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## Butterfly escapes endangered species net; New Mexico community creates its own conservation plan

ANONYMOUS

The Sacramento Mountains checkerspot butterfly, decked out in black and orange, lives only in the mountain meadows in and around the village of Cloudcroft, high in the Sacramento Mountains of southern New Mexico. Until a few years ago, the locals gave little thought to their winged neighbor. But in 1999, spooked by the approaching specter of the Endangered Species Act, they decided to take butterfly conservation into their own hands.

Some of the residents of Cloudcroft saw an endangered species listing - which prevents the harming, harassing or killing of federally protected species - as a threat to private-property rights and an imposition by Uncle Sam. So when environmental groups petitioned the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to list the species, the community reacted by drafting a conservation plan to keep the butterfly off the list.

The plan offers local solutions to recover the species, which has suffered from habitat loss, particularly to development and off-road vehicle use, livestock grazing and pesticide spraying. It also proposes creating a green-belt around the city, keeping campers out of butterfly habitat, and blocking illegal off-road vehicle trails.

Last month, the community's work paid off when the Fish and Wildlife Service reversed its 2001 decision and announced that the checkerspot butterfly is no longer in danger of extinction. "Basically, we decided that the primary threats to the butterfly were alleviated, or they weren't as pronounced as we had originally thought," says Elizabeth Slown, a spokesperson for Fish and Wildlife in Albuquerque. Cloudcroft has put limits on new development, and forest thinning and controlled burns have reduced the threat of catastrophic fire, she says.

"The (village's) conservation plan is going to be the center of the universe now," says Sarah Rinkevich, a biologist with the Fish and Wildlife Service's endangered species division in Albuquerque, who has worked closely with the residents of Cloudcroft in drafting the plan.

### Locals win influence

Environmentalists call the plan a "positive step," but say it does nothing to protect the butterfly on the private lands that make up about 50 percent of the species' habitat.

"I definitely applaud the village of Cloudcroft for taking a proactive approach to protecting the butterfly," says Noah Greenwald of the Center for Biological Diversity. But he adds that the village's plan is not an adequate

substitute for federal protection: "Since this is just a draft, and it's calling for things that are still in the future, it really doesn't make sense to use it instead of listing (the butterfly.)" He also questions whether the city will follow through on its plan without the threat of an Endangered Species Act listing.

But Michael Nivison, a former mayor of Cloudcroft who now serves on the town council, says the village's view of the butterfly underwent something of a metamorphosis during the crafting of its conservation plan. For many community leaders, the butterfly - once regarded as a fluttery annoyance - is now seen as a tourist attraction, says Nivison: "We're a tourist community, so it allows us to maximize another facet of the mountains where we live to draw tourists here."

And Cloudcroft is not alone in undertaking local conservation efforts to try to head off an Endangered Species Act listing. Several states are working together to protect the black-tailed prairie dog, and a similar effort is under way for the sage grouse (HCN, 12/20/04). As with the checkerspot butterfly, the Fish and Wildlife Service has decided that those species do not merit federal protection.

Spokespeople for the agency say that local conservation efforts did not influence those decisions, but a policy finalized in March 2003 encourages federal biologists to consider local measures in deciding whether to list a species. The policy, which was drafted under the Clinton administration, lays out criteria for biologists to use in deciding whether local conservation efforts can be considered during the listing process.

"When you're making a decision about whether a species is endangered or not, what's being done locally can be a factor in the decision," says Hugh Vickery, a spokesman for the Department of Interior, which oversees Fish and Wildlife. "The viewpoint is that it's far more effective to try to get ahead of the curve and work with states, tribes, landowners and others to conserve species before they decline to the point where they need to be listed."