

Big Bear Grizzly

Pebble plains plants lose some protection

By KATHY PORTIE

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Wednesday, January 2, 2008 4:29 PM PST

Botanist Ileene Anderson has a passion for plants. It's her passion that has driven her to work for the Center for Biological Diversity, an organization that strives to protect endangered plant and animal species around the world.

Anderson, who works out of the Los Angeles office, is up in arms about the United States Fish and Wildlife Service decision to designate less than 25 percent of pebble plains areas in the San Bernardino Mountains as critical habitat. "This is the only place on the planet where these plants are found," Anderson said. The list includes the Bear Valley sandwort, the ash-gray Indian paintbrush and the Southern mountain wild buckwheat. All three pebble plains plants are on the federal endangered species list.

On Dec. 27, the Fish and Wildlife Service designated 1,769 acres in and around Big Bear Valley as critical habitat for the survival and recovery of the three plants. According to Anderson, that isn't enough. Without the full range of protection, the Fish and Wildlife Service is allowing the plants to go extinct in unprotected areas, and putting the species as a whole in peril, Anderson said in a press release from the Center for Biological Diversity.

Anderson has a special interest in saving endangered plants in Southern California. "You live in such a wonderful area with all the species found there," said Anderson, who received her master's degree in botany at Cal State-Northridge. "We want to protect these species (from extinction)."

The Fish and Wildlife Service designated 1,412 acres of 6,057 occupied acres as critical habitat for the sandwort. Of 7,008 acres inhabited by the paintbrush, 1,769 acres are critical habitat under the Fish and Wildlife Service designation. Less than 1,000 of 6,066 occupied acres are being set aside as critical habitat for the buckwheat. There is overlapping of acreage between the three plants.

Protected areas within the San Bernardino National Forest include Arrastre and Union flats, Broom Flat, Fawnskin, Juniper Point, Gold Mountain, South Baldwin Meadow and North Baldwin Lake. Public and private land in Holcomb Valley and Sawmill, Snow Valley, South Baldwin Ridge/Erwin Lake and Sugarloaf Ridge is also on the list. Other areas in Big Bear Lake include acreage in Aspen Glen and the former Snow Forest ski area.

Private property within the critical habitat designation is owned by the Wildlands Conservancy and the Boy Scouts of America. It is not clear where the land left out of the critical habitat designation is located.

Anderson said the Center for Biological Diversity will send a letter to the Fish and Wildlife Service asking for an explanation on why more land wasn't designated. "And there is always the option for litigation in the future," Anderson said.

A phone call to Jane Hendron, public affairs chief at the Fish and Wildlife Service Carlsbad, Calif., office was not returned at press time.

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