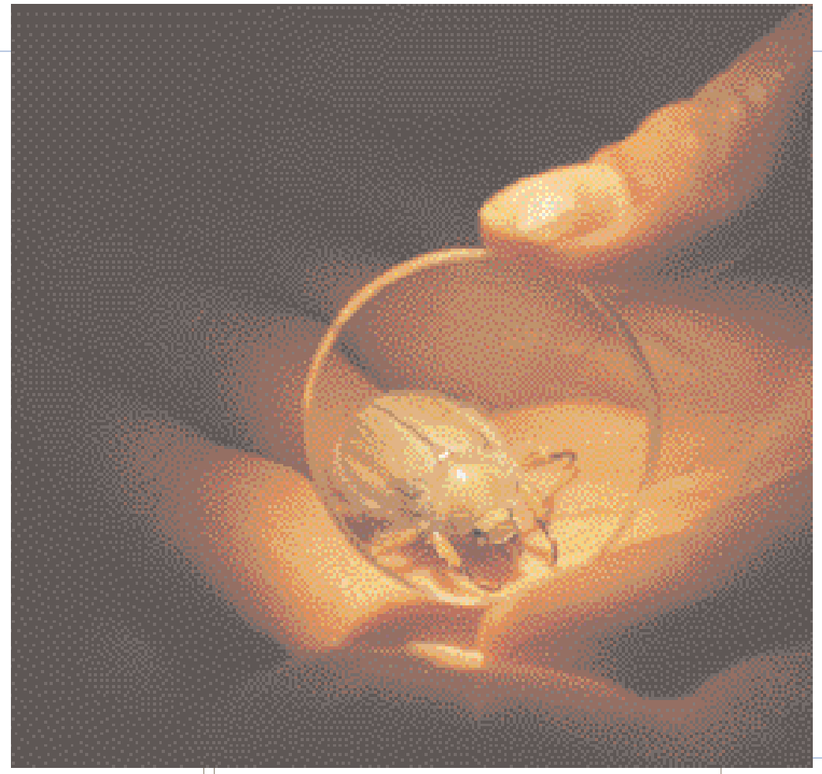
# Moses or Menace?

Meet Kieran Suckling, the most feared environmentalist in the West. He wants to save endangered species by kicking loggers, miners, and ranchers off America's public lands. His strategy may save the wilderness for us all—or it may get him killed.

BY ANNETTE MCGIVNEY

SHOUT AT THE DEVIL: EXTRACTIVE INDUSTRIES ARE NUDGING US TOWARD ECOLOGICAL MELTDOWN, SAYS ENDANGERED-SPECIES ADVOCATE KIERAN SUCKLING. HE'S FIGHTING BACK—AND WINNING, ONE LOWLY CREATURE AT A TIME.

PHOTO BY EDWARD MCCAIN



YOU'D SQUASH THIS BUG. KIERAN SUCKLING WOULDN'T. IN FACT, HE'D GARAGE EVERY ATV IN THE WEST JUST TO PROTECT THE ANDREWS DUNES SCARAB BEETLE.

Kieran Suckling never met a cave snail he didn't like. The same goes for salamanders, shrews, bats, beetles, fairy shrimp, and any creature unfortunate enough to have "pygmy" as part of its name. His critics accuse him of caring more about bugs than people, a charge Suckling doesn't entirely deny. Truth is, the bearded activist couldn't give a damn what you think of him. That's what makes him so dangerous.

Suckling, 38, is the high priest of a new brand of take-no-prisoners environmentalism obsessed with protecting endangered species and the land they need to prosper. His church is the Tucson-based Center for Biological Diversity, which under his direction has become one of the most powerful and effective conservation groups in the country.

Over the past decade, the Center's campaign to save the bottom of the food chain has shut down logging, ranching, ORVing, and development on 38 million acres of public land across the West. That's the equivalent of more than 17 Yellowstones set aside for habitat protection and nonmotorized recreation. Not surprisingly, Suckling is a hero to hikers—and a menace to cowboys, miners, timber companies, and wise-use activists, who think he's an environmental zealot bent on destroying rural economies and lifestyles. And they're not the only ones protesting. Land management officials throw their hands up, claiming Suckling's barrage of lawsuits hijacks their budgets and manpower with endless litigation. Mainstream conservation groups complain that his bull-in-a-china-shop style polarizes discussions about public lands.

