

CALCULATING EXTINCTION

There are two questions to answer in this challenge:

- 1. How many animals have become extinct in the last 50 years?**
- 2. How many animals will go extinct in the next 50 years?**

The difficulty with answering these questions, is that they are not as simple as they first seem – because no one knows how many species are out there to begin with!

The World Resources Institute even goes as far as to say: “scientists have a better understanding of how many stars there are in the galaxy than how many species there are on Earth.”

This is because scientists are discovering new species all the time.

Somewhere between 15,000 and 18,000 new species are identified each year – about half of which are insects. The State University of New York's College of Environmental Science and Forestry has been documenting thousands of new plants and animals every year, and have found that the rate at which new species are identified remains relatively stable.

YOUR CHALLENGE

- **Research figures on the number of documented species from 50 years ago.**
- **Calculate how that initial number has increased over the last 50 years, using**

the average rate (between 15,000 and 18,000) of new species identified per year.

You should now have worked out the approximate number of species on the planet today. Here are a few facts that can help you to calculate the rate of the decline, and therefore the number of species that have gone extinct in the last 50 years:

- **Experts estimate that the rapid loss of species we are seeing today is between 1,000 and 10,000 times higher than the background extinction rate (meaning the rate of species extinctions that would occur if we humans were not around).**
- **Experts calculate that between 0.01 and 0.1% of all species will become extinct each year.**

How might the facts change over the next 50 years? Are the rates of discovery and extinction likely to change in the next 50 years? How may they change? Why?

How will these considerations affect your answer to question 2?

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