



Questions and Answers

Proposed Rule to Remove Island Fox Subspecies on Northern Channel Islands from the Endangered Species List Due to Recovery, and Improve Status of Island Foxes on Santa Catalina from Endangered to Threatened under the ESA

Q. What action is the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service taking?

Due to successful recovery, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) is proposing to remove three subspecies of island fox on San Miguel, Santa Rosa and Santa Cruz islands from the Federal List of Threatened and Endangered Wildlife under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). The Service is also proposing to improve the status of island foxes on Santa Catalina Island from endangered to threatened under the ESA.

Q. What is special about the Channel Island fox species?

A. The island fox is a unique or endemic species that inhabits the six largest California Channel Islands off the coast of southern California (San Miguel, Santa Rosa, Santa Cruz, San Nicolas, Santa Catalina, and San Clemente islands). Smaller than their relatives the mainland grey fox, they weigh around three to five pounds and stand approximately 12 inches tall.

Island foxes are omnivores and forage opportunistically on a wide variety of seasonally available plants and animals. Although primarily nocturnal, the island fox is more diurnal than the mainland grey fox. This diurnal behavior could be a result of the historical absence of large predators and the freedom from human harassment on the islands.

Q. What role do Channel Island foxes play in both the broader ecosystem and cultural history of the Channel Islands?

A. The island fox plays not only an important role within the individual island ecosystems, but also has cultural and historical significance for the Channel Islands. As top predators in their ecosystem, these mid-sized omnivores keep prey populations such as mice and skunks in balance, while also helping to reduce populations of invasive, non-native rats. The island fox was also a revered and culturally significant species for indigenous peoples – the Chumash of the north and Tongva of the south – who first inhabited the islands.

Q. What caused their population to decline?

A. In the late 1990s, island fox populations on the northern Channel Islands declined by 90 to 95 percent and were estimated to have a only a 50 percent chance of extinction over the next five to 10 years.

The fox decline on the northern Channel Islands was a consequence of predation by golden eagles. The presence of nonnative prey species (such as feral pigs on Santa Cruz Island and mule

deer and elk on Santa Rosa Island) attracted golden eagles to colonize the islands and to opportunistically prey on island foxes. On Santa Catalina Island, a canine distemper outbreak in 1998 killed approximately 90 percent of Santa Catalina Island's fox population.

Due to these declines, in March 2004, the four endemic subspecies of island fox on San Miguel, Santa Rosa, Santa Cruz and Santa Catalina Islands were designated as federally endangered under the Endangered Species Act.

Q. What does “federally endangered” mean?

A. The term “endangered species” under the Endangered Species Act indicates the species is in danger of extinction throughout all or a significant portion of its range. Under the Act, no party may “take” a listed species without prior consultation and authorization from the Service. Take is defined broadly in the Act as meaning “to harass, harm, pursue, hunt, shoot, wound, kill, trap, capture, or collect, or to attempt to engage in any such conduct.”

Q. What conservation and management actions have been implemented to prevent the extinction of Channel Island fox?

A. Past and ongoing actions to recover the species include: removing nonnative golden eagles from the northern Channel Islands to reduce the predation threat; removing the nonnative species that provided prey for the golden eagles; vaccinating foxes to protect them against canine distemper; breeding foxes in captivity and releasing them to the wild; monitoring wild island fox populations; and reestablishing bald eagles to their historic territories on the Channel Islands. As a result of these strategies, the island fox subspecies on the four islands have shown dramatic improvement.

Q. Which major partners were involved in the recovery efforts?

A. The Service collaborated with land managers of the Channel Islands including the National Park Service, The Nature Conservancy, Catalina Island Conservancy, as well as a team of stakeholders including scientific experts from academia, state and local governments, private, and non-profit organizations, including the Friends of the Island Fox and the Institute for Wildlife Studies, to identify and ameliorate threats to the island fox.

Q. What was the role of the captive breeding program in island fox recovery?

A. Due to the sharp population decline of the four island fox subspecies in the 1990s, a captive breeding program was established as an emergency effort to protect island foxes on Santa Catalina, San Miguel, Santa Cruz, and Santa Rosa Islands from extinction. In particular, the 15 remaining island foxes on San Miguel and Santa Rosa islands were all put into the captive breeding program to save them from extinction. The program was initiated in 1999 and ended in 2008 with all captive foxes being returned to the wild. This captive breeding program was an integral component to preventing extinction of the subspecies and supporting overall recovery efforts.

