

11 PLACES TO SEE BEFORE THEY DISAPPEAR

Those of us who are concerned about earth's survival already hear the warning alarms around us on a daily basis. But this is a travel site, not an eco-sermon, so these eleven picks make up a carefully chosen list of destinations for eco-conscious travelers to enjoy. That verb "enjoy" is crucial — for in the process of cherishing these natural and cultural wonders we renew our commitment to preserving them.

Babylon, a city of both history and legend, has been seriously damaged by war and development, and those remain the two major threats to the ancient city. The U.S. war in Iraq continues to endanger Babylon and other ancient sites in Iraq, and Iraqi officials' own plans for post-war Babylon could be just as destructive.

Fenway Park: Having won the World Series, in both 2004 and 2007, the Boston Red Sox are lovable underdogs no longer — now they are certified winners. And as a result, management has, at least temporarily, stopped making noises about replacing Fenway Park.

Gu Gong — The Forbidden City: This vast complex in Beijing is half a millennium old — the emperors lived here from 1420 to 1923, beginning long before Columbus sailed to the Americas and ending right before Lindbergh flew across the Atlantic — and the heavy traffic is taking its toll.

Kootenai River: Kootenai wetlands in Idaho were almost decimated by agricultural development; part of the wetlands is now being restored by environmental groups. In Montana, the endangered and aging white sturgeon population has stopped spawning due to loss of habitat caused by the Libby Dam; unless young fish live to spawning age the species is expected to be extinct in as few as 20 years.

Little Green Street isn't in the center of London, but maybe that's why it survived so long — it's one of only a few intact Georgian streets left in the whole metropolis. These two-story brick houses may have survived the Blitz in World War II, but the inexorable march of gentrification is another thing altogether.

Lord Howe Island, Australia: More than half of the original recorded species of birds on this island are extinct due to hunting; non-native predators such as black rats, cats, and owls; and overgrazing by farm animals. Now that the island is protected and managed, the most serious threats are oil and chemical water pollution, and groundwater pollution from sewage management.

Michoacán Monarch Biosphere Reserve, Mexico: Monarch butterflies face a variety of risks all along their 2,000-mile (3,220-km) migration route between Canada and Mexico. Pesticides are a constant threat, and the monarchs' low tolerance for cold and wet conditions leave them vulnerable to winter storms, increased rainfall, and other climate changes. Meanwhile, deforestation of their winter habitat could be the fatal blow for the butterflies.

Taj Mahal: If the plan to close the Taj Mahal goes into effect, it would reduce this over-the-top mausoleum — built by Shah Jahan (fifth emperor of the Mughal dynasty) in Agra, India, to mourn his favorite wife, Mumtaz Mahal — to a mere postcard silhouette instead of the spiritual experience it can be.

The Galápagos Islands: Legions of tourists who visit the Galápagos each year have helped and hurt the islands' delicate ecosystem. But despite laws to protect the Galápagos, increased land and sea tourism, population growth (which brings pollution and habitat destruction), and invasive species continue to threaten the wildlife here. Fishing and poaching also threaten the survival of native marine life.

The Pyramids of Giza: Unrestricted development and urban sprawl from nearby Cairo threaten the ancient pyramids and the Great Sphinx. Air pollution eats away at the magnificent structures, and sewage from adjacent slums weakens the plateau upon which they stand. Ongoing efforts to complete a multilane beltway around Cairo pose additional risks to these irreplaceable wonders.

Versailles: The fierce winter storms that pummeled Europe in December 1999 were bound to take down some property — but did it have to be Louis XIV's showplace?