



Committee on Natural Resources

Rep. Nick J. Rahall, II - Chairman

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The Endangered Species Act: Preserving Unique Life Forms

Americans have long supported efforts to conserve life in all its forms. Since its enactment in 1973, the Endangered Species Act (ESA) has played a key role in protecting animals, plants, and their habitat for future generations. The law has been tremendously successful, keeping species such as the manatee, grizzly bear, and bald eagle alive for future generations. The sections below address some of the most commonly asked questions about the ESA.

Why should we care about endangered species?

For more than 2,000 years, humans have developed food, medicine, and essential materials from plants and animals. Nearly 50 percent of all medical prescriptions dispensed annually in the U.S. are derived from nature or synthesized to mimic naturally occurring chemical compounds. In fact, it was the cultivation of mold fungus that led to the development of penicillin.

Morphine and codeine, both produced from poppy plants, also remain among the most widely used analgesics in medicine today. Additionally, venoms from snakes have led to the creation of important medications, including the blood pressure drug captopril. The extinction of a single species may permanently extinguish the next effective treatment for cancer, AIDS, or other diseases.

Aside from their medicinal value, plants are also important food sources. It has been estimated that there are 80,000 species of edible plants, of which fewer than 20 produce 90 percent of the world's food. As Pulitzer Prize-winning Biologist E.O. Wilson has noted, if we allow species to become extinct, still undeveloped medicines, crops, pharmaceuticals, timber fibers, pulp, soil-restoring vegetation, petroleum substitutes and other products will never come to light.

Equally important, endangered wildlife and plants are national treasures that must be protected from overexploitation. The fundamental principle of the ESA is based on the conviction that we, as Americans, have a responsibility to be good stewards of the Earth, and to ensure that these precious creatures survive for future generations to experience.

How have federal agencies implemented the law?

One of the serious hurdles to species conservation comes not from the law itself, but from the lackluster support it has received from federal agencies. Since 1978, the ESA has required all listed species to have critical habitat designations and recovery plans, but not all do.

Meanwhile, a draft document leaked to the press in early 2007 showed that the Administration was developing regulations that could undermine endangered species conservation. The Administration has denied that the document released is under consideration, and has refused to divulge what regulations are under review.

How do the agencies use science in ESA decisions?

The ESA requires the FWS and NOAA-Fisheries to rely on the best scientific data available when making decisions to list species as endangered or threatened, evaluating whether endangered or threatened species will be affected by a proposed federal action, and designating critical habitat.

Unfortunately, sound science has not always prevailed within the current Administration. In early May 2007, former Deputy Assistant Interior Secretary Julie MacDonald resigned following the release of an Inspector General's report revealing that she manipulated scientific data on endangered species for political purposes. The report also stated that she shared internal Interior Department documents with industry lobbyists and representatives — those known to be critical of the ESA.

As a result, in July 2007 the Administration committed to reviewing the accuracy of eight specific species-related decisions made during MacDonald's service, including those affecting the white-tailed prairie dog, 12 species of Hawaiian picture-wing flies, the arroyo toad, Preble's meadow jumping mouse, Southwestern willow flycatcher, California red-legged frog and Canada lynx. In November 2007, the Interior Department conceded that seven of these decisions were "inappropriately influenced" by MacDonald and warrant revision. A November 2007 Inspector General's report also found that MacDonald should have recused herself from editing documents affecting the Sacramento splittail due to her ownership of a California farm that might be financially impacted by the ruling.

Affirming a strong commitment to ensuring the use of sound science by the Administration, the House Natural Resources Committee, under the leadership of Chairman Nick J. Rahall, has, and continues to, examine these actions. Chairman Rahall has also tasked the Government Accountability Office with recommending an objective, scientific-based process to eliminate political interference in ESA decisions.