The bat, the weevil and other 'species'

The International Year of Biodiversity, as declared by the United Nations, is coming to an end. Worldwide, there have been many biodiversity conferences, lectures, celebrations, competitions, even 'bioweeks', all meant to increase understanding about biodiversity issues. Ever since scientists first drew attention to the pressure on the world's biodiversity caused by human activities, public awareness of the significance of biodiversity has gradually increased, as has recognition of the need to maintain it. This implies a corresponding increase in public knowledge of the diversity of the natural world. After all, why should people be worried about the extinction of a species if they have no idea that it even exists? People only care about what they know.

Yet, despite media attention to biodiversity, there is evidence that knowledge about nature is deteriorating. A British survey revealed that primary school children were better at recognising Pokémon characters than at identifying common native plants and animals (Balmford et al. 2002): the children were able to recognise 32% of (a selection of) common British wildlife at the age of four, and 52% at the age of eight; the eight year olds could, however, correctly identify 80% of a sample of Pokémon characters. According to the Cambridge zoologists that performed the study, this study contained some good news: that children apparently have an enormous capacity to learn different characters, whether from natural or man-made 'species'.

Another conclusion to be drawn from this study is that the creators of Pokémon are doing a better job than conservationists and school teachers, in stimulating children to learn about their subjects. More recent studies from Germany and the UK confirm these results and show a decline of knowledge of and interest in nature that parallels the increased abundance and availability of electronic devices in children's everyday lives.

So how important is it for people to have at least some idea about the diversity of life forms around them? When IUCN scientists tell us that at least 21% of the earth's mammals are endangered, how many people are aware that the number of known mammal species currently exceeds 5,400? And how important is it if they don't know this? Or for instance, if they don't know the difference between a field vole and a root vole, or even between a hare and a rabbit? Maybe it's not at all important, as long as people care about their natural environment and are willing to protect it. On the other hand, a certain awareness of the diversity of species, and the ecosystems which we are part of, may be a prerequisite for fully appreciating nature.

People can acquire knowledge about the diversity of the natural world in many different

ways, but whether people will retain that information, depends greatly on their interest in storing it. Yet, information provided by the media can often be confusing. For example, the twenty or so different bat species in the Netherlands are frequently lumped together as 'the bat'. To (over)simplify things for readers and listeners, the media frequently reports that "the bat is protected" or that "the bat is an endangered species". It is not that we should expect everyone to know all the different species of bat, but a little more information on the magnitude of such diverse taxa would certainly help keep things in perspective. And in case of a species that is thought to cause damage, it might also help to keep their many harmless relatives from being persecuted.

As an example of the latter, last summer's media fuss about the introduced species of weevils (Coleoptera: Curculionoidea) destroying gardens created much confusion among both journalists and the public. Photographs of non-beetle insect taxa (such as Heteroptera in my own - well-esteemed - newspaper) appeared alongside articles about these specific weevils. News messages persistently spoke about 'the weevil'. But of course there is no single 'weevil': there are about 60,000 known species of weevil worldwide (including some 500 in the Netherlands), belonging to a number of families. While most weevils are completely harmless or will never enter a garden, there is now the possibility of a general suspicion of all weevils.

Fortunately, for anyone interested, the richness of species of our natural world is very well-documented in books. This certainly applies to the Netherlands. Most taxa of Dutch flora and fauna are nowadays represented in a wealth of ecological atlases and field guides. One of these that might be of special interest to the readers of Lutra is a long awaited, recently issued guide to the mammals of Europe, which is reviewed in this issue. It is written in Dutch, as is the review by Vincent van Laar. This review will be the last Dutch language contribution to Lutra. As mentioned in previous editorials, from 2011 on Lutra will only publish contributions in English. Coincidently, van Laar also wrote the first research paper ever published in Lutra, on the remains of mammals in pellets of the barn owl - more than fifty years ago (van Laar, July 1959, Lutra 1 (20): 209). Van Laar, by the way, used to offer his manuscripts to Lutra in handwrittten form, but this time the 'manuscript' was typewritten (although still not submitted through e-mail): strong evidence for the times that are at changing.

There is one announcement to make. After ten years, Edgar van de Grift has left our board. As an editor, managing editor and secretary, Edgar has left a strong mark on our journal. He was one of those 'angry young editors' of Lutra around the year 2000 who inspired his fellow editors by bringing up many interesting ideas, and who initiated a change of style of Lutra. We thank Edgar for being an inspiring colleague over the years, and for helping Lutra to become an even better journal!

Balmford, A., L. Clegg, T. Coulson & J. Taylor 2002. Why conservationists should heed Pokémon. Science 295: 2367.

Ben Verboom