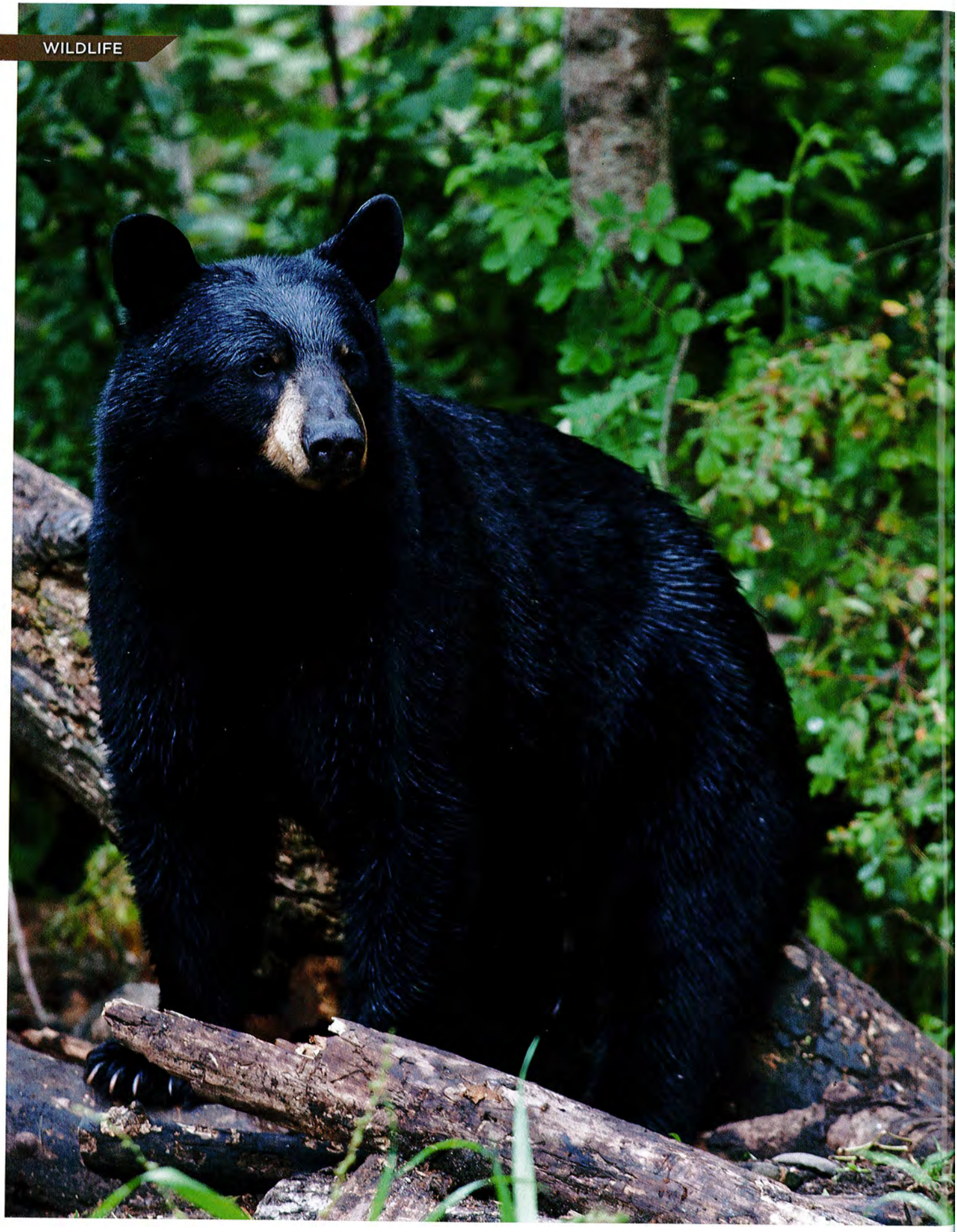

INSIGHTS FROM TODAY'S

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

BY: CINDY DOHNER

Working to conserve species so they do not end up on the endangered list.

