

On the Side of Life

Last year, the Endangered Species Act celebrated its 25th anniversary. Many of its advocates, including the American Zoo and Aquarium Association, took time to celebrate that event and to reflect on the law's past and future. In March 1998, the following piece was published in the AZA's publication *Communique* by its executive director, Dr. Sydney Butler. We have reprinted it here because it speaks to the AZA's commitment for conserving not just the foreign or exotic species of greatest popularity but to the work for species in our own "backyard."

I am particularly fond of the *Communique* cover photograph this month. In this 25th anniversary year of the Endangered Species Act, when other magazine covers will splendidly display eagles, wolves, and gray whales, we proudly present—the Wyoming toad. Just sitting there, showing its best side to the camera. It doesn't soar, howl, breach (or croak "Bud-wis-er").

But our cover star might tell us that beauty is in the eye of the beholder. To some, this toad would be just another ridiculous thing—in the family of snail darters and spotted owls—that is used by idealists to stop humanity's rightful progress. To others, like nine AZA institutions, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and lots of committed citizens, this toad is worth every instant of time, effort, and dollars spent to conserve it. One man's toad is another man's prince.

But surely some would say that, in the "grand scheme of things," some lesser creatures have to give way to people. A national symbol like the bald eagle is worth saving, but a *toad*? To that argument our cover creature would say, "Look, I may not be a regal

megavertebrate, but I don't take up much space in the *least populated state in the U.S.* If I am disposable here, what are the prospects for tigers in India, a country with a billion people? In fact, what chance do any creatures have, *including yourselves*, in a world soon to have 8 billion people?"

Just about now I start getting discouraged. A hundred Wyoming toads left in the least populated state? Three thousand tigers left in a country with a billion people? A world filled with 8.2 billion humans by 2030? Just what and who is really endangered here? Toads? Tigers? Ourselves, our children, our grandchildren?

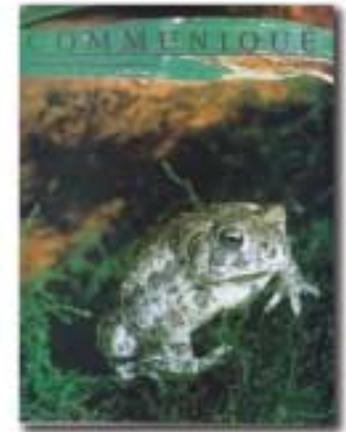
But then I become grateful, really grateful, for the Endangered Species Act. Not so much because of its legal protections, but because of its optimistic, consistent, and clarifying declaration that all species are worthy. Without this declaration, fiercely protected, what is beautiful becomes ugly. Toads become silly, tigers become pests, wolves become pelts, people become enemies. The Act surely recognizes that nature isn't perfect, that balance and compromise are sometimes necessary. But underneath all, it declares that creatures should live because life itself is the overwhelming value.

The Act's declaration for life has remarkable appeal. It drives zoos and aquarium professionals to keep studying and reintroducing Wyoming toads, even when they know that few may survive. And it inspires us by saying we could put any endangered creature (including ourselves) on the cover of a magazine, and the message would still be the same. Life should be on the side of life, period.



Dr. Sydney Butler, AZA Executive Director

Photo courtesy American Zoo and Aquarium Association



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