All creatures, great and small

The widespread use of the pesticide DDT was banned decades ago, in large part because of the damage it did to the nation's wildlife. If not for that ban, and the federal Endangered Species Act, there's a good chance that about the only place you'd see an American bald eagle would be on emblems and flags at federal buildings or on the back of a dollar bill.

DDT and other pesticides had all but wiped out the bald eagle population. At one time, there were less than 500 nesting pairs of bald eagles in the continental United States, not counting Alaska.

The bald eagle has made an encouraging comeback, thanks to the DDT ban and the Endangered Species Act, which has strict rules about the use of pesticides. Still, an estimated 67 million birds die each year in the United States from pesticide poisoning. And that's from the legal uses of those chemicals.

One wonders what will happen to bird populations and other species if the U.S. Senate goes along with a House-approved bill that would, by all measures, essentially gut the Endangered Species Act. One provision of the bill would remove all pesticide restrictions from the act - making it open season on just about every kind of bird on the continent.

The so-called Threatened and Endangered Species Recovery Act actually is a mockery of any real effort to protect endangered species. Besides wiping out the pesticide rules, it also would require taxpayers to reward owners who aren't able to fully develop their land, by requiring the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to pay developers for any loss of profits due to enforcement of laws on behalf of endangered species. Another provision of the bill would give the secretary of the Interior, a political appointee, the authority to contradict and over-ride scientific findings.

Does this sound to you like it's going to encourage the protection of endangered species? In fact, a more appropriate name for it would have been the Shock and Awe Approach to Environmentalism Act.

Landowners and developers have made it crystal clear over the years that they don't like the Endangered Species Act. They see it as too restrictive and an infringement on private-property rights. They are, to a degree, correct about that - but not to the extent that a solid, working strategy for preserving all creatures great and small should be eviscerated. The act may need some fine-tuning, but not a complete gutting.

We probably could get along without tiger salamanders, red-legged frogs and bald eagles, but our lives would be diminished.