U.S. FISH & WILDLIFE SERVICE

NEWS

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NATION MARKS 25 YEARS OF ENDANGERED SPECIES PROTECTION

"Nothing is more priceless and more worthy of preservation than the rich array of animal life with which our country has been blessed." With these words, on December 28, 1973, President Richard Nixon signed the Endangered Species Act, a law which has proven to be one of the strongest and most foresighted efforts ever made to protect the delicate web of life.

"It is a law which has at various times challenged, inspired, angered, and above all made us ask hard questions about the impact of human activities on our environment and how they can be balanced with the need to protect the diversity of life," says Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt.

The law's purpose is to conserve "the ecosystems upon which endangered and threatened species depend" and to conserve and recover listed species. It is a challenge which encompasses not only familiar and beloved mammals, birds, and fishes, but also little-known plants, amphibians, reptiles, insects, and crustaceans. But the worthiness of the law's broad purpose has become more apparent over the years, as scientists have found the value of rare plants and animals as sources for new medicines and genetic reservoirs for new agricultural crops.

Earlier endangered species laws passed in 1966 and 1969 raised public awareness about the plight of rare animals. But it was the 1973 Endangered Species Act that provided the real tools to help wildlife and plants facing extinction.

"Over the years the Endangered Species Act has evolved greater flexibility and increased recognition for the contributions of partners across all sectors of our society. I believe the Act will help us assure wildlife and wild places as a birthright for generations of Americans to come," Secretary Babbitt says.

The law has steadily built an impressive track record. By the time they are deemed to merit the special protection of the Endangered Species Act, many species have been declining for many years and face multiple threats to their continued existence.

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Often research is needed to determine the exact causes of their decline or the best means of restoring them. Yet in 25 years, the Endangered Species Act has proven remarkably effective at preventing extinctions and slowing the decline of imperiled species. Nearly half of all species listed for a decade or more are now either stable or improving in status. Only seven -- less than 1 percent -- have been found to be extinct. Preventing the extinction of the remaining 99 percent of listed species is one of the Act's greatest successes.

But the Act's first 25 years have not been without controversy -- at times, intense controversy. Although protection of most species has gone without much public notice, a few -- like the snail darter and the northern spotted owl -- have been lightning rods for controversy. Often, it is the decline of these species that has caused society to confront hard issues about how we should manage our rivers, forests, and other natural resources. In that sense, endangered species have been "Mother Nature's 911," signaling changes in the environment that require our attention.

"Has the Endangered Species Act generated controversy?" asks Jamie Rappaport Clark, director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. "Of course. But I believe most Americans now recognize that the Endangered Species Act is ultimately about our own future. The law doesn't protect just the famous and well-loved species. It seeks to assure healthy and balanced life systems for all species -- ours included. The Act has sparked much debate over the years, and that's wholesome; that's how a public dialogue is encouraged and laws can be improved. But on the 25th anniversary, I think it's important to note that this law has given us a society far more on the plus side of the ledger than on the minus. There have been some tremendous restorations and some vitally important strides for scores of rare plants and animals."

One of the most remarkable events of 1998 was the announcement that the peregrine falcon is ready to graduate from the list of endangered and threatened species. The Peregrine Fund, the Raptor Center, the Santa Cruz Predatory Bird Research Group, states and many volunteers have worked with the Fish and Wildlife Service over the last two decades to successfully breed and release peregrines into the wild. Today their numbers have reached 1,593 breeding pairs, inhabiting skyscrapers, bridges, and cliffs in 40 states. Many more species will be following the peregrine on its road to recovery in the near future, including our national symbol, the bald eagle, the Aleutian Canada goose, and the Tinian monarch -- a fitting tribute to the 25th anniversary of the Endangered Species Act.

Other highlights this year included the captive breeding program for the endangered black-footed ferret, which experienced its

most successful year to date. Managed by the Service and many partners (the Toronto Zoo, Phoenix Zoo, Henry Doorly Zoo, Louisville Zoological Garden, National Zoo, and the Cheyenne Mountain Zoological Park), the program produced 339 surviving kits from a total of 452 born in captivity this spring. As a result, over 200 ferret kits were placed into reintroduction sites and field breeding programs this year. This success is even more impressive considering that the ferret was thought to be extinct until a Wyoming ranch dog brought one home in 1981.

The California condor reintroduction program continued this year as well, in partnership with the Peregrine Fund. Condors have been released in Arizona and California, increasing the population of free-flying condors from zero in 1987 to 44 today.

The Act's flagship species, the whooping crane, fell to less than 20 individuals in the early 1940's. Today more than 200 whooping cranes exist in the wild, with 200 more in captive breeding populations. The greenback cutthroat trout was widely believed extinct until a remote population was discovered in the 1960's. Thanks to recovery actions under the Endangered Species Act, the greenback is on the verge of complete delisting.

But, despite its successes, need for the Act continues. This year, the Service has added 57 species to the endangered species list, bringing the list of endangered and threatened species to 1179. "Listing a species means that other conservation efforts have failed," says Service Director Clark. "Ideally we should be protecting more species earlier by addressing larger habitat issues. The Endangered Species Act at least gives us one last chance to do right by a creature."

Seventy percent of all endangered and threatened species make their homes on privately owned lands, so the involvement of landowners is critical to the management of these vulnerable species. The Clinton Administration has worked on ways for landowners to become more involved in the protection of endangered species on their lands while allowing for smart economic development to continue.

"These efforts have paid off," according to Director Clark. "In local communities all across the country, people are taking a real interest in saving species. All Americans owe tremendous gratitude to concerned groups and individual private citizens who have dedicated their efforts to saving species that were virtually on the brink of extinction."

Through habitat conservation plans (HCP's), the Service works with landowners to conserve species and their habitats while providing for economic growth. HCP's offer long-term planning for both landowners and for species. To date, 243 habitat

conservation plan permits have been signed and about 200 more are being developed. These habitat conservation plans cover approximately 6.5 million acres.

One of the highlights of the HCP program was the completion of San Diego's Multi-Species Conservation Plan, covering 85 endangered and threatened species. "With the U.S. population expected to increase by 125 million in the next century, San Diego now offers a model to the nation for how to plan for and balance the needs of man and nature, demonstrating that the preservation of ecosystems and the unique plants and wildlife they support is compatible with growth and development. This is endangered species protection in the real world," says Secretary Babbitt.

"The basic message of the Endangered Species Act is something everybody understands: extinction is forever," Babbitt concludes. "Once a species and its habitat are lost, they can't be brought back. The Endangered Species Act gives us one last chance to intervene on behalf of a species, and to save some important living part of America for the future."

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting, and enhancing fish and wildlife and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 93-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System comprised of more than 500 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands, and other special management areas. It also operates 66 national fish hatcheries and 78 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces Federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Aid program that distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state wildlife agencies.

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B-roll and pictures of endangered species are available. Call 202-208-3008.