

The New York Times

FEBRUARY 20, 2006

Soaring Eagles

The American bald eagle has been inching its way off the endangered species list for several years, and now the bird might finally make it. This is great news for the eagle. It is equally great news for the 1973 Endangered Species Act, which has been under legislative assault in Congress.

According to Interior Department officials, there are only a few small regulatory hurdles to go before the eagle officially comes off the list. The bird's progress has been remarkable. In 1963, there were only 413 verifiable breeding pairs in the continental United States. Today there are 7,066, enough to justify delisting. The banning of the pesticide DDT in 1972 was enormously helpful. But so were the habitat protections provided by the act.

Last fall, the House of Representatives approved a dreadful bill, sponsored by Richard Pombo of California, that would weaken the act and be especially harmful to the provisions protecting habitat. The House somehow fell for the specious argument that the law was a failure because less than 1 percent of the more than 1,200 species listed as endangered or threatened had recovered to the point where they could be removed from the list.

But as the bald eagle demonstrates, recovery from near-extinction does not happen quickly. Most of the species on the list have been there a short time — 15.5 years on average. A much better measure of the law's effectiveness is the fact that more than two-thirds of the listed plants and animals whose condition is known are stable or improving.

We hope the Pombo bill dies for lack of interest in the Senate. Although the Endangered Species Act could profit from clarification and measured reform, the recovery of the bald eagle is testimony to its fundamental merit.