Suckling thrives on the controversy. The death threats and verbal lashings he receives are proof to him that the Center is initiating the radical social change needed to forestall global environmental Armageddon. Far from backing down, Suckling is turning up the heat: As this story went to press, the Center was putting the finishing touches on a secret plan that could shut down the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. That's right, shut down.

Whether you're a backpacker or a cave snail, Kieran Suckling could be your new best friend. He has his eye on 20 million more wild acres to save, and there's a fair chance he'll do it. That is, if a letter bomb doesn't get him first.

This man doesn't look like a troublemaker. His appearance is nondescript: medium height, medium build, patchy brown hair, generic goatee, brown eyes. He usually wears sandals, jeans, and a thrift store T-shirt. He drives a battered 1983 Toyota pickup and carries his ever-present laptop in a threadbare daypack. His look is distinctly invisible: Just another midcareer nonprofit worker for whom every day is casual Friday.

Spend an hour in Suckling's office, though, and you'll discover a manic genius who's anything but casual. He spews facts and philosophies with a rapid-fire delivery, his voice jumping from an intense whisper to an excited shout and back, his anti-grazing tirades punctuated by occasional bursts of sardonic laughter. Rarely do 10 minutes pass without an outrageous declaration ("I'm trying to save the world—and drive George Bush's blood pressure up five points."). And the contradictions leap out. Suckling is equal parts Luddite and computer geek; guru and bully; CEO and deep ecologist. Combine Henry David Thoreau, Bill Gates, and Howard Stern, and you'd come pretty close to capturing Suckling.

As executive director of the Center, Suckling regularly works 12-hour days. Not so unusual, until you consider the additional 4 to 6 hours he logs every night maintaining species databases that contain 10,000 different plants and animals. Never far from his laptop and cell phone, he's constantly e-mailing, researching, strategizing, and obsessing over creatures many people would just as soon kill with a flyswatter. During interviews, he fidgets nervously, glancing over to his computer screen and stacks of reports. He's a classic workaholic, except he has no interest in material wealth. And even workaholics take time to shower. "An extravagance," he sniffs.

"Kieran is like a monk," says Suckling's ex-wife, Stephanie Buffum. "He is not tethered on a daily basis to the same things that you and I are tethered to." At once selfless and self-absorbed, he'll give the sweater off his back to a homeless man, but let his renters live with a hole in the ceiling of their apartment. For Buffum, who directs a small environmental group in the Pacific Northwest, the end of their 9-year relationship came when Suckling kept forgetting to pay their insurance and electric bills. "I should have known when he was on the cell phone 15 minutes before we said 'I do' that it wouldn't be easy," she laments.

What Suckling *is* tethered to are endangered bugs and beetles. "Kieran has always had great compassion for the underdog," says his mother, an Irish immigrant and devout Catholic who thinks her son acquired the roots of his environmental philosophy as a church-going youth. Early on, says Maureen Suckling, her son gravitated to Francis of Assisi, the patron saint of animals and a 12th-century radical who preached to birds, defended wolves, and disdained all worldly possessions. Inspired by the saint's fervent belief in the sanctity of all life, Suckling chose Francis as his confirmation name.

**Early on, says Maureen Suckling, her son gravitated to Francis of Assisi, the patron saint of animals. He even chose Francis as his confirmation name.**

PHOTOS BY ANDREW M. HARVEY/WWW.VISUALJOURNEYS.NET (TOP); COURTESY MAUREEN SUCKLING

A few years in the rough-and-tumble world of old-growth politics radicalized the nascent conservationist in Suckling. After college, the native Easterner headed to the Rockies for a grand hiking tour of the West. Distressed by the clear-cuts and rampant development, Suckling joined logging protests in Montana and eventually signed on with Earth First!, the counterculture environmental group known for its monkey-wrenching tactics. It was there that Suckling began to develop his own doctrine of wildlands protection. It goes something like this: All living organisms in nature are equal, and they communicate with one another to create a dynamic and healthy environment. If humans drive their fellow creatures extinct, not only does life become boring, but we also guarantee our own demise.

