

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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SEVEN SAN CLEMENTE ISLAND SPECIES LISTED AS ENDANGERED OR THREATENED

The unique and fragile ecosystem of San Clemente Island, California, has at least seven endangered or threatened species of plants and animals, the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service has determined.

The designation, published in the August 11 Federal Register, identifies one bird and four plants as endangered species threatened with extinction on the U.S. Navy-owned island off the southern California coast. Another bird and a lizard were listed as threatened species. This is the first formal listing of plants under the Endangered Species Act of 1973.

"The destruction of the island's habitat by escaped pigs and goats and introduced plants, is the primary threat to all these species," said Associate Director Keith M. Schreiner of the wildlife agency.

San Clemente Island is viewed by some scientists as similar to Ecuador's Galapagos Islands west of coastal South America, where life forms evolved independently from those on the mainland. Unlike the seven other islands off the southern California coast, which were once connected to the mainland during the Ice Age, San Clemente is a true oceanic island. Many of its species do not occur anywhere else. Due to its isolation, it is considered the most biologically distinctive coastal island owned by the United States.

"Its wildlife and plants have been studied by scientists for over 100 years, but only within the last 10 years have they been studied intensively. The island presents an unusual opportunity for the study of evolution and speciation. However, man has severely modified the habitat upon which many of these species depend by introducing various domestic animals which are now escaped," Schreiner said.

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The browsing effects of goats and the rooting of pigs are the most serious threat to the plant species. The competitive effects by introduced plants also jeopardize the native plant species. Prior to their introduction, San Clemente was covered with native woodlands and sagebrush. Wooded areas are almost entirely absent now, and sagebrush occurs only in a few rugged, relatively inaccessible canyons. The removal of vegetation also caused erosion of the top-soil.

Escaped house cats feed on the island's night lizards, and may also affect the bird species which have been listed.

Unless precautions are taken, the extinction of these species is likely in the foreseeable future, as their population levels have become critically low due to the competition from introduced animals. Recently, the Navy initiated a live trapping program and many of San Clemente's goats have been trapped and removed from the island. It is hope that when removal of the goats is complete, the native ecosystems on the island may recover. The listing of these plants and animals together emphasizes that San Clemente Island is an endangered ecosystem.

The species listed as endangered are the San Clemente loggerhead shrike and four flowering plants: the San Clemente Island indian paintbrush, San Clemente Island bush-mallow, San Clemente Island larkspur, and the San Clemente Island broom. The San Clemente Island night lizard and the San Clemente Island sage sparrow were listed as threatened species.

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