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## N.M. Huge Beneficiary of Endangered Species Act

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The Endangered Species Act is a safety net for wildlife and plants on the brink of extinction. The act has saved the American bald eagle, Mexican gray wolf, Pecos sunflower, and Gila trout—among hundreds of other beneficiaries. Intended to “conserve the ecosystems upon which threatened species and endangered species depend,” it has also enabled natural ecosystems to bounce back.

Ninety-nine percent of animals and plants protected by the act are still with us. Government data prove that animals protected by the law’s critical habitat provision are twice as likely to be recovering as those which lack such protections.

The Endangered Species Act is also popular, with 86 percent of Americans supporting it. Religious groups, municipalities and businesses have stepped up in its defense.

The act is successful because of its great reliance on science. On March 8, 5,738 scientists sent a letter to the U.S. Senate calling for protection of the law.

The Endangered Species Act is at risk. A bill passed in the House

of Representatives would eliminate critical habitat, substitute politics for science, bankrupt conservation programs by paying off industry, and authorize widespread poisoning of wolves and other wildlife.

Protecting the diversity of life serves all of us. Intact ecosystems provide an estimated \$300 billion in annual benefits to Americans, through vital functions such as keeping our air and water clean. Nine of the top 10 prescribed drugs in the United States are based on natural plants. But less than 1 percent of plant species worldwide have been screened for health applications.

In its juniper-clad mesas, ponderosa and fir forests, and tangled bosques of willow and cottonwood found at the bottom of its precipitous canyons, the story of New Mexico’s Gila ecosystem is one of the Endangered Species Act’s great successes.

In the 1980s, U.S. Forest Service management plans called for aggressive road-construction to facilitate logging of the centuries-old trees in much of the Gila’s backcountry—despite millions of dollars in costs to taxpayers. Mexican spotted owls were declining precipitously.

Hundreds of cattle grazed the Gila and San Francisco river corridors down to dirt. The southwestern wil-

low flycatcher, a songbird requiring healthy streamside vegetation, had fewer nesting trees and almost no new ones springing up. The river channels favored by two fish—the loach minnow and spokedace—were scoured by unchecked floods. The howl of the wolf had not been heard in the Gila since the early 1930s due to government poison and traps, and the secretive jaguar had been eliminated as well.

Today, the Gila’s big trees have largely been spared. Cattle have been removed from the river banks. The owl, flycatcher and fish are making progress toward recovery. Mexican gray wolves were reintroduced, and jaguars have been sighted in recent years.

The Endangered Species Act’s promise to conserve the web of life is also being fulfilled. With flourishing riparian vegetation, beavers have come back in force. Their ponds have expanded habitat for waterfowl and elk. But the free-flowing Gila and San Francisco Rivers are now threatened by water diversions. The Endangered Species Act, if it survives, will ensure that habitat for imperiled fish and birds is not destroyed.

Elsewhere, the act is helping to safeguard New Mexico’s natural

heritage from unrestrained oil and gas drilling. In the land the Navajo call Dinétah, the place of their origin story, Bureau of Land Management (BLM) areas specifically set aside for bald eagles are being destroyed by pipelines and roads. Fortunately, the muscular provisions of the Endangered Species Act are helping to spare the bald eagle.

At the other end of the state, on Otero Mesa, the elegant aplomado falcon is reclaiming our enchanted skies. But the BLM approved a plan last year that would scar this vibrant Chihuahuan Desert grassland with oil rigs. Sixty-three percent of New Mexicans favor protecting Otero Mesa, and Endangered Species Act safeguards for the falcon provide hope for this rare grassland ecosystem.

The toll from the oil and gas drilling frenzy includes contamination of ground water at 1,400 sites across the state. The public is being cut out of decisions on public lands, as big oil companies leave rubble in their wakes. Yates Petroleum Company has even proposed drilling less than a mile from the visitors' center on the popular Bitter Lake National Wildlife Refuge.

A Democratic Congress and Republican president Richard Nixon agreed when creating the Endangered Species Act in 1973 that the fates of people and nature are intertwined.

A previous generation's wisdom allows us to enjoy small but vital parts of our country close to how they looked hundreds of years ago.

Will future generations be able to experience the beauty and wonder of a migratory songbird's voice in a riverside cottonwood? Will they hear the howl of the lobo?

Today's Senate must defend nature's safety net.

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