Suckling's first big chance to put that doctrine to work came in 1989, while counting Mexican spotted owls among the ancient ponderosa pines of New Mexico's Gila National Forest. There, he met two men who would help him establish what became the Center for Biological Diversity. Like Suckling, biologist Peter Galvin was working for the U.S. Forest Service; emergency room physician Robin Silver was photographing owls for the Arizona Game and Fish department. All three were frustrated by their agencies' inaction. "At some point, we realized the government had no intention of stopping logging," Suckling recalls. So the three hatched a plan: They would compile all the data they could find about nesting sites, then use the little-known citizen suit provision of the Endangered Species Act to petition the Forest Service to list the owl and stop cutting down the big trees where it was nesting.

At first, the Forest Service managers and loggers of Catron County, NM, laughed them off. "The Endangered Species Act had never been enforced here," recalls Leon Fager, a former Forest Service biologist who headed up the region's endangered species program. "The managers weren't worried. They just wanted to get the cut out and graze the cows."

Earth Justice attorney Jay Tutchton, who represented Suckling's crew in the early spotted owl cases, compares his dealings with the Forest Service to reasoning with a belligerent 5-year-old. "We'd submit a Freedom of Information Act request [to get public documents for a lawsuit], and they'd say, 'We're not going to give those grubby hippies anything.' And I'd have to explain to them that was not a legal reason, that there was no 'grubby hippie exemption' in the law."

Ultimately, the grubby hippies prevailed. Between 1989 and 1995, a series of lawsuits won endangered species protection for the Mexican spotted owl. A court-ordered injunction stopped all timber harvesting for 2 years on 21 million acres of national forest in Arizona and New Mexico, and most of the region's mills permanently closed. The sale of timber in Arizona and New Mexico went from a record high of 320 million board feet in 1990 to a meager 33 million board feet in 1996.

The David and Goliath story of three ordinary citizens bringing large timber corporations to their knees made national headlines and plenty of enemies. One prominent critic, Arizona Gov. Fife Symington, likened the group's tactics to "an environmental drive-by shooting." But success encouraged the trio to expand their work beyond spotted owls. As the newly created Southwest Center for Biological Diversity, they launched campaigns to defend the loach minnow, Southwestern willow flycatcher, and ferruginous pygmy owl; to check sprawl around Tuscon; and to fight over-grazing in riparian areas throughout the Southwest. In 1999, they dropped "Southwest" to reflect

further expansion into California, the Pacific Northwest, and Hawaii.

Since the first spotted owl case, Suckling has honed the group's strategy to a stunningly effective science. Biologists working or volunteering for the Center collect information about a threatened species. Then an attorney, usually working pro bono, files a lawsuit against a company or land management agency for violating the Endangered Species Act. Since the threatened plant or animal is often in dire straits, and since the Act requires immediate action to protect such species, judges almost always rule in favor of the Center.

The next step involves getting critical habitat established. Once a species is listed, the law obligates the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (administrator of the federal endangered species program) to cordon off sufficient wildland for it to recover. Any human activities that would interfere with recovery, such as logging, grazing, mining, or development, are prohibited in the critical habitat zone.

The Center has enjoyed unprecedented legal success. Since 1989, it has filed 224 lawsuits, mostly against the federal government. Suckling and crew have won 146, or 90 percent, of the completed cases (52 are ongoing and 10 remain unresolved), resulting in the listing of 281 species and the designation of 38 million acres of critical habitat, mostly on public land (see "38 Million Acres And Counting" at right). Imagine all the national parks in the Lower 48 stacked side by side, and you'll get a sense of the total de facto wilderness the lawsuits have created.

"They are masters of working within the system," says Earth First! founder Dave Foreman. "Right now, the Center is the best thing going in the West on conservation issues."

"EVERY DAY IS EARTH DAY FOR ME," SAYS JIM CHILTON, WHO RUNS CATTLE ON 85,000 ACRES OF PUBLIC LAND IN SOUTHERN ARIZONA.

