



# Threats to Habitats

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Most animals are adapted to very specific habitats, so if the habitat changes, the animal can be threatened. Habitats can be changed by a number of factors:

### *Natural events*

Storms or fires can damage or destroy a natural habitat. Even if the animals living there survive, their food supply, burrows, or nests could be destroyed.

### *Incursion of human activity: houses, roads, shopping malls, golf courses, recreational activities, pollution—all the result of urbanization*

Clearing and developing previously undeveloped land is one of the greatest threats to animal habitats. Forests, farmlands, and ranchlands are often turned into human-use areas, driving out the animals who once lived there or destroying their source of food or breeding areas. Recreational activities (for example, golf courses) can destroy habitats or create conditions such as noise and pollution (such as the disturbance to the environment produced by all-terrain vehicles) that prevent animals from breeding in the area. As the amount of available habitats decreases, animals cannot live and breed, and their population decreases. They could become threatened or endangered species.

When development occurs near cities, some animals attempt to meet their needs in suburban or even urban areas. Increasingly, mountain lions, bears, or coyotes are being sighted where people are living. People might kill these animals in order to protect themselves or their pets, but the animals are only attempting to compensate for what they've lost through human activity.

Pollution resulting from human activity can also threaten habitats. Runoff of fertilizer, pesticides, or waste products from farms and toxic materials from industrial plants can enter rivers and streams, posing a particular danger to aquatic (water-dwelling) species. Oil spills from offshore drilling or oil tankers can pollute oceans and shoreline.

### *Incursion of non-native species introduced by humans*

Because animals and their habitats evolve together, they have developed a natural balance that allows all to exist together. All the animals and plants are also dependent on the nonliving things such as soil, streams, and rocks. A non-native species is one that has not evolved over time in this ecosystem but is brought in from elsewhere by people. Non-native species can be introduced accidentally—seeds or insects can “hitch hike” on unsuspecting travelers, for example, or they can be carried in by construction equipment. Non-natives can also be introduced intentionally by people who decide, for instance, that they would like to plant a flower that they enjoyed seeing somewhere else.

The problem for the animals and plants already living in the habitat is that the newcomer could take over. It might not have any natural predators in the new habitat so its population is not kept in check. If the non-native is a plant, it could crowd out existing plants that are foraged by the habitat's native animals. If it is an animal, it could eat all the food that the natives depended on, take over the nesting sites, or even prey on the natives.