



BY MICHELE S. BYERS
THE STATE WE'RE IN

October is World Animal Month! It's a chance to celebrate animal life in all of its forms, and the intricate, symbiotic bonds between humanity and the animal kingdom. And what better way to celebrate than making animal-friendly lifestyle changes?

Much attention is focused on Oct. 4, otherwise known as World Animal Day. It began in 1931 as a way to highlight the plight of endangered animals around the world. Oct. 4 was chosen because it is the feast day of Francis of Assisi, the patron saint of animals and the environment. Today, local news often carries stories about blessings of pets and animals by local churches.

But the celebration has expanded far beyond its roots. In 2009, events were held in more than 80 countries, for people of all beliefs and nationalities. This year, hundreds of events are planned during World Animal Month. For example, a road race in Guam will highlight the plight of the country's near-extinct Ko'ko bird, and villagers in China's Yunnan Province will learn how using fuel-efficient solar water heaters protect the Yunnan Golden Monkey by reducing the need to take firewood from their habitat.

All of these efforts and many more are needed if we are going to make a difference for the world's animals. The International Union for Conservation of Nature estimates that over 9,200 animal species worldwide are threatened or endangered. However, only a small portion of these species have legal protections.

In this state we're in, almost 80 animal species are officially listed as threatened or endangered by the New Jersey Division of Fish and Wildlife. Over 100 more are considered species of "special concern" — on their way to threatened status if something doesn't change.

But the issue is bigger than a few species. The trend lines are alarming for a wide variety of even common animals.

Take, for example, birds, bees and bats. A National Audubon Society report in 2007 found populations of common birds in serious decline. Since 1967 the average population of those in steepest decline was down by more than 80 percent, and half the populations of 20 species listed as "national common birds in decline" disappeared in just forty years!

That same year, the honeybee winter death rate — normally around 10 percent — reached 40 percent. The losses were so large and precipitous that experts feared a collapse of food crops that rely on honey bee pollination. And bats in New Jersey have been impacted by a regional epidemic known as "white nose syndrome" that may have killed as many as 94 percent of bats in several of our state's hibernacula.

People are not to blame in every case, but it's impossible to deny that human activity causes major stresses on animal populations. The way we live, eat, move and organize ourselves impacts many animals directly. Pollution, habitat loss and habitat fragmentation have far-reaching impacts for whole ecosystems, including the animals that live there.

Reflecting that reality, this year's World Animal Day theme is: "Animals don't need to evolve: We do."

Our first step in evolving is raising awareness. The World Animal Day website (www.worldanimalday.org.uk) has a great list of ideas under the "Get Involved" section. For example, individuals can donate food to an animal shelter, schools can hold an "animal story day," and communities can sponsor pet shows. So join the "Evolution" this October and make a change to benefit our fine furry (or feathered, scaly, or slimy) friends!

Another part of the evolution is continuing to preserve open space and wildlife habitat here in New Jersey, the nation's most densely populated state. People need homes, but so do animals!

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