Jim Chilton would beg to differ. "What Suckling is really talking about is ethnic cleansing," says the fifth-generation Arizona rancher. "He wants to cleanse the land of us cowboys who have a custom, a culture, a tradition in the West. He has come from the East and thinks he knows more than us."

Chilton, who runs cattle on 85,000 acres of public land, has battled the Center repeatedly over his grazing allotments in southeastern Arizona, where two different endangered species were found. Like other ranchers, he considers himself an ardent defender of the land. "Every day is Earth Day for me," protests the 62-year-old Chilton. "Why would ranchers who depend on a healthy landscape destroy it? If you abuse the land, you're sticking a knife in your own back."

Like Chilton, Doc Lane of the Arizona Cattle Growers Association has no use for Center research suggesting that grazing anywhere anytime in the arid West is bad for the land. He sees an interloper driven more by ego than ecology. "Suckling is pushing his ideals and personal desires on a society that does not necessarily share those ideals," he insists.

"If these ranchers weren't subsidized by the federal government, they wouldn't exist," retorts Suckling. "They're living a lifestyle that is supported by the rest of us to the detriment of our public lands. If they lived in a city and treated their rental property that badly, they would have been booted off years ago." When I suggest a middle ground—some conservation groups are espousing what they are calling environmentally responsible ranching—Suckling laughs. It's clear he'll never budge from his zero-tolerance position on grazing, even if it means that every cowboy in the West has to trade in his Wranglers for a McDonald's uniform.

The ranchers aren't taking Suckling's attacks lying down. In fact, they've recently slowed the Center's momentum by filing countersuits when the Center wins a decision or settlement. Their lawyers look for technical violations in Fish and Wildlife plans to create critical habitat, then take those inconsistencies to court. Wyoming attorney Karen Budd-Falen has built an eight-person practice appealing such cases.

"What we're trying to do with these lawsuits is get the land management agency to really look at the costs [of endangered species protection] and consider alternatives to lessen the economic impact," explains Falen, who's become something of a celebrity in the wise-use movement. "I'm convinced there are all sorts of options when it comes to managing the land and designating critical habitat that will protect species without eliminating use," she adds.

While ranchers and industry groups have enjoyed small victories against the Center, the feds just keep losing. In the last 10 years, 70 percent of all species listed were added as a result of the Center's legal actions. Only a few listings were initiated by Fish and Wildlife, even though one of the agency's primary missions is to

# 38 Million Acres And Counting

## A sampling of the species and hiker-friendly wildlands protected by the Center for Biological Diversity

**California red-legged frog** Nearly 300,000 acres along the streams and rivers of central California's Plumas, Lassen, and Stanislaus National Forests, as well as in Yosemite National Park

**Desert tortoise and Andrews Dunes scarab beetle** Restrictions on grazing allotments on more than 2 million acres and the closure of 4,500 miles of road in the California Desert Conservation Area

**Peirson's milk vetch** 50,000 acres closed to ORVs in southern California's Algodones Dunes

**Bay checkerspot butterfly** Nearly 24,000 acres designated in California's San Mateo and Santa Clara counties

PYGMY OWL

FOR MORE INFORMATION, GO TO WWW.BIOLOGICALDIVERSITY.ORG.

**Northern goshawk, California spotted owl, and Pacific fisher** Revisions to the Forest Service's regional land use plan (called the Sierra Nevada framework) that restrict logging throughout the Sierra

