to be previously unknown, as well as six of the 10 bird species that were instrumental in the Park being designated as an Important Bird Area. The park is under pressure, mostly notably from the H'Mong people who started hunting and trapping in the Park following their migration to the area from Vietnam's mountainous northern provinces. The survey was carried out as part of a Global Environment Fund/World Bank project that will set up a biodiversity monitoring programme and a management plan for the Park.
Source: http://www.birdlife.org/news/news/2006/04/vietnam.html

East Asia

China labelled the 'wood workshop of the world'

China has become the largest importer of illegally logged timber from tropical rainforests, according to the American think-tank Forest Trends. Since the 1990s China has been acquiring timber from the forests of other countries such as Burma, Papua New Guinea, Liberia and Indonesia, where 80% of the logging is thought to be illegal. Although the need for timber within China is rising, two thirds of imported wood is subsequently exported from China, much of it as furniture, with the UK and USA providing China with two of its largest markets.
Source: *New Scientist* (2006), **190**(2545), 7.

Alarm at sale of Japanese whaling fleet

The three shareholding companies of the only company licensed by Japan's Institute for Cetacean Research to carry out whaling, Kyodo Senpaku Kaisha, have announced their intention to sell the fleet, a week after returning with Japan's largest kill for 20 years. It is thought that the companies wish to distance themselves as public opposition against whaling grows. Far from reassuring anti-whaling campaigners, the decision is causing alarm, as the companies plan to transfer ownership to the Japanese government, which it is feared will be less susceptible to anti-whaling pressure.
Source: *New Scientist* (2006), **190**(2548), 6.

Chopstick tax in China

The government of China is introducing a 5% tax on wooden disposable chopsticks as part of a bid to help the environment and lessen the divide between the rich and the poor in China. China produces *c*. 45 billion pairs of chopsticks every year, using millions of bamboo plants and trees in the process. In addition to the new chopstick tax, the tax on cars with engines bigger that 2 litres is being raised from 8 to 20%, in view of the fact that cars now account for one third of the oil used in China.
Source: *BBC News* (2006), 22 March; http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/business/4831734.stm

South Korean reclamation project given go-ahead

The Korean Supreme Court ruled in March that the controversial Saemangeum reclamation project is not illegal, despite two of the 13 judges declaring that the project was based on a flawed Environmental Impact Survey. The 33 km long sea wall has now been completed, closing off 40,000 ha of tidal flats and shallows from the sea. The affected areas are famous for the quantities of globally threatened species that occur there, including the Endangered spoon-billed sandpiper *Eurynorhynchus pygmeus* and up to 30% of the world's

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great knot *Calidris tenuirostris* population. It is hoped, however, that appropriate management of the sluice gates in the sea wall may allow some suitable habitat to remain for the birds.
Source: http://www.birdlife.org/news/news/2006/03/saemangeum_decision.html & http://www.birdskorea.org/saemref.asp#latnews

Rainforest timber used for Chinese Olympic games construction

With the start of the Chinese Olympic games now less than $2^1/_2$ years away, it is alleged that the Chinese government have turned to the ancient rainforests of Indonesia's Papua province to provide them with the timber for the games' construction. A proposed timber factory in Papua province will harvest over 800,000 m^3 of wood from the merbau (*Instia* spp.) forests to fulfill the USD 1 billion order placed by China. China have denied that they are using timber from Indonesia in the construction of the facilities for the 2008 Olympic games.
Source: http://www.rainforestportal.org/issues/2006/05/beijing_china_2008_olympics_de.asp

China blocks Burmese timber imports

China has closed its border to the timber trade and ordered the withdrawal of Chinese workers from Burma in an unprecedented move to crack down on the import of illegally logged timber. More than 1.5 million m^3 of Burmese timber, worth *c*. USD 350 million, were imported into China in 2005. Although timber is still entering China via small border crossing roads, the volume of wood entering China from Burma has fallen drastically. The Burmese government has officially asked for help from China in reducing the amount of illegally harvested timber, although there is some indication that the government's commitment to a logging ban imposed in the north of the country in 2005 is wavering, with the result that timber piles are growing on the Burmese side of the border.
Source: http://www.globalwitness.org/press_releases/display2.php?id=358

North America

Benefits of outbreeding outweigh disease risks

A study of an isolated bighorn sheep *Ovis canadensis* population has found that the benefits of allowing small populations to mix outweigh dangers posed by the spread of disease. Data collected over a 25-year period showed that the addition of individuals in 1985 to the flock, which had been isolated since 1922, improved both male and female reproductive success and birth weight. The study's authors argue that the improvements in fitness outweigh the risks of disease transmission between isolated populations.
Source: *Nature* (2006), **440**(7081), 130.

