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## New lawsuit aimed at protecting flowers

ENVIRONMENT: The latest action seeks "critical habitat designation for six rare desert plants

**By Jennifer Bowles**

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RIVERSIDE - In what has become a common move to get heightened protection for endangered species, an environmental group in Idyllwild filed a lawsuit Monday to compel federal wildlife officials to designate critical habitat for six rare wildflowers found across Inland mountains.

The Center for Biological Diversity, joined by the California Native Plant Society, filed the federal lawsuit in Riverside against the U.S. Interior Department, the second of its kind in as many months. In August, the Center filed a similar lawsuit over the mountain yellow-legged frog, one of the Inland area's most imperiled species.

At issue in both lawsuits is the so-called critical habitat designation, required for species listed under the federal Endangered Species Act to protect the land essential for them to survive by, in some cases, restricting certain activities. But the move is generally opposed by federal wildlife officials who say they would rather work to put more rare species on the list than engage in the time-consuming and costly chore of carving out habitat.

"I think the most important part of the listing (under the Act) has been the actual listing of the plant or animal," said Andy Yuen, deputy field supervisor at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Carlsbad office.

Yuen added, "And in those cases where we've listed a species at least that does enforce and bring the Act into play." Yuen said he couldn't comment on the lawsuit because he hadn't seen it, and couldn't say why critical habitat wasn't designated for the plants when they were put on the list in 1998.

Daniel Patterson of the Center said critical habitat is necessary to prevent endangered species from going extinct.

"You can't recover a species without protecting its habitat," Patterson said. Otherwise, he said, "it'll just keep hanging on to being endangered. The law's about recovery and let's do what we can to give these species a firm foothold and take them off the list."

The plants are the southern mountain wild buckwheat, Bear Valley sandwort and ash gray paintbrush, and live only on pebble plains habitat between 6,000 to 7,500 feet in elevation in the San Bernardino Mountains.

The others include the San Bernardino bluegrass and California dandelion, which live in mountain meadows, and the Hidden Lake bluecurls, which lives in one location in the San Jacinto Mountains.