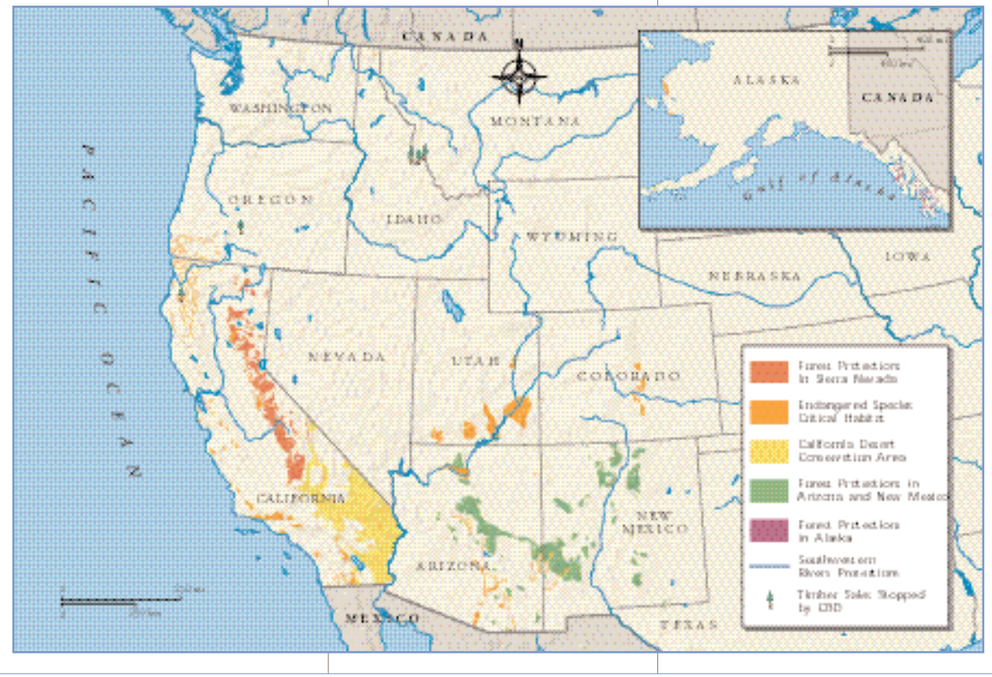
**Mexican spotted owl** 4.6 million acres designated in the ponderosa pine havens of these national forests: Manti La Sal, UT; Dixie, UT; Fishlake, UT; San Isabel, CO; Pike, CO; and Kaibab, AZ

**Loach minnow** Cattle banned from 250 river miles in Arizona and New Mexico, with the biggest stretch along the Gila River in the Gila National Forest, NM

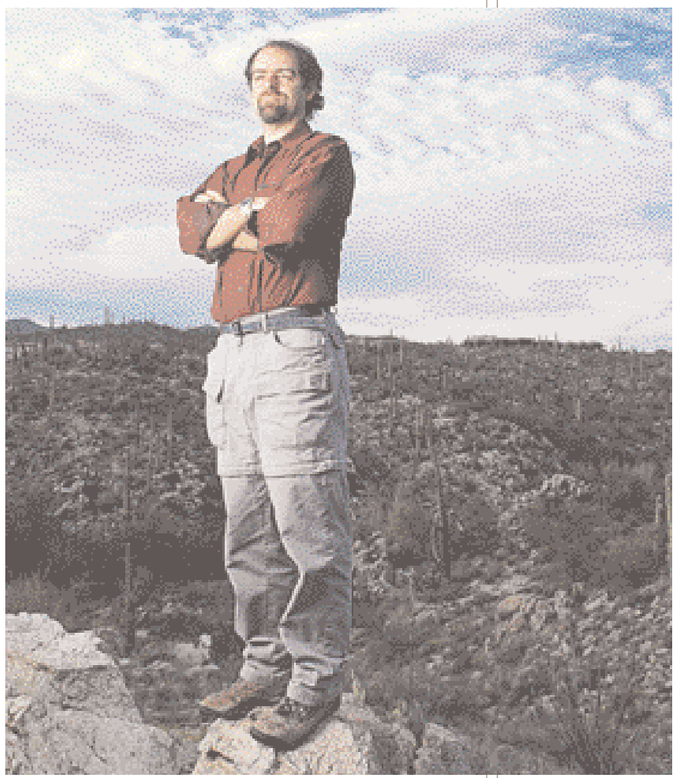
**Bull trout** Timber sales halted on 4,000 acres in Oregon's Willamette National Forest and on 33,000 acres in Montana's Bitterroot National Forest

**Spectacled eider (sea duck)** 24 million acres protected along the Alaskan coast, including 1 million acres in the Yukon Delta and Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuges that are accessible to hikers

**Queen Charlotte goshawk** Revisions to a Forest Service management plan that reduce logging in Alaska's Tongass National Forest




PHOTOS BY A.E. ARAIZA/ARIZONA DAILY STAR (LEFT); STEVE HOWE; MAP BY EQUATOR GRAPHICS



SUCKLING'S EMERGENCE AS AN ACID-TONGUED ENVIRONMENTAL LEADER HAS LEFT HIM LESS TIME FOR EXTENDED BACKPACKING TRIPS, BUT HE STILL PREFERS TO SURVEY ENDANGERED HABITATS—LIKE THIS PARCEL OUTSIDE TUSCON—ON FOOT.

administer the nation's endangered species program.

