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NATURE ON THE EDGE **A small fish story**

Editorial

A 3-INCH-LONG FISH, DISCOVERED in one area of the Little Tennessee River in the same year the Endangered Species Act was signed, would prove an icon of the new law. For a while, the snail darter held back the construction of a dam. More important, it tested the public's will to protect species and helped define how extensive the act would be.

In 1977, four years after the act was passed, lawsuits sought to save the snail darter by challenging the construction of the Tellico Dam, one of dozens of Tennessee River Valley dam projects. The courts ruled for the fish, but Congress, in a last-minute amendment to another bill, exempted the dam from compliance with the act.

It was certainly a loss for the fish. The dam wiped out the river's population of 20,000 or so snail darters. The legal conflict prompted debate over how the act should be applied. Saving a 50-foot whale was one thing, but a fish the length of a finger?

Despite the approval of the Tellico Dam, the act emerged as a powerful force for conservation. The snail darter's advocates prevailed legally all the way through the U.S. Supreme Court.

Rulings made it clear that not only did the law protect all listed species, but that preserving the habitats necessary for their survival and recovery was an in-

trinsic part of protection. Despite a period of doubt, public support for the act's full provisions has remained strong.

Ultimately, in a show of how little humans know about nature, the snail darter itself prevailed. Though efforts to transplant snail darters to other areas met with mixed success, smaller populations have been found in other creeks and rivers. In 1984, the snail darter was upgraded from endangered to threatened.