

4. American Pika: Indicator of Global Warming

When we recently visited the Rocky Mountains, we encountered a rare creature that got our curiosity. This creature is called the American pika. Having not encountered these cute, cuddly looking creatures anywhere else in our travels, we decided to learn more about them, so we could find out why we don't find them other places we travel.

The American pika is a small, shy plant eating animal that is related to rabbits and hares. These tiny mammals have adapted to the cold climates in high-elevation boulder fields and alpine meadows in the mountains in the western part of America. These adaptations that have allowed this species to survive make them very sensitive to the changes such as global warming. Rising temperatures threaten pikas by shortening the time available for them to gather food. Rising temperatures also shrink the size of alpine meadows which provide their food, and reduce the snowpack which protects pikas from cold snaps in the winter.

As they live in the high and cooler mountain regions, they are very sensitive to high temperatures, and are considered to be one of the best early warning systems for detecting global warming in the western United States. Temperature increases are suspected to be one cause of American Pika's moving higher in elevation in an attempt to find suitable habitat. Pikas can die in six hours when exposed to temperatures above 78 degrees if they cannot find refuge from heat.

Pikas have two different ways of foraging, or finding food. They will eat it as they need it, or they will store food in hay piles to use for a food source in the winter, which is called haying. Pikas do not hibernate, so their food demands are high year around.

In 2010, the US government considered, and then decided not to protect the American Pika under the US Endangered Species Act therefore it is still considered a Species of Least Concern, despite its struggles to flourish. Studies suggest populations are declining due to various factors, most notably global warming. A 2003 study showed nine of 25 sampled populations of American pika had disappeared in the Great Basin, leading biologists to conduct further investigations to determine if the species as a whole is vulnerable.

Let's hope that something can be done to help these cute and cuddly creatures!

Sources:

Biological Diversity

http://www.biologicaldiversity.org/species/mammals/American_pika/

Wikipedia

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National Wildlife Federation

<http://www.nwf.org/Global-Warming/Effects-on-Wildlife-and-Habitat/Pika.aspx>