Officials at the Justice Department (whose lawyers defend against the lawsuits) and Fish and Wildlife admit that Suckling is dictating their agenda. "It's wrong," says a Justice attorney who doesn't want to be named. "A privately funded organization acting in its own self-interest should not be doing a job entrusted to the federal government by U.S. citizens."

Again, Suckling laughs. "People at every agency leak us documents," he says. "I'll get anonymous envelopes. We use their own information against them in court." But Suckling is sympathetic to Fish and Wildlife in his own contradictory way. He believes the agency is grossly underfunded and mismanaged, but he hopes his campaign will bring it more money—the kind it needs to fulfill its mission. He's willing to kill the beast to make it better.

Chris Tollefson, a Fish and Wildlife spokesman in Washington, DC, says the lawsuits are easy for the Center to win. "Most have to do with our failure to meet statutory requirements. The Endangered Species Act is very deadline driven. If we don't respond to a petition for listing a species or designate critical habitat in time, they sue," he says.

The agency now spends every penny of its $9 million listing budget complying with court orders. Most of the money goes to establish critical habitat, which Fish and Wildlife managers believe is less important than new listings. "If we didn't have the litigation to deal with, we'd be able to respond to the needs of more species," maintains Tollefson. "These court orders correspond with the priorities of some folks, but not ours. Somehow we've got to get to the point where litigation isn't driving the process."

But some Forest Service and Fish and Wildlife employees insist the land management agencies wouldn't even try to abide by environmental protection laws if it weren't for the Center's lawsuits. "The Center has become the police of the Forest Service," says Leon Fager, who retired in frustration in 1994 after 31 years as a biologist with the agency. "My job was supposed to be restoration and recovery of species. Instead, I spent the whole time defending the Forest Service for not following the law."

He's hardly alone. "I've been here a long time, and we used to be advocates for wildlife resources," says a current Fish and Wildlife Service biologist who doesn't want to be named. "Now we're advocates for development and collaboration. The question I'm always asked in meetings is: 'What can we do to help someone get their [development] project done?' We're cautioned not to use the Endangered Species Act too much—that if we use it, we'll lose it." Indeed, several conservative Congressmen have proposed legislation to water down the Endangered Species Act. For now, it appears safe. Few elected officials want the blood of extinct species on their records.

If the feds are angry, mainstream environmental organizations are nervous. "The Center sues everybody and that scares people away," says the director of an Arizona environmental group who asks to remain anonymous. "We recently lost a collaborative initiative to preserve state trust lands because the government was afraid the Center would step in and sue. I believe in collaborative conservation, where everybody works together on protection plans. The Center believes in just the opposite."

Suckling, no surprise, scoffs at consensus. "Child abuse is illegal and so is extinction," he argues. "You don't negotiate about either one of them. People don't sit around and have consensus groups to decide how much child abuse there should be."

Dave Foreman agrees that the Center's direct approach is the only way. "If you look at the history of conservation," he notes, "very little positive has happened through a touchy-feely, consensus approach. Every wilderness area I've worked on has been a knock-down-drag-out fight. You can only do consensus and kissy-face negotiations with people you share values with."

"Hello enviro-nazi asshole," reads one of the many hate e-mails Suckling receives every day. "Are you seriously trying to save the milk-vetch weed? Is it really in danger of becoming extinct because sand buggies run them over? Is that stupid plant so important we can just piss on an entire subculture of human beings? Do you hate people? Let's say my group of people hates environmentalists. We cry to Congress and get a law passed that makes it legal to hunt and kill you assholes. How would you like that? You are asking for a war. It's coming. You've been warned."