When I was 15, my grandmother bought a herd of buffalo. She'd read they were in trouble and wanted to help save them from extinction. For more than a decade, she and my grandfather raised 20 of the great American grassland animals on their farm in Illinois, before donating them to a zoo. Whenever I visited the farm with my parents and siblings, I learned a few things. One was not to get too close to buffalo. They ***will*** charge. I also learned about the difference a private landowner can make,and the value of working on and enjoying the land.

As the Southeast Regional Director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the important role private landowners play in conserving our lands, waters and outdoor way of life is the lesson I most take to heart. The vast majority of land in the Southeast is in private ownership. The opportunities we have today to hike, camp, hunt, fish or simply enjoy time with family and friends is largely because of the long legacy of responsible land stewardship handed down from one generation to the next. We all owe you and other land stewards our gratitude.

I also know the 21st century has brought conservation challenges my grandparents could not have imagined, from the fast pace of development, to exponential population growth, to the onslaught of exotic species overtaking our natural communities. Unless we do some things differently, we're going to lose a lot of the natural heritage that I grew up with and hope to pass on to my two sons.

OUR MISSION

The Service's mission is to work with others to conserve, protect, and enhance fish, wildlife, plants, and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. We accomplish our mission in many ways, including managing a network of national wildlife refuges, stocking trout streams and enforcing federal laws that protect threatened and endangered species. We also work with private landowners, the states, conservation groups and other federal agencies to provide funding and technical guidance on high priority conservation projects such as restoring the once vast longleaf pine forests.

And yet we're losing ground. I grew up in Pennsylvania, where I could run all day in the nearby forest. I played in creeks and turned over rocks looking for crayfish. I learned about trees and birds, built forts and enjoyed the stars. Now that forest and stream are gone, and with them the water quality protections and recreational opportunities they afforded.

I believe this nation has a limited amount of time to conserve our working lands, our rural way of life, and the connected natural areas that wildlife and their habitats need. This is the time to build on your excellent conservation and land stewardship legacy, to keep forests in forests so that you can continue to provide the renewable natural resources that make this country great.

The Fish and Wildlife Service wants to be your partner in this effort. I know that without you, we cannot succeed in our mission.

LITIGATION INUNDATION

In addition to responding to complex conservation challenges, the Service is also responding to frequent lawsuits filed under the Endangered Species Act in the last few years.

In 2011, under a court settlement reached with two conservation groups, the Service created a national, six-year work plan to act on more than 250 fish, wildlife and plant species that have been candidates for listing as threatened or endangered, some for more than a decade. "Candidates" are species the Service has determined should be listed under the Act, but have not been due to higher priorities and limited resources. Once a species is listed, a long list of regulations kicks in to prevent extinction.

More than 60 candidate species are found in the Southeast. For most of them, we have until October 2017 to determine if they need federal protection. For the gopher tortoise, we have a little more time. The long-lived reptile, which lives in the sandy soils of open pine forests, was named a candidate species in July 2011, after the settlement agreement was signed.

Addressing candidate species alone would be a daunting task. But in the last three years, conservation groups have also petitioned the Service under the Act to list hundreds of additional species in the Southeast Region, including a large number of fish, crayfish, salamanders, mussels and snails found in rivers and wetlands.

I call this a "tsunami" of potential listings, which could overwhelm our budget and resources. But with your help, through good land management practices, I believe we can turn the tide.

400+ Number of species the Southeast Region of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service must evaluate for listing under the Endangered Species Act over the next decade.

336 Number of federally threatened and endangered species administered by the Service's Southeast Region.

64 Number of candidate species in the Service's Southeast Region, or species that warrant protection under the Endangered Species Act but have been precluded due to higher listing priorities.

