

US must reverse harmful endangered-species rule

By Randy Serraglio

SPECIAL TO THE ARIZONA DAILY STAR

The Endangered Species Act is one of the most effective environmental laws ever created. Of all the desperately imperiled species listed under the act since its passage 36 years ago, 99 percent have survived. In some cases, thanks to the act's strong legal protections, species have recovered and flourished to the point of leaving behind the "endangered" label.

Not surprisingly, such success makes the Endangered Species Act one of the most popular environmental laws as well. I believe this stems at least in part from the fundamental need of the human spirit to maintain its connection to the wild.

Arizonans want to know that jaguars and leopard frogs and even tiny topminnows are still breathing life into our beautiful mountains and deserts. And it is profoundly satisfying to know that our hearts are big enough, and our government effective enough, to ensure that such species do not succumb to the tragedy of extinction.

But neither should it surprise anyone — considering the mess we are in now and his vast unpopularity — to learn that one of President George W. Bush's final actions before leaving the White House last fall was to take a damaging swipe at such a popular and effective law by imposing new rules that significantly weaken it.

One of the fundamental facets of the act is consultation, whereby federal agencies are required to ask the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to weigh in on proposed federal actions whenever they might cause harm to endangered species. Using the best available science, Fish and Wildlife must issue an opinion on the expected impacts to the species, which often results in modifications to the proposed action and mitigation and other steps to protect the species.

President Bush thought it would be a good idea to remove this requirement and allow federal agencies to oversee themselves on endangered-species matters.

But Bush's attack on the Endangered Species Act went further than that. His new rules also prohibit consideration of the impacts of greenhouse gases on endangered species, despite the fact that catastrophic climate disruption resulting from the buildup of such gases in our atmosphere is now the single greatest threat to biodiversity worldwide.

We are on the brink of a devastating extinction crisis, we know the causes, and we have an effective legal tool to help deal with them — yet Bush's rules prevent us from using it.

Fortunately, Congress recently granted new Interior Secretary Ken Salazar the authority to rescind the Bush rules with the stroke of a pen. During his campaign, Barack Obama made a clear commitment to strongly support endangered species protections.

Secretary Salazar should honor President Obama's commitment and rescind the Bush rules before the May 9 deadline. We must act, so that the miraculous diversity of life in southern Arizona and around the world is not diminished forever.

Write to Randy Serraglio at rserraglio@biologicaldiversity.org