Why the Endangered Species Act matters

VOICE FROM SANTA BARBARA

Santa Barbara Botanic Garden

If you have been following recent news cycles, you may have noticed that there is an effort underway to weaken the Endangered Species Act (ESA). You might also wonder why efforts to reduce environmental protections under the ESA should matter to you. As scientists and conservationists at the Santa Barbara Botanic Garden, our role is to conserve the diversity of life (biodiversity) — which in many ways boils down to saving the plants that are native to an area, the communities they form, and the habitat that those communities provide to bugs, lizards, birds and other organisms, including humans. That's why at the Garden, we work to understand those native plants, protect them so that none goes extinct, and restore species, habitats and ecosystems. This allows that biological diversity to provide the services that we all depend on — such as pollination of our food crops, or clean air and water. The richness of life on our planet allows for not only our survival but our well-being, providing both recreation and renewal. Saving plant and animal species from extinction helps to ensure that we save humans too.

First, some background. The primary goal of the ESA is to prevent the extinction of imperiled plants and animals by (a) identifying the most critically endangered and threatened species, (b) preventing harm to the listed species, (c) protecting the ecosystems essential to a listed species' survival, and (d) creating and implementing plans to restore listed species to healthy population levels. By setting aside and restoring critical habitat for these listed species, the ESA protects not only those species, but entire communities for which those species are indicators that there is a problem.

The history of the ESA is important. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Americans were choking on smog and watching their forests, streams and lakes die from the effects of unregulated dumping of industrial waste into/onto our air (causing smog and acid rain), waterways and land. In response to this national crisis, Congress adopted a body of major environmental legislation between 1970 and 1974. Adopted during this period were the National Environmental Protection Act (1970); the Clean Air Act (1972); the Marine Mammal Protection Act (1972); the Marine Protection, Research, and Sanctuaries Act (1972); the Endangered Species Act (1973); and the Safe Drinking Water Act (1974). Taken as a whole, these laws transformed government decision-making by requiring consideration of scientific evidence concerning the impacts that land use, commerce and industry have on the health and well-being of humans and every living species. The Endangered Species Act is arguably the most important U.S. law for conserving biodiversity.

The Endangered Species Act should not be a liberal versus conservative debate. Then-President Richard Nixon challenged Congress to come up with comprehensive legislation to improve and protect our environment. Congress passed the Endangered Species Act with near unanimous support (the House voted 355-4 in favor of the law). While the Act has always come under sharp criticism from those who favor short-term profits over the protection of species, polling since adoption of the Act demonstrates that protecting endangered species from extinction has always been a policy that receives overwhelming popular support. And the Act is working — many species have come back from the brink of extinction because of its protections. Our own Channel Islands fox is a shining example of the Act's success, having made the fastest recovery ever for an Endangered Species Act-listed mammal.

Californians are lucky to live in the most botanically diverse state in the nation. We are renowned for our "superblooms" of wildflowers that attract people from all over the state and even world. Our wild places are spectacularly beautiful, colorful and fascinating because of the rich flora and fauna that live there. Of our more than 6,500 kinds of native plants, more than one-third are rare to some degree and 182 are listed as threatened or endangered. In California, the Act protects such regional rarities as the Nipomo lupine, the Santa Cruz Island liveforever, the California jewelflower, the western snowy plover, the El Segundo blue butterfly, and hundreds more plants and animals that contribute to the natural heritage of California. A weakened Endangered Species Act jeopardizes not only these species and their habitats, and thus the health and safety of California's wild places, it also threatens Californians.

Scientific studies have shown us that each species has a unique array of characteristics which both provide and consume different resources. Some years, some do well and other years, others do — but together, they provide essential "services" to us all. They decompose our waste and recycle nutrients. They hold the soil and slopes together and buffer us from nature's extremes like fires, big storms, and drought. They even buffer us against climate change by providing resilience and stability. They form forests, scrub, and meadows that support life, including human beings, giving us places to play and feed our spirits. They produce the food not just for us but for the whole web of life. We also know that there is a threshold at which, if we lose too many species, this wondrous web unravels. The Endangered Species Act is a critical way that we prevent that loss of species.

We may debate whether the preservation of a species, for the sake of that species, is noble or foolhardy. But when the importance of biodiversity as a whole is included in that debate, we should all understand that gutting the Endangered Species Act will harm our health, compromise environmental systems that we depend on and threaten our existence. The Endangered Species Act protects all species, but in the end, the species we save may very well be our own.

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