



BALD EAGLE RECOVERY QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

1. What is the Fish and Wildlife Service proposing to do regarding the bald eagle?

The Fish and Wildlife Service is proposing to remove the bald eagle from the list of endangered and threatened species in the lower 48 states.

2. Why is the Fish and Wildlife Service proposing to remove the bald eagle from the list of endangered and threatened species?

The bald eagle population in the lower 48 states has recovered from a population estimated at less than 500 breeding pairs in 1967 when the birds were first listed, to a current population of an estimated 5,748 breeding pairs. The initial threats to the species that warranted listing have been reduced; reproductive success has increased to a healthy level; and the current population is increasing. Therefore, the Service believes that the bald eagle no longer warrants protection under the Endangered Species Act.

3. Will the bald eagle continue to receive protection under the Endangered Species Act next year while its status is being reviewed?

The bald eagle has the full protection of the Act during this time.

4. When was the bald eagle first placed on the Endangered Species list?

In 1967, the bald eagle was officially declared an endangered species under a law that preceded the Endangered Species Act of 1973 in all areas of the United States south of the 40th parallel. In a partial survey conducted in 1963, the Audubon Society found fewer than 500 breeding pairs in the lower 48 states.

5. What is the history of Federal protection of the bald eagle?

The bald eagle was declared the Nation's symbol in 1782. In 1918, the Migratory Bird Treaty Act prohibited, except under specific conditions the taking, selling, transporting, and importing of migratory birds, their nests, eggs, parts, or products. The Bald Eagle Protection Act of 1940 prohibits except under certain specified conditions the taking, possession and commerce in bald and golden eagles; penalties are not more than \$10,000 or not more than two years in jail, or both. Bald eagles south of the 40th parallel were listed under the Endangered Species Preservation Act of 1966 on March 11, 1967. On February 14, 1978, they were listed under the Endangered Species Act as threatened in Michigan, Minnesota, Oregon, Washington, Wisconsin and endangered in the remaining 43 coterminous states. In July 1995, the Service down-listed the species to threatened throughout the lower 48 states.

6. What caused the near extinction of the bald eagle?

The use of DDT as a pesticide during the late 1940s, 1950s and 1960s resulted in a precipitous decline of bald eagles in the contiguous United States. During this period of DDT use, eggshell thinning and nesting failures were widespread in bald eagles, and in some areas successful reproduction virtually ceased. DDE,

a metabolite of DDT, prevents normal calcium deposition during eggshell formation, resulting in thin-shelled eggs that are susceptible to breakage during incubation. Bald eagles suffered from the accumulation of DDE due to eating contaminated prey.

7. What has contributed to the recovery of the bald eagle in the lower 48 states?

Banning the use of the pesticide DDT, by EPA in 1972 set the stage for eagle recovery. Vigorous law enforcement reduced shootings; federal, state and private conservation agencies acquired or protected millions of acres of eagle habitat; and hundreds of eagles were successfully reintroduced to unoccupied suitable habitat.

8. How many bald eagles were there historically?

Wildlife experts believe there may have been 250,000 to as many as 500,000 bald eagles in North America when the Europeans first arrived. Lower 48 states estimates range up to 100,000 bald eagles.

9. How many bald eagles are there in the United States now?

In 1998, there were an estimated 5,748 breeding pairs, excluding Alaska.

10. How many bald eagles are there in Alaska?

Today, biologists estimate that there are approximately 50,000 bald eagles in Alaska. In 1917 Alaska's territorial legislature imposed a bounty on eagles. More than 128,000 were killed before the bounty was removed in 1953. In 1959 Alaska's eagles were given protection under the Bald Eagle Protection Act of 1940.

11. How many bald eagles are there in Hawaii?

Hawaii is the only state in the Union that does not have bald eagles.

12. How many bald eagles are there in Mexico?

There are several pairs in northern Mexico.

13. How many bald eagles are there in Canada?

Canada's population is estimated to be similar to Alaska's at about 50,000 birds.

14. How is the population data obtained?

The Service obtains data on nesting pairs and reproductive success collected primarily by the states, federal land management agencies, tribes and other cooperators. The Service then collates the data and compares it with previous years.

15. Are total numbers the only criteria on which removal from the list is based?

No. The decision to reclassify the bald eagle to threatened in 1995 and the decision to delist, if made, are based on numbers of breeding pairs, population trends, geographic distribution, reproductive success, habitat protection and an assessment of current threats and ability to manage them.

16. How much has the bald eagle population improved?

In 1963, the Audubon Society estimated that the lower 48 states had less than 500 pairs of nesting bald eagles. Service coordinated surveys in 1973-74 estimated 1000 pairs. In 1998, we recorded more than 5,748 occupied breeding areas.

