

## **Bald eagle status a reminder of law Endangered Species Act saved raptor**

The scenario unfolding on Mad Dog Island in southern Beaufort County as a pair of bald eagles prepare to nest is a reminder for the nation that wildlife habitat is important.

"Bill and The Bride," as they have been dubbed, are representative of the national bird family, and they seek solitude to nest and incubate offspring. Bald eagles are skittish and often will abandon a nest if disturbed, especially when their relationship is young.

According to Patty Richards, Palmetto Bluff conservancy director, her company and Bluffton officials are working with the S.C. Department of Natural Resources to increase public awareness of the nesting eagles and keep their environment as quiet as possible by posting the island. They hope this will keep people from visiting the island until May. "When you have something this spectacular, you've got to take steps to protect them and give them space," Richards recently told a reporter.

While the bald eagle is skittish early in its mating life, it is adaptable, according to biologists. It just takes time. Through a series of federal laws dating to the 1940s, the once-endangered bird has been protected, and its population has grown. In South Carolina, the number of eagle pairs nesting has grown from 13 in 1977 to more than 200, according to Tom Murphy, a Department of Natural Resources biologist. Beaufort County has about 30 pairs of nesting eagles, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Department estimates about 6,500 nesting pairs in the continental United States.

Yet, the primary law responsible for the resurgence of the bald eagle is under attack. According to The Washington Post, the U.S. House Resources Committee Thursday set the stage for the most sweeping changes in the law in three decades. The changes would make it harder for federal officials to set aside large swaths of habitat for endangered plants and animals. Many think the bill will pass the House as early as this week. It is popular with many GOP House members because it ensures that "individual property owners are not forced to shoulder the financial burden of conserving endangered species for all Americans," according to Richard W. Pombo, R-Calif., committee chairman, as reported in The Post.

Pombo's bill would give greater incentive to privatize protection, but what if privatization doesn't work and habitat slowly disappears? What will happen to many species then?

The best hope may rest with the Senate, where hearings will start soon on its version of the bill. Senators should keep in mind that the Endangered Species Act without teeth has little value. Once a species is gone, it's lost forever.

Americans have valued the bald eagle for the life of this country, but if they want to continue to do so, the bird must have habitat to survive. South Carolina has laws to protect the bald eagle, but it would be nice to keep some teeth in federal laws. Another way to look at the issue is: Why mess with success?