

## Preserve wealth; eliminate species

*Rep. Richard Pombo wants to strip meaning from Endangered Species Act*

You'd just as well try to fly a kite without a string or make pie without crust as do what U.S. Rep. Richard Pombo proposes for endangered species. Pombo would eliminate the law that protects their most vital habitat.

In a brazen move that is purely about preserving wealth, the Republican congressman from California, who has made a specialty of sabotaging the nation's conservation laws, has turned his sights on the Endangered Species Act.

Hoping to hurry through a major sucker punch to ESA before congressional elections a year from now, Pombo and a selection of other industry-beholden representatives – including some token Democrats – aim to make the nation's premier environmental legislation as toothless as possible.

Key to this is unlinking the recovery of species threatened with extinction from preservation of the often highly specific types of habitat on which they depend for survival.

It is true that many, though by no means all, endangered animals and plants can be raised in zoos or arboretums. But even the decidedly pro-business president who first signed the ESA into law in 1973, Richard Nixon, recognized this is a pale and inadequate substitute for ensuring that all God's creatures and plants continue as self-perpetuating populations in the wild.

Though seldom vocalized by environmental advocates, ESA's focus on preserving habitat provides a useful pretext to do what we should anyway: Set aside swaths of land and water where a wide variety of living things can prosper. In this sense, endangered species serve as a legal shield for land that would otherwise be carved up for human purposes.

Habitat protection sticks in the craw of many who see possessing the title to a piece of property as a license to scrape it down to bare bedrock if that will produce the most money.

Pombo's bill would require the government to compensate landowners if their development plans are impeded to prevent negative impacts on species, opening the door to strategic games in which sensitive lands are held for ransom.

Furthermore, Pombo would give political appointees the power to make scientific determinations, a sure recipe