Using it as a guide, World Wildlife Fund now directs more than 500 scientifically based projects. These include studying the effects of deforestation on migratory birds ... gorilla conservation in Rwanda ... examining the contribution of wild plants and animals to industrialized society ... panda research and habitat protection at the Wolong Reserve in China ... to name just a few of our projects. And this is just the beginning.

Your participation is the path to action. By contributing to World Wildlife Fund, you will help us build a vast citizens' conservation force that can literally reach across the world to the most isolated trouble spots.

But you may be wondering if your help is really worth it. That's a fair question. So first let me tell you a little bit about our organization.

You've probably seen the panda logo before. That's us. Since its founding in 1961, World Wildlife Fund has been in the forefront of the international struggle to protect the world's threatened wildlife and the habitats they need to survive. We are the largest international conservation organization in the world.

With 23 affiliates across five continents, World Wildlife Fund is uniquely positioned to engage in emergency rescue programs ... habitat protection ... conservation education ... direct land acquisitions ... and more. Our activities range from supplying radios, cameras, and binoculars for Project Tiger in India -- to providing emergency down payments for new protected areas like the La Planada nature reserve in Colombia.

So far these programs, as well as our efforts to rescue the Arabian oryx, the peregrine falcon in America, and the golden lion tamarin monkey in Brazil, along with many other endangered species, have cost World Wildlife Fund more than $100,000,000.

That's a huge sum. But in spite of all this, we need many more committed members, many more dollars, and a vastly accelerated timetable if we are to win the race for wildlife survival.

I'm hoping that with your help we can bring many forms of life on earth back from the brink of extinction. We can and must make sure that "extinct" does not become their final epitaph.

How can we do this? By making our commitment move beyond "just talk." Beyond merely marveling at the perfect flying formation of migratory geese across our bit of sky. Beyond delighting in majestic movements of the great whales as they traverse the global oceans.

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If you simply wonder to yourself "Why bother?" or ask "Who needs nature anyway?" I can tell you that every one of us needs nature. For food, health, and scientific innovation. For the prevention of floods, droughts, epidemics, and other natural disasters. And of course, we need wild places, animals, and plants for recreation, renewal, and inspiration. But most of all, for survival.

That's why I hope you'll help us here at World Wildlife Fund act more quickly and effectively by joining us as a new member.

I'll add your name to the list to receive FOCUS, our members-only newsletter, with provocative reports on faraway places and informative articles on some of the world's most spectacular wildlife.

Whenever I send a letter like this or speak to citizen groups, I'm often asked why World Wildlife Fund has been able to achieve so much ... from saving India's majestic Bengal tiger ... to mobilizing global resources to rescue our planet's tropical rain forests.

My answer is this: Our success is based on setting up only those projects that we know are practical, well-planned, and solidly founded on rigorous scientific research.

Before we move to acquire land for a wildlife preserve or take on a specific endangered species like the humpback whale or Africa's mountain gorilla, we develop a careful long-range action plan. We enlist the cooperation of the best scientific minds and call on other groups so that our conservation efforts will have the greatest impact possible.

This reliance on hard work, full use of all available expertise and experience, produces measurable conservation results.

But we must do even better in the coming months and years. For we know we are in a breakneck race against time...

Runaway destruction of our planet's rain forests -- 25 to 50 acres every single minute -- is alarming. Especially when you consider that half of our prescription medicines come from natural sources like plants -- and nearly half of all plant species on earth are found in these rain forests!

I am deeply aware of the need to expand our work, enlist more citizens like you in our international wildlife mission, and invest our resources where they can bring the highest and most enduring returns for future generations.

(over, please)