



Critical Habitat for Alabama Sturgeon

What is critical habitat?

Critical habitat is a term used in the Endangered Species Act to refer to specific geographic areas that are essential for the conservation of a threatened or endangered species and that may require special management considerations.

What is the purpose of designating critical habitat?

The purpose of designating critical habitat is to require Federal agencies to consider the effects of actions they carry out, fund, or authorize on habitat that is essential to the conservation of a listed species. For more information, see Q&A No. 15.*

What is the impact of designating critical habitat on private lands and private landowners?

The designation of critical habitat on private land will have no impact on private landowner activities that do not require Federal funding or permits. The designation of critical habitat is only applicable to Federal activities.

How does the Service determine what areas to designate?

The Service considers physical or biological habitat features which are essential to the conservation of the species, including:

- space for individual and population growth and for normal behavior;
- cover or shelter;
- food, water, air, light, minerals, or other nutritional or physiological requirements;
- sites for breeding and rearing offspring;
- habitats that are protected from disturbance or are representative of the historic geographical and ecological distributions of a species.

* See the more extensive Questions and Answers on the decision to list the Alabama sturgeon that appear in a separate document.

Do listed species in critical habitat areas receive more protection?

Listed species are protected by the Endangered Species Act whether or not they are in an area designated as critical habitat. Designation of an area as critical habitat provides a means by which the habitat of an endangered or threatened species can be protected from adverse changes or destruction resulting from Federal activities or projects. In most cases, protection of a species from critical habitat designation duplicates the protection provided by section 7 of the Endangered Species Act. For more information, see Q&A No. 16.

Must Federal agencies consult with the Service outside critical habitat areas?

Yes, even when there is no critical habitat designation, Federal agencies must consult with the Service to ensure any action they carry out, fund, or authorize is not likely to jeopardize the continued existence of a listed species.

Does the Act require an economic analysis as part of designating critical habitat?

Yes. The Service must take into account the economic impact, beyond that accrued by listing, of specifying any particular area as critical habitat. The Service may exclude any area from critical habitat if it determines that the benefits of the exclusion outweigh the benefits of specifying the area as part of critical habitat, unless it determines based on the best scientific and commercial data available, that the failure to designate the area as critical habitat will result in the extinction of the species.

Does this economic analysis have any effect on the decision to list a species?

No, under the Act, a decision to list a species is made solely on the basis of scientific data.

For how many species has the Service designated critical habitat?

To date, the Service has designated critical habitat for 118 of the 1,206 species listed as threatened or endangered.

What is the impact of a critical habitat designation on economic development?

The vast majority of human activities that require a consultation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service proceed with little or no modification.

Is the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service going to designate critical habitat for the Alabama sturgeon?

We proposed not to designate critical habitat because the designation would provide no additional benefit for the species, and we were concerned that an adverse public reaction to critical habitat designation might actually impede future conservation efforts. However, during the public comment period, we received numerous comments from both proponents and opponents of the species listing that favored designation of critical habitat. Based on those comments, we have determined that it is unlikely that any adverse effect on the Alabama sturgeon would occur as a result of critical habitat designation, and that such designation is prudent. We plan to publish a proposal outlining critical habitat next year. For more information, see Q&A No. 13.

How will designation of critical habitat help the Alabama sturgeon?

Critical habitat designation may benefit the Alabama sturgeon by enhancing awareness within Federal agencies of the sturgeon's range.

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Information on the sturgeon is also available at: <http://www.fws.gov>.