

New protections proposed for endangered Southeastern mussels

The Associated Press - ALBANY, Ga.

In response to a lawsuit, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has proposed designating 1,200 miles of rivers and streams in Alabama, Florida and Georgia as critical habitat for seven federally protected mussel species.

The waterways include portions of Apalachicola-Chattahoochee-Flint River system in all three states, the Ochlocknee River in Georgia and Florida and the Econofina Creek and Suwannee River in Florida.

Some scientists rank mussels as the nation's most threatened natural resource. Of the 300 species found in the United States, most live in the Southeast. American Indians ate them and used them to make tools and jewelry, and their shells were a major source of buttons from about 1890 until plastic buttons came along in the 1950s.

Snuggled in their hinged shells, they're not much to look at. To the uninitiated, they may resemble a blob, but scientists know all their parts: a mouth, a couple of muscles, a single sturdy foot for digging and anchoring and gills for straining food from the water.

"They're somewhat charismatically challenged lacking a face, but they receive the same protections as some species with faces under the Endangered Species Act," said Jerry Zeiwitz, a Wildlife Service biologist in Panama City, Fla.

What mussels may lack in inner beauty, they make up for in their colorful names.

The critical habitat designation is proposed for five endangered mussels _ the fat threeridge, the shinyrayed pocketbook, the Gulf moccasinshell, the Ochlocknee moccasinshell and the oval pigtoe _ and two threatened mussels, the Chipola slabshell and purple bankclimber.

Scientists say mussels have declined drastically over the past 30 years because they can't tolerate changes in water quality resulting from pollution or sediment from dredging and soil erosion.

Zeiwitz said the critical habitat designation would have little impact on anglers, boaters or people who own land along the streams.

But the designation will give the Wildlife Service extra clout in reviewing federal projects, including dam construction or dredging by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Zeiwitz said.

The Wildlife Service's mussel plan stems from a U.S. District Court suit filed in 2004 in Atlanta.

"The government will not do anything unless you sue them," said attorney Jay Tutchton, who filed suit on behalf of the Center for Biological Diversity in Tucson, Ariz. "The law is quite clear, but you basically have to sue them to get them to do their job."

Tutchton, who runs an environmental law clinic at the University of Denver, said the government did not fight the suit.

"Hundreds of freshwater mussels are endangered or threatened," Tutchton said. "They are hanging on, but at drastically reduced numbers."

The Endangered Species Act protects some animals from hunters and other obvious hazards, but the greatest threat to mussels is the loss of habitat, Tutchton said.

"Some species are threatened by direct human taking of them: a panther, an eagle, a Louisiana back bear, but nobody does that with mussels," he said. "The threat is to the habitat of the river."

The Wildlife Service said in a press release that it had found that the critical habitat designation generally provides little additional protection and prevents the agency from using its resources for activities with greater conservation benefits.

Nevertheless, in accordance with the court ruling, the agency is preparing an economic analysis of the plan and it will be released later for public comment and review.

"Some people question, 'Why save mussels?'" Tutchton asked. "They're at the base of the food chain. Hey, if a mussel can't live in that area, it probably isn't good for people drinking from that river. If they're dying, your own kidneys are next."