The headquarters of the Center for Biological Diversity is hidden in a donated warehouse in a low-rent area of Tucson. No sign identifies the building's occupants, the parking lot is gated, and the heavy front door is alarmed. "When you're successful in shutting down industry, you get enemies," explains Suckling after I comment on the tight security I negotiated to get past the front desk. Center attorneys have been attacked in meetings; Suckling has run from angry loggers and had his car defecated on. "We take the death threats seriously," he says.

The Center's current annual budget is $2 million, 60 percent of which come from its 7,500 members. The Center earns some money from contract scientific work; the remainder is donated by the Pew Charitable Trusts, and Ted Turner and a few other wealthy individuals. None of the Center's 30 full-time employees look like grubby hippies. They are professional biologists, public policy experts, and accomplished lawyers. Most make about $35,000 a year, a figure that guarantees only the most passionate will apply.

Unlike wildlife advocates that focus on big, furry animals, the Center loves the charismatically challenged creatures at the bottom of the food chain. Suckling estimates that 80 percent of the species the Center is trying to save are less than 10 inches long. "The little things are what run the world," he says. "Ecosystems aren't driven by grizzly bears and bald eagles. They're driven by plants and worms and grasshoppers." Knock one down, the theory goes, and you start a domino effect that threatens hundreds farther up the food chain.

By winning endangered species protection for one tiny creature after another, Suckling is inching toward his ultimate objective: An end to all commercial use of public lands. No more mining. No more grazing. No more logging (except for thinning near residential areas to minimize catastrophic wildfires).

It's a revolutionary, even inflammatory, proposal, but to Suckling the math is simple. "Public lands should be managed for wildlife habitat, clean water, and low-impact recreation, like camping and hiking," he says. "[Consumptive activities] cost the taxpayer, destroy habitat, and trash recreational opportunities." What's more, he argues, only 3 percent of the beef consumed in the United States and 10 percent of the timber come from public lands, so the restrictions would hardly derail the nation's economy.

Out of 727 million acres of U.S. public land, just more than 100 million acres are currently protected against development under the federal Wilderness Act. Suckling wants the rest given equal protection—it's the only way, he says, to stop the nation's "extinction crisis." The method? The Endangered Species Act, of course. It's faster and cheaper than the Wilderness Act, and immune to the political filibustering that can delay wilderness designation for decades.

Suckling points to the Center's recent victory in the California Desert Conservation Area as proof of how well his strategy works. Even though the 1994 California Desert Protection Act designated 3.5 million acres of the conservation area as wilderness and established three national parks, the backcountry still suffered from ORV use, overgrazing, and mining. In March 2000, the Center filed suit against the Bureau of Land Management to protect 24 endangered species. The eventual settlement banned ORVs on more than half a million acres of sand dunes, restricted grazing on 2.5 million acres of desert tortoise habitat, and closed a mine operating inside Mojave National Preserve. Perhaps the most obvious benefit for backpackers is the newfound silence and solitude they'll experience in Algodunes Dunes, where ORVs once ruled.


**"This little guy has been so abused," says Suckling of the Buena Vista Lake ornate shrew. "Only 30 have been seen in the last decade."**

PHOTOS BY EDWARD CARREON (TOP); B. MOOSE PETERSON/WRP

"Our modus operandi is to take [opponents] by storm," boasts Suckling. "We don't let the industry or agencies know what we're doing because they'll try and stop us. But once we file a petition or lawsuit, they can't respond quickly enough. Then we file another. It's like boxing. We hit them once and before they have a chance to recover we hit them again, and we keep hammering away until they fall down."

There's no doubt Suckling loves a good fight. But the individual victories are trivial compared to the larger

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## MOSES OR MENACE?

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issue he sees facing the globe. "During the last 100 years, we have entered the sixth greatest extinction spasm this planet has ever experienced," he says. "Humans are wiping out wildlife at a rate unparalleled except for when massive meteors hurled into the Earth. Just in the United States alone, we've documented over 1,000 species that have gone extinct this century.

"If the current trajectory of insane development and destruction continues, life on Earth will end within a few hundred years," predicts Suckling. "Humans will go near the beginning. The last species to go will be cockroaches, ants, and worms. What we're fighting for at the Center is not just this or that animal, but the very basis of life on this planet."

