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DURHAM, N.H. – A major new study that sounds a conservation alarm for the world’s vertebrate species notes that the world’s seagrass species are faring somewhat better, says a University of New Hampshire researcher who was a coauthor of the study.

Fred Short, UNH research professor of natural resources and director of the worldwide program SeagrassNet, was among the 174 scientists who contributed to “The Impact of Conservation on the Status of the World’s Vertebrates,” released online this week in the journal Science.

“The survey focused primarily on vertebrate species, finding that 20 percent of the vertebrates reviewed are classified as “threatened” by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and an average of 52 species of mammals, birds and amphibians move one category closer to extinction each year. In addition, the article included three plant groups.

“Inclusion of these plant groups -- seagrasses, cycads and conifers – gives a context for what’s happening with vertebrates by looking at other organismal distribution,” says Short. "Plant species provide habitat and food for vertebrates.”

Short, who is the IUCN Red List Authority focal point for seagrasses, led a three-year assessment of the world’s seagrass species for conservation status. He notes that 14 percent of seagrass species are in threatened categories based on the Red List. “We’re polluting our oceans and coastal areas tremendously,” he says. “We’re most certainly losing seagrass distribution, and at present 10 of the world’s 72 seagrass species are threatened. The trends are not encouraging.”

The Science paper, whose lead author is Michael Hoffman of the IUCN, emphasizes that its concerning findings should not obscure the impact of conservation efforts, without which species losses would have been 20 percent higher. "Nonetheless, current conservation efforts remain insufficient to offset the main drivers of biodiversity loss in these groups: agricultural expansion, logging, over-exploitation, and invasive alien species,” the authors write.

Short adds that the same drivers affecting vertebrates, along with coastal development, are also threatening seagrasses in the coastal oceans.

For an abstract of the Science paper, go to http://www.sciencemag.org/cgi/content/abstract/science.1194442. To learn more about SeagrassNet, go to www.seagrassnet.org. The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species is at http://www.iucnredlist.org/.
The seagrass species assessment was funded by Tom Haas through the New Hampshire Charitable Foundation.
The University of New Hampshire, founded in 1866, is a world-class public research university with the feel of a New England liberal arts college. A land, sea, and space-grant university, UNH is the state's flagship public institution, enrolling 12,200 undergraduate and 2,200 graduate students.

Photographs available to download:
http://www.unh.edu/news/cj_nr/2010/oct/bp27resources.jpg
Caption: University of New Hampshire research professor of natural resources Fred Short contributed seagrass data to a major survey of conservation status of worldwide species.

http://www.unh.edu/news/img/colsa/In_seagrass_Green_Island2.jpg
Caption: On the Great Barrier Reef in Australia, Fred Short, UNH research professor of natural resources and marine science, retrieves marked plants for an assessment of seagrass productivity.

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