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## AZ bald eagles get no special species shield

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The U.S. government decided Wednesday not to give separate protection under the Endangered Species Act to Sonoran Desert bald eagles, which live primarily in Central Arizona along the Salt and Verde rivers.

The decision means the Arizona eagles, whose known population is 166, will not be listed as what's known as a distinct population segment that would be protected as an endangered species separately from all other bald eagles in the United States.

The national population is listed as a threatened species, which is considered less imperiled. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service concluded that environmental groups seeking separate protection for Arizona eagles had failed to prove that their population is significant compared with the national population or that the Arizona eagles are threatened seriously enough to risk extinction.

This decision also means that if Fish and Wildlife approves its now-pending proposal to delist the national eagle population, the Sonoran Desert population will lose its protection at the same time. The service is under a federal court order to decide by February 2007 whether to delist the entire eagle population.

"This is a devastating blow to desert nesting bald eagles. It clears the way to remove all significant protection," said Robin Silver, board president of the Tucson-based Center for Biological Diversity, one of three environmental groups that had petitioned the service for a separate listing for Arizona eagles.

In the Southwest, bald eagles nest and hunt for food in and around a variety of aquatic sites: reservoirs, regulated river systems, and free-flowing rivers and creeks. Most Southwestern eagles nest on cliff edges, rock pinnacles and in cottonwood trees.

Environmentalists had sought to protect these eagles in part because they felt that the birds' riverfront riparian habitats are severely threatened; most scientists agree that 80 percent to 90 percent of all Southwest riparian areas have disappeared over the past century because of a variety of human-caused damages.

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