Gopher Tortoise

FLORIDA FISH AND WILDLIFE CONSERVATION COMMISSION

I believe this nation has a limited amount of time to conserve our working lands, our rural way of life, and the connected natural areas that wildlife and their habitats need.

Why Save Endangered Species?

When the Endangered Species Act was passed, Congress recognized that endangered species of "fish, wildlife and plants are of esthetic, ecological, educational, historical, recreational, and scientific value to the Nation and its people."

Natural Diversity: The removal of a single species can set off a chain reaction affecting many others. It has been estimated, for example, that a disappearing plant can take with it up to 30 other species, including insects and other plants.

Medicine: A fungus gave us penicillin, and certain plants have yielded substances used in drugs to treat heart disease, cancer, and a variety of other serious illnesses. At least a quarter of all prescriptions written annually in the United States contain chemicals discovered in plants and animals.

Ecosystem Services: We are only beginning to understand the value of our natural resources for cleaning our air and water, and for many other services we depend on.

ESA 101

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is one of two federal agencies charged with enforcing the Endangered Species Act, which was passed by Congress in 1973. The other agency is the U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Fisheries Service.

Endangered species are those that are in danger of extinction throughout all or a significant portion of its range. Threatened species are those likely to become endangered. A candidate species are those plants and animals for which the Service has sufficient information to list under the Act, but their status is on hold due to higher priority listing activities.

The Service determines whether a species is threatened or endangered based on their biological status and threats to their existence. When evaluating a species for listing, the Service must consider five factors:

1) Damage to, or destruction of, a species' habitat;
2) Overutilization of the species for commercial, recreational, scientific or educational purposes;
3) Disease or predation;
4) Inadequacy of existing protection; and
5) Other natural or manmade factors that affect the continued existence of the species, such as poor water quality and urbanization.

PETITIONS

Under the Act, citizens may petition the Service to add species to the list of threatened and endangered species. Currently the Service's Southeast Region is responding to petitions to list more than 400 species.

90-DAY FINDINGS

To the extent practical, the Service has 90 days to determine if there is enough information in the petition to warrant further review. During this period, the Service is limited to using the scientific data already available.

The Service can either determine the petition is not valid and further review of the petitioned species is unnecessary, or that the petition contains substantial information that warrants further review. If the petition would lead a reasonable person to believe protecting the species may be warranted, then further review is necessary. This does not mean the species will be listed. The Service issues its decision in a 90-day finding.

If a 90-day finding is issued for a species that warrants further review, the Service will then ask partner agencies, academic institutions, corporate interests and the general public for any and all information on the species in question.

GEORGIA DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES

Key Deer

CONSERVING AT-RISK SPECIES

My goal is to conserve as many of these candidates and at-risk species as possible. My view is that when a species is officially listed as federally threatened or endangered, the conservation community has failed.

Instead, my staff and I want to work with our partners to do such a good job conserving species that they do not require federal protection.

We have a five-point strategy to work on proactively conserving these species. Working with multiple partners, including the Forest Landowners Association, military bases and the states' fish and wildlife agencies, we are beginning to prioritize species for conservation action and improve incentives for voluntary conservation actions on private lands.

In addition, along with six Southeastern states, we are currently drafting a conservation strategy for the gopher tortoise to hopefully preclude the need for listing. You can find the draft at our website, www.fws.gov/southeast/candidateconservation, under the tab "Conservation Actions."

To be successful, we need your help. I am committed to finding the most innovative, flexible, and beneficial ways to help you conserve species in your working forests. One way we can do that is by acknowledging the best management practices implemented on your land to lighten your regulatory load. Fish and wildlife are in good hands with you, and we want to help keep it that way.

I don't have all the answers. In some cases, I'm still trying to figure out the questions. But I am certain of two things: One is that some of life's best lessons are taught on a pond, or in a deer stand, or by walking your family's land. The other is that if I am going to be able to give my sons the same opportunities my grandparents gave me, it will take all of us working together.