

# The Providence Journal

---

MARCH 1, 2006

## Backers of Endangered Species Act tout success

BY KAREN LEE ZINER

**Representatives of the Center for Biological Diversity, based in Arizona, come to Providence to show how well species are recovering.**

If not for the Endangered Species Act, a black-and-orange spotted beetle dubbed "nature's little embalmer" for its remarkable recycling of carrion, would almost certainly have gone the way of the dodo bird, rather than increase its fragile foothold on Block Island.

So too, the Atlantic piping plover and the Karner blue butterfly are success stories of federal environmental protection, advocates said yesterday.

As opponents work to revise -- and many say gut -- the 32-year-old Endangered Species Act, the Arizona-based Center for Biological Diversity yesterday held news conferences in Rhode Island, Massachusetts and New York to tout the act's success in the northeastern United States.

The center released results of a population trend study of all 54 endangered species that currently or historically bred or migrated through the Northeast.

Stars of the center's report include

the Atlantic piping plover, whose numbers have increased through protective efforts in Rhode Island and Massachusetts, and the American burying beetle, whose sole remaining natural colony east of the Mississippi is on Block Island.

"We discovered that 93 percent of the listed species have either improved or remained stable," said Melissa Waage, policy advocate for the center. Waage spoke at the Roger Williams Park Zoo.

"We came out with this report now, while there are open questions on how well the [Endangered Species Act] has fulfilled its purpose," said Waage. "No one had ever taken a good, comprehensive look at how well the species were recovering under the act.

"Now we know those numbers, and we know the act is working to bring those creatures from the edge of extinction towards the point where they won't need this kind of protection," said Waage.

Critics have said the act isn't working because not enough listed species have recovered, said Waage. "What this report shows is they're on the way to recovery and it's certainly disingenuous to criticize"

based on short-term data. "It's just a longer-term process than some say it is."

Among the most vocal critics of the Endangered Species Act is U.S. Rep. Richard Pombo, R-Calif., who last September pushed a bill through the House "that would gut the Endangered Species Act," said Waage.

Pombo's bill would repeal protections against hazardous pesticides, and eliminate habitat protections. He has argued that it puts "endangered flies, beetles, rats and shellfish" before people.

"The important thing to note is federal scientists say it's going to take 42 years for a species to recover, but on average has only been on the list for 24 years. So there's work to be done. The report is encouraging, that in the intervening time we will get them there," said Waage.

The report notes, "Declaring the Endangered Species Act a failure for not having recovered these species is akin to declaring a 10-day antibiotic treatment a failure because it didn't cure the infection on day three."

According to the report, improving species include the American bald eagle, American peregrine falcon, Arctic peregrine falcon, Atlantic piping plover, roseate tern, humpback whale, fin whale, right whale, Delmarva fox squirrel, shortnose sturgeon, American burying beetle, dwarf cinquefoil, "and many others."

Only three species declined: the Indiana bat, the Puritan tiger beetle, and the American hart's-tongue fern.

The number of nesting pairs of bald eagles increased in the Northeast from 21 in 1967 to 562 in 2005, the report states, including in Rhode Island. The number of Atlantic piping plovers has climbed since it was placed on the endangered list in 1985; the number of nesting pairs grew from 550 in 1986 to 1,423 pairs in 2004, according to the report.

Zookeeper Lou Perrotti, coordinator for the American burying beetle conservation project, spoke about the zoo's collaboration with the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, Massachusetts Fish & Game Service, Nantucket Conservation Society, and the Nature Conservancy in Rhode Island, to establish American burying beetle colonies on Nantucket. The beetles disappeared from the island in the 1920s.

The American burying beetle's naturally occurring populations once ranged over 30 states and at the borders of three Canadian provinces. The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service placed the beetles on the Endangered Species list in 1989.

"From what we can see, yes, it's

doing well," Perrotti said. "The naturally occurring population on Block Island -- it seems to be holding strong and even improving." Biologists estimate the population at around 3,000.

Since 1994, said Perrotti, "We've released like a little over 2,500 beetles on the island of Nantucket. They are maintaining a presence. We are catching beetles when we go over in the spring" each year.

This year and next, biologists will monitor to see whether the beetles have established self-sustaining populations, by trapping and counting insects.

The traps are "pitfall traps -- it's a jar sunk into the ground, baited with some of the most rotted chicken you're ever gonna smell in your life," he said.

Waxing poetic on the attributes of the American burying beetle, Perrotti said, "They clean up mortality. They take death, and it's recycled as soil."