17. Does the Service have a recovery plan for the bald eagle?

The bald eagle population in the lower 48 states is divided into five recovery regions. These regions include the Northern States, Chesapeake Bay, Southeastern, Southwestern and the Pacific Regions. Five separate recovery plans have been prepared, one for each region.

18. Can the Service consider delisting the bald eagle even though all recovery goals in the existing recovery plans have not been met or exceeded?

Recovery is the process by which the decline of an endangered or threatened species is arrested or reversed and threats to its survival are neutralized so that long-term survival in nature can be ensured. One of the main purposes of the recovery plan is to enumerate goals (guidelines) that will help the Service to determine when recovery for a particular species has been achieved. The Act does not require that all of the specific recovery goals for a listed species be met or exceeded before it can be delisted. The Service determines whether recovery has been achieved based on a species' performance relative to the goals set in its recovery plan, the best available scientific information, and interviews with species experts. A species is recovered when it is no longer in danger of extinction, or likely to become endangered within the foreseeable future throughout all or a significant portion of its range, and the threats that led to the species' listing have been reduced or eliminated. The bald eagle meets these requirements for removal from the List of Endangered and Threatened Wildlife.

19. Are there laws that protect bald eagles once the protections of the Endangered Species Act are lifted?

Yes. Two major laws are:

* The Migratory Bird Treaty Act prohibits except under certain specified conditions the possession, transport, or take of any migratory bird (including bald eagles), their parts, nests or eggs (16 U.S.C. 703-711).

* The Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act prohibits except under certain specified conditions the possession, transport, or take of any bald or golden eagle, their parts, nests or eggs (16 U.S.C. 668-668d). "Take" includes pursue, shoot, shoot at, poison, wound, kill, capture, trap, collect, molest or disturb (16 U.S.C. 668c; 50 CFR 22.3). We are developing guidelines to help with the interpretation of this Act in the absence of protection for the bald eagle under the Endangered Species Act.

20. How will we know that the population will not start to decline without the protections of the Endangered Species Act?

The species will be monitored for a minimum of five years to evaluate the population after the protections of the Act are lifted. If the population declines and the Service believes the protections of the Act are needed to prevent it from becoming endangered, it can be relisted.

21. Will bald eagle habitat be protected once the protections of the Endangered Species Act have been lifted?

Yes, but not to the same extent that protection was provided under the Endangered Species Act. Other federal laws which protect habitat including bald eagle habitat will still apply. These include the Clean Water Act, the Fish and Wildlife Coordination Act, the National Environmental Policy Act and others. As stated in (19) above, we are currently working on guidelines to aid the interpretation of "take" under the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act.

22. What is being done to protect bald eagle habitat outside of the Endangered Species Act?

Many states, local governments and private interest groups are active in purchase and protection of lands important as bald eagle habitat. In addition, bald eagle nesting and wintering habitat management

guidelines have been developed by recovery teams, states, and other resource managers. These guidelines emphasize the importance of protective buffer areas around the nesting and winter roosting trees. The Service will continue to promote continued use of the guidelines for effective bald eagle management.

23. What are the major remaining threats to the bald eagle?

The two major threats to the bald eagles are (1) habitat loss and (2) contaminants. Habitat loss will be a continuing problem as America's population expands into undeveloped areas. Acquisition and prudent management of bald eagle habitat by all levels of government and private organizations will aid its protection. Impacts from contaminants have been significantly reduced with the ban of DDT, elimination of lead shot for waterfowl hunting, and restrictions on other harmful pesticides. Contaminants still do impact eagles on a more localized basis, but not to the extent that they are suppressing the overall population increase. The Service will continue to monitor these situations and strive for corrective action.

24. What effect did DDT have on the bald eagle?

The pesticide DDT came into widespread use after World War II. DDT ingested with the diet of fish resulted in egg shell thinning such that the eggs broke when incubated by the parent, while others failed to hatch. By the early 1960s, recruitment plummeted and population numbers dropped. In response to the problems caused by DDT and other toxic persistent pesticides, DDT was banned from use on December 31, 1972. By 1976, registration of dieldrin, heptachlor, and chlordane was canceled for all but the most restricted uses. Most uses of PCB's were restricted in 1977 and continued to be phased out through the 1980s.

25. Is DDT still a problem?

Insecticide DDT was banned from use in the United States by the US Environmental Protection Agency in 1972. It is still found in the environment and in the food chain, but impacts are now confined to local areas, like the Channel Islands in California which are near an historic DDT production facility.

26. What activities contributed to the recovery of the bald eagle?

Banning DDT and other harmful organochlorines from use in the United States and the passage of the Endangered Species Act with the subsequent listing of the bald eagle were the two major actions contributing to the recovery of the bald eagle.