Kauai cave wolf spiderlings seen for first time in 30 years

Surveys in the lava tubes of Kauai's Koloa Basin in Hawaii have resulted in the first sightings of baby Kauai cave wolf spiders for 30 years. The Endangered Kauai cave wolf spider, which only occurs in these lava tubes, has adapted to live in the darkness by losing its eyes and becoming a sit-and-wait predator rather than spinning a web. In addition, the spiderlings have a row of comb-like teeth on their claws that fit between the hairs on their mother's back. The major threat to the species comes from habitat destruction, which is complicated by the need for particular types of plant to grow in the soil above the caves.
Source: *US Fish and Wildlife Service press release* (24 January 2006).

Insects worth USD 57 billion annuallly

An investigation into the economic value of insects has calculated that they are worth at least USD 57 billion every year in the USA alone. This figure was reached by examining the economic transactions that would have been impossible without the presence of insects, and researchers suggest that it may be an underestimate. Although some insects cause damage to crops, the harm caused by these species is outweighed by the benefits brought by other species. In addition, damage by pest species is sometimes mitigated by other insects.
Source: *Nature* (2006), **440**(7085), 729.

Beluga whales maintain numbers in Cook Inlet, Alaska

The latest annual survey of beluga whales in Alaska's Cook Inlet has shown that the population is remaining stable at 198–398 individuals, 5 years after the population was declared depleted, and 6 years after hunting restrictions were enacted. Abundance estimates are calculated by analysis of videos taken during aerial passes over beluga groups. The US Fisheries Service, the Cook Inlet Marine Mammal Council, the Native Village of Tyonek, Cook Inlet Treaty Tribes and others have worked together over the last 10 years to establish cooperative agreements for the management of the whales, with the result that five whales were taken for subsistence between 1999–2005.
Source: *Marine Pollution Bulletin* (2006), **52**, 245.

Compensating farmers is better than killing wolves

Grey wolves have been reintroduced into the western USA, and with a current population of *c*. 5,000 individuals, often kill livestock. As a consequence of this, some individuals or packs are shot by ranchers and government animal control officers. It seems, however, that the benefits of shooting wolves are short-lived, as it does not deter other wolves from killing livestock in subsequent years. According to the researchers, it is cheaper to reimburse farmers for lost livestock, and they recommend the use of non-lethal controls such as alarms, although they do not rule out the use of lethal control.
Source: *New Scientist* (2006), **190**(2548), 16.

Pilot project launched to help short-tailed albatrosses

Ten juvenile Laysan albatrosses have been transported >1,600 km to Kilauea Point National Wildlife Refuge to enable researchers to gain experience in the handling and rearing of albatross chicks. Data collected during the rearing of these 10 chicks will be used to translocate short-tailed albatross chicks to new colony sites in Japan. The short-tailed albatross, categorized as Vulnerable on the IUCN Red List, only breeds on two remote islands in the Western Pacific, one of which is an active volcano. The knowledge gained from the Laysan albatross chick relocation will help to minimize risks to short-tailed albatross, of which only *c*. 2,000 individuals remain, during future translocation projects.
Source: *US Fish and Wildlife Service press release* (3 March 2006).

First ever grizzly-polar bear hybrid found

A mostly white bear, with brown eye patches and large paws and claws has been identified through DNA analysis as the offspring of a male grizzly and a

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female polar bear. There has been speculation for some time that climate change could cause grizzly bears to move north, where they would come into contact with polar bears. The grolar, or pizzly, bear had been shot by a hunter in northern Canada, who will be allowed to keep the pelt following initial fears that he may face prosecution for shooting an animal not on his licence.
Source: *Nature* (2006), **441**(7091), 268.

Central America and Caribbean

Cahows return to breed

Four Bermuda petrels *Pterodroma cahow*, known locally as cahows, returned to the nesting islets off Bermuda in February, having been ringed as fledgelings in 2002. Two of the birds had hatched on the islet on which they were found, but the other two had come from an islet 440 m away. It is thought that the birds not originally from the islet were attracted there because of the high levels of cahow nesting activity on the islet. Cahows were believed extinct for >300 years and are now the subject of a recovery programme that has included the construction of artificial burrows on hurricane-proof islands.
Source: http://www.birdlife.org/news/news/2006/03/cahow.html

South America

Guide to Brazil's IBAs published

A series that aims ultimately to describe all the Important Bird Areas (IBAs) of Brazil has been launched with the publication of a book describing the 163 most important sites for birds in four of Brazil's habitats: Atlantic forest, cerrado, caatinga and pampas. Brazil is home to more globally threatened birds than any other country, and of the 111 species at risk of extinction, 98 occur in the Atlantic forest. BirdLife International and its Brazilian partner SAVE Brasil are determined that the book will be a pragmatic guide for action, and to this end have selected 10% of the sites described in the book as targets for priority action.
Source: http://www.birdlife.org/news/news/2006/03/brazil.html

Isabella Rossellini donates USD 50,000 to Andean Cat Alliance

The actress and model Isabella Rossellini has donated USD 50,000 to the Andean Cat Alliance. The donation is half of a grant given to Rossellini by the Disney Wildlife Conservation Fund in recognition of her work to preserve threatened animals. The Andean cat is the most endangered cat in the Americas, with fewer than 10 sightings in the last 25 years. Threats to the species include hunting for their pelts, use in ceremonies, and the destruction of their high altitude Andean habitat.
Source: http://www.wildnet.org/news.htm

