



OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY
**U.S. Department
of the Interior**

www.doi.gov

News Release

Date: August 16, 2011

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Salazar Announces Recovery of Lake Erie Watersnake, Endangered Species Act Protection Removed

WASHINGTON — Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar today removed the Lake Erie watersnake, a harmless species found on offshore islands in western Lake Erie in Ohio and Ontario, from the Federal List of Threatened and Endangered Wildlife. The snake becomes the 23rd species to be delisted due to recovery.

“The Lake Erie watersnake joins species such as the bald eagle, the American alligator and the peregrine falcon that have rebounded from the threat of extinction and no longer require the protection of the Endangered Species Act,” Salazar said. “These species and the hundreds of others whose extinction has been prevented by the Act are living testimonies to its ability to bring species back from the brink by protecting them and conserving and restoring their habitat.”

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service listed the Lake Erie watersnake as a threatened species in 1999. Threats to the species included intentional killing and loss of its shoreline habitat to development.

The Service finalized a recovery plan in 2003 that called for protecting habitat and providing outreach to reduce threats to the species. In cooperation with the Ohio Department of Natural Resources Division of Wildlife (ODNR) and other partners, biologists worked to minimize and reduce the threats to the snake by sustaining and protecting summer and hibernation habitat and ensuring the permanent protection of shoreline habitat.

Critical research, including an annual intensive Lake Erie watersnake census begun in 2001, provided data that identified when the species had achieved its population goal and threats to its survival had been reduced. In addition, public outreach programs provide awareness of the snake, its plight and its role in the ecosystem.

Recovery criteria include a combined population of at least 5,555 snakes on the U.S. islands, sustained for six years, and protection of key habitat.

Through continued habitat protection and public education, the Lake Erie watersnake population grew to about 11,980 in 2009, and has exceeded the minimum recovery level since 2002. About 300 acres of inland habitat and 11 miles of shoreline have been protected for the snake since it was listed.

“As with most conservation success stories, the comeback of the Lake Erie watersnake is the result of different groups of people working toward a common goal. Partners — from local citizens to government agencies — worked hard to address threats to this species and ensure its long-term survival,” said Fish and Wildlife Service Director Dan Ashe.

Partners in the efforts to recover the Lake Erie watersnake include the ODNR, Northern Illinois University, Lake Erie Islands Chapter of the Black Swamp Conservancy, Western Reserve Land Conservancy, Put-in-Bay Township Park District, the Cleveland Museum of Natural History, and The Ohio State University Stone Laboratory.

The Act requires that a species be monitored for a minimum of 5 years after delisting to ensure that the species remains stable after its protections are removed. The Service and the ODNR have developed a post-delisting monitoring plan to verify that the species remains secure from risk of extinction after the protections of the ESA no longer apply.

Lake Erie watersnakes are still listed as endangered by the state of Ohio so killing them would be illegal under state law.

The final rule will publish in the *Federal Register* on August 16, 2011, and become effective on September 15, 2011. A copy of the final rule and other information about the Lake Erie watersnake are available online at <http://www.fws.gov/midwest/endangered/reptiles/lews/index.html> or by contacting the Columbus Ohio Field Office at 4625 Morse Road, Suite 104, Columbus, Ohio 43230, or by telephone at 614-416-8993.

The ESA provides a critical safety net for America’s native fish, wildlife, and plants. The Service is working to actively engage conservation partners and the public in the search for improved and innovative ways to conserve and recover imperiled species. To learn more about the Endangered Species Program, visit <http://www.fws.gov/endangered/>.

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