Q. Why was the removal and relocation of golden eagles but addition of bald eagles beneficial to island fox?

A. Bald eagles primarily prey on fish, smaller birds or carrion, thus posing little threat to island foxes. However, golden eagles are primarily specialized and terrestrial hunters, meaning they prey mainly on small rodents and mammals. The removal of golden eagles and reestablishment of bald eagles to the islands played an important role in supporting island fox recovery.

Q. How many Channel Islands foxes are there in the wild today?

A. Population estimates from 1999/2000 and 2014 are shown below for each island.

Table: Estimated number of wild adult and juvenile island foxes for each listed subspecies.

Island/Subspecies	1999/2000 Estimate	2014 Estimate
San Miguel	15	500
Santa Rosa	15	800
Santa Cruz	55	2500
Santa Catalina	103	1700

Q. Why is the Service proposing to remove island fox on the Northern Channel Islands from the Endangered Species List?

The best available scientific data suggest that the island fox subspecies on San Miguel, Santa Rosa and Santa Cruz Islands have recovered to self-sustaining levels and that threats to them (predominantly predation by golden eagles) have been reduced or eliminated. In addition to proposed removal from ESA protections, the Service is also proposing a monitoring plan to verify that northern Channel Islands foxes remain secure from risk of extinction by detecting changes in population trends and mortality and survival over time.

Q. Why is the Service proposing to change the status of island fox on Santa Catalina Island from endangered to threatened?

A. While data suggest island fox populations on Santa Catalina have also increased to pre-decline levels, the potential for a disease outbreak remains an existing threat; therefore, the Service recommends the subspecies' status be reclassified from endangered to threatened, retaining ESA protections. While an endangered species is defined under the ESA as any species that is in danger of extinction throughout all or a significant portions of its range, a threatened species is defines as any species that is likely to become endangered within the foreseeable future throughout all or a significant portion of its range. Threatened wildlife is afforded the same protections under the ESA as endangered wildlife.

Q. Is there a Recovery Plan in place for the four island fox subspecies?

A. In March 2015, the Service released the final [Recovery Plan](#) for the four island fox subspecies, outlining proven methods to ensure the subspecies' long-term viability in the wild,

including a golden eagle management strategy and epidemic response plan. Recovery plans provide a blueprint for conservation partners and land managers to take steps to recover a species so that protection under the Endangered Species Act is no longer necessary. A recovery plan includes scientific information about the species and provides criteria and actions necessary for the Service to be able to improve the status from endangered to threatened or remove the species from the list of Federally Threatened and Endangered Species entirely.

The Service and conservation partners proceeded with a series of recovery actions to halt the downward spiral of island fox populations. Over time, actions recommended by the recovery partners have been implemented, and the recovery plan was refined as new information and data was collected. In September 2012, the draft recovery plan for the four subspecies of island fox was made publicly available for additional comments and input that were incorporated into the final plan.

Q. What happens next?

A. The Service will evaluate information provided by the public during the comment period. Based upon this evaluation, the Service may make the determination to publish a final rule to change one or more of the subspecies' statuses under the ESA within approximately one year of the proposed rule.

Q. What information is the Service looking for in the rule-making process? How can I provide input?

A. The proposed rule is available in the [Federal Register](#) under docket number FWS–R8–ES–2015–0170. During the comment period for the proposed rule from February 16, 2016 to April 18, 2016, any person may submit new information to the Service related to:

- Additional information on island fox distribution, population size, and population trend;
- Relevant information concerning any current or likely future threats (or lack thereof) to island foxes;
- Current or planned activities within the range of the island fox and their possible impacts;
- Regional climate change models and whether they are reliable and credible to use in assessing the effects of climate change on island foxes and its habitat; and
- Our draft post-delisting monitoring plan.

Any person may submit new information to be considered in the status reviews via email to fw8islandfox@fws.gov or by mail to the Ventura Fish and Wildlife Office, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 2493 Portola Road, Suite B, Ventura, CA 93003. Any new information will be considered during the review and will also be useful in evaluating the ongoing recovery programs for the species. Input and comments will be accepted from February 16 to April 18, 2016.