40% of Amazon forests to be lost by 2050

Increased cattle ranching and soya bean production has heightened deforestation in the Amazon basin and is threatening to force all-weather highways into the heart of the rainforest. Models of the basin have shown that, unless action is taken, 40% of Amazon forests will have been lost by 2050, and 25% of mammals will lose >40% of the forest in their Amazon ranges. Protected areas, the prevailing mechanism of Amazonian conservation, will be insufficient in halting this loss, particularly in the cases of watershed conservation, where headwaters often extend beyond protected area boundaries, and climate, because >70% of Amazonian forest cover is required to maintain the current rainfall regime. A comprehensive conservation strategy is required for the Amazon basin, including enforced conservation on private lands and increasing market pressures to halt forest clearing on land unsuited to agriculture.
Source: *Nature* (2006), **440** (7083), 520–523.

Bird species in Peru's forgotten forests at risk

The dry, deciduous forests of northern Peru's Tumbesian region contain over 800 bird species, 10% of which are found nowhere else. Of these endemic species seven are categorized as Endangered on the IUCN Red List and the white-winged guan is Critically Endangered. Less than 7% of the forest's original cover remains, and mapping carried out by BirdLife International and Conservation International in 2004 identified 33 globally Important Bird Areas. Funds raised at the British Birdwatching Fair in 2004 are supporting immediate action in the region, but urgent action is still required to protect the forest remnants.
Source: http://www.birdlife.org/news/news/2006/03/peru.html

Palms and parrots campaign launched in Ecuador

A national campaign launched at the end of March by Aves&Conservación and the Jocotoco Foundation for the conservation of wax palms and two parrot species has received the support of Ecuador's Ministry of Environment. Every year the central leaves of thousands of wax palms are removed, often damaging or killing the tree, to fulfill the demand for palm leaves on Palm Sunday. Wax palms take 25–30 years to reach their reproductive stage, and >75–100 years to die naturally and provide nest sites for the Critically Endangered yellow-eared parrot *Ognorhynchus icterotis* and the Vulnerable golden-plumed parakeet *Leptosittaca branickii*. Aves&Conservación is seeking the official endorsement of the Catholic Church in Ecuador to promote the use of alternatives such as corn and eucalyptus during the Palm Sunday festivities.
Source: http://www.birdlife.org/news/news/2006/04/yellow-eared_parrot.html

Patagonia declared fruit fly-free following effective pest control strategy

The use of the Sterile Insect Technique, in combination with other pest control and monitoring strategies, has successfully eradicated the Mediterranean fruit fly from Argentina's Patagonia region. The technique involves sterilizing male insects through exposure to low levels of gamma radiation, and then releasing them into infested areas. If sterile males outnumber fertile males the wild population declines and eventually disappears. The fact that the sterile males can be released from aeroplanes means that this ecologically friendly technique is suitable for use in remote or protected areas.
Source: http://www.fao.org/newsroom/en/news/2006/1000225/index.html

Australia/Antarctica/New Zealand

Protests against old-growth forest destruction in Tasmania

There has been a global outcry about the logging practices being used by Forestry Tasmania and the logging company Gunns Ltd. Tasmania's old-growth forests are being clear-felled, to provide woodchips for disposable paper

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products, at a rate equivalent to the loss of 44 football fields per day, while native mammals are being eradicated by means of carrots laced with a toxic compound. Once an area has been cleared, napalm is routinely used to clear the area prior to the creation of plantations. Gunns Ltd is also accused of stifling free speech, as it is suing 20 Australian citizens for speaking out against the company, in a lawsuit that has been condemned by human rights lawyers in the UK.

Source: *Rainforest Action Network press release* (6 March 2006).

New Zealand's newest species of carnivorous snail at risk of extinction

The Minister for Conservation in New Zealand, Chris Carter, stands accused of jeopardizing the existence of Powelliphanta 'Augustus' snails through his decision to allow Solid Energy to relocate almost the entire population of snails from their current location on Mount Augustus. The Minister claims that three conservation measures (moving 250 snails to a new area, moving snail habitat using heavy machinery, and taking snails into captivity) will be enough to ensure the snails' survival, despite advice from his own Department that the only way to prevent the species from going extinct is by leaving the population in its current site. Mount Augustus, the site of a proposed opencast coal mine, is home to a number of other threatened species, including kiwi and another species of Powelliphanta snail.

Source: http://www.savehappyvalley.org.nz/pressreleases/pr_12-04-06_shvc.htm

All internet links were correct at the time of going to press. The *Briefly* section in this issue was written and compiled by Elizabeth Allen and Martin Fisher, with additional contributions from Antony Rylands, Thomas Wesener and Madhu Rao. Contributions from authoritative published sources (including web sites) are always welcome. Please send contributions by e-mail to oryx@fauna-flora.org or to Martin Fisher, Fauna & Flora International, Great Eastern House, Tenison Road, Cambridge, CB1 2TT, UK.

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