

U.S. Denies Protection for Mexican Garter Snake

WASHINGTON, DC, September 28, 2006 (ENS) - The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced Tuesday that the Mexican Garter Snake does not warrant protection as an endangered species under the Endangered Species Act. The agency was responding to a petition and lawsuit by the Center for Biological Diversity, which sought protection for the species.

The Fish and Wildlife Service recognized that the garter snake is extirpated from 85-90 percent of its range in the United States and that the species is declining, and severely threatened by multiple factors in both the U.S. and Mexico. Even so, the agency concluded that the species should not be protected.

The Center for Biological Diversity expressed dismay with the decision, and said it reflects the Bush administration's disdain for protecting imperiled species.

"The Bush administration is perfectly willing to let the Mexican Garter Snake go extinct in the United States," said Noah Greenwald, conservation biologist with the Center for Biological Diversity and primary author of the petition. "This willingness is typical of the administration's disregard for the nation's wildlife."

Mexican garter snakes reach a maximum length of one meter, range in color from olive to olive-brown to olive-gray, and have three yellow stripes that run the length of the body. The species is dependent on the dwindling rivers and streams of the southwest United States and northern Mexico. They feed primarily on native frogs and fish, but also occasionally eat lizards and mice.

Its decline is closely linked to the deteriorating quality of streamside habitats, the disappearance of native frogs and native fishes and the rampant introduction and spread of non-native species, such as bullfrogs, sunfish and bass. The species has vanished from the majority of its range in the United States, but can still be found in a handful of areas in Arizona.

"The decline of the Mexican garter snake is symptomatic of an extremely widespread decline in the aquatic fauna of the Southwest," said Dr. Phil Rosen, herpetologist with the University of Arizona.

Greenwald noted that many species of wildlife have been protected in the United States despite their occurrence in other countries, including the gray wolf, grizzly bear, killer whale and Canada lynx.

Of particular disturbance, Greenwald added, is that the Fish and Wildlife Service recognized that the garter snake is also severely threatened by multiple factors in Mexico - the species is listed as threatened by the Mexican government.

"Given the severity of threats to the survival of the Mexican Garter Snake, it should have been listed across its range, including Mexico," Greenwald said. "The Fish and Wildlife Service refused to list the Garter Snake across its range because there haven't been surveys in Mexico, not because it is secure."