If Suckling were the only one painting this kind of doomsday scenario, you might pass it off as the ranting of a radical environmentalist who's smoked too much milk-vetch weed. True, many scientists would dispute Suckling's dire predictions, but at least one credible source echoes his warning: Harvard biologist Edward O. Wilson, winner of two Pulitzer prizes as well as the National Medal of Science. "An Armageddon is approaching at the beginning of the third millennium," writes Wilson in his latest book, *The Future of Life*. "But it is not the cosmic war and fiery collapse of mankind foretold in sacred scripture. It is the wreckage of the planet by an exuberantly plentiful and ingenious humanity."

The long snout. The beady, little eyes. The cute, rat-like body. Kieran Suckling has a million things to do, but he can't stop thinking about the Buena Vista Lake ornate shrew. "This little guy pulled on my heart strings," he laments. "It's been so abused. Only 30 have been seen in the last decade."

Once thriving in a vast wetland at the southern end of California's San Joaquin Valley, the Buena Vista shrew declined as its habitat was drained for agricultural irrigation. The few that remain cling to life on the edge of a polluted pond that's periodically drained to water crops. An agribusiness controls the pond's water supply; until the Center got involved, it refused to comply with pleas from environmentalists to save the shrew.

"They're not going to sacrifice their business for a goddamn shrew," reasons Suckling. "So now we're coming in after voluntary efforts failed, and we're saying, 'This is the law; this is the biology, it has to be done.' And we're going to sue and get in the face of anyone trying to stop it."

Thanks to the Center's legal threats, the shrew was added to the endangered species list last March. Now the Center is pushing Fish and Wildlife to establish protected habitat and a recovery plan for the shrew and its marshes. It's at this stage of the game that Suckling sometimes resorts to a bit of old-fashioned monkey-wrenching. "We're monitoring the shrew and making sure the agribusiness isn't de-watering the marshes," he says. "Sometimes it gets a little dicey because part of the habitat is on private land. But, shit, this species is going extinct! You think we're not going to climb over a fence?"

Problem is, the shrew is just one of thousands of species Suckling wants to save, and he can climb over only so many fences. Which is why the Center is preparing the mother of all endangered species lawsuits. As this issue went to press in mid-October, Center attorneys were preparing to file a petition with the Fish and Wildlife Service to list an astounding 251 plants and animals. In a typical year, Fish and Wildlife gets 45 listing petitions. "This will be the biggest filing in history," grins Suckling, "and it will completely overwhelm them."

On one level, the Center's attempt to create bureaucratic gridlock is a gimmick intended to draw national media attention. On another, it's a serious effort to force Congressional debate on endangered species funding, which Suckling calls "abysmally and cynically too low to get the job done." But the filing is also a manifestation of Suckling's near state of panic. Some of the species on Fish and Wildlife's candidate list have been there for 20 years, and a few may be literally down to their last days and months.

If all 251 species get listed, the impact on public lands will be extraordinary. Suckling estimates an addition of as many as 20 million new acres of critical habitat, a boon almost beyond belief to backpackers and other low-impact users. It would be like waking up one morning to discover that George W. Bush had set aside the entire state of Maine as a wilderness area.

For Suckling, though, the work never ends. There's always another filing (hundreds, in fact) and another adopted species to monitor. While he admits to getting tired of the conflict, he seems oblivious to the long hours and nonexistent personal life. Like St. Francis, he's stripped his existence down to a few bare essentials, chief among them an all-consuming devotion to the plight of helpless creatures. "Every time I study some new beetle," marvels Suckling, "I'm amazed at how unique it is, that it's the only one with three toes or that it lives on the underside of branches. There's so much to keep me going. We have to win every battle or a species will go extinct. We have to have a 100 percent success rate."

Sacrificing marriage, sleep, salary, and personal safety to save a three-toed beetle won't make sense to a lot of people. Nor will fighting cowboys, Fish and Wildlife, and every developer in the West. But what doesn't make sense to Suckling is that the Buena Vista Lake ornate shrew could go extinct by the time this story is published. "One gnarly winter is all it will take."

*Southwest Editor Annette McGivney keeps an eye on public lands issues from her home in Flagstaff, AZ.*

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