The gradual reduction of DDT and other harmful organochlorines from the food chain has allowed overall production of young to approach that of a non-polluted environment. Vigorous law enforcement efforts reduced the shooting of bald eagles.

Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act has served to protect habitat of the bald eagle wherever it may have been affected by a federally licensed, permitted or funded activity. Through consultation with the Service under section 7 of the Act, buffers around nest trees and winter roost sites were protected.

The Service and many other federal, state, tribal, and local cooperators from across the nation have funded and carried out many of the tasks described within the five bald eagle recovery plans. Annual expenditures for the recovery and protection of the bald eagle by public and private agencies have exceeded \$1 million each year for the past decade. State fish and wildlife agencies have played a vital role in restoring eagles to areas from which they were extirpated or their numbers greatly reduced. These activities include conducting annual breeding and productivity surveys, purchasing lands for the protection of bald eagle habitat, reintroduction and habitat management programs, and public outreach.

27. What other threats are there to the bald eagle?

Other threats include shooting, disease, vehicle collision and electrocution.

28. What about the coot and eagle lesion syndrome found in Arkansas?

A neurological disease of unknown origin is believed to be the cause of death for at least 58 bald eagles in Arkansas over the past five years. Pathologists have recently found the problem in bald eagles in North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia. Research to date has not determined the exact cause of this mortality. The disease is also affecting coots and three species of ducks. These mortalities, though significant locally, are too few in number to impact recovery of the population nationwide.

29. What can we do about these threats?

Public education remains an important tool in protection of the bald eagle. Citizens must be constantly made aware that shooting bald eagles is against the law, punishable by fine and/or imprisonment. Disease problems occasionally occur in eagles. The Service tracks any such outbreaks very closely and will continue to do so. Vehicle collisions can be reduced by removing carrion along highways, particularly in winter when other sources of food are scarce. Electrocutions still occur on power poles and lines that are not configured for the protection of raptors. Much research has been done in this area and generally, new poles and lines are configured to reduce raptor electrocutions.

30. What about natural disasters?

Natural disasters such as hurricanes tend to have a local, temporary impact. If important roost or nest trees are lost, more marginal habitat will be used until reforestation renders the area useable again. The spread of infectious disease such as cutaneous pox has been limited to date, affecting less than 3% of all cases examined by the National Wildlife Health Laboratories at Madison, Wisconsin from 1985 -1990.

31. Do bald eagles have any natural predators?

Occasional predation of young by great horned owls can occur, and raccoons may take an egg once in a while. Neither of these occurs frequently enough to be considered serious.

32. What roles do state and local governments play?

The majority of state governments list the bald eagle as threatened or endangered. State endangered species laws vary from state to state on the amount of protection a listed species is afforded. The proposal to remove ESA protection will not affect the status the species has in each state. However, some states will also remove the bald eagle from their list of endangered species once the species is removed from the federal list.

Local governments play an important role in bald eagle habitat protection through zoning ordinances, acquisition and public education. Examples of excellent opportunities for public education occur along the Upper Mississippi River in winter. There, the local cities and private groups together with local state and federal agencies declare "Bald Eagle Days" where events are sponsored around viewing and learning about bald eagles. Many states have adopted the bald eagle habitat management guidelines and encourage their use in local development.

33. What can a private citizen do to help the bald eagle?

There are many things a private citizen can do to help protect the bald eagle. One can join an organization that works toward protection and preservation of an important bald eagle habitat; create and participate in outreach efforts to educate the public about the bald eagle and its needs; join local birdwatcher's efforts to monitor relative numbers of eagles over extended periods of time; report any potential problems that might result in injury or death to an eagle; or assist local, state, federal or tribal conservation agencies in monitoring nesting progress.

34. What is the purpose of the Endangered Species Act?

The purpose of the Act is to restore endangered and threatened animals and plants to the point where they are again viable, self-sustaining components of their ecosystems.

35. What do the terms "endangered" and "threatened" mean?

An endangered species, by definition, is one on the brink of extinction throughout all or a significant portion of its range. A threatened species is one likely to become endangered within the foreseeable future.

36. Have any other species been proposed for removal from the list of endangered and threatened species?

Yes, last summer the Service proposed to remove the peregrine falcon from the list of endangered species. This year, the Tinian Monarch, the Aleutian Canada Goose and the Columbia White-tailed Deer have all been proposed for removal from the list due to recovery. There are a number of other species that are expected to be proposed for removal in the near future, proving the effectiveness of the Endangered Species Act in recovering species from the brink of extinction.

37. Where can I get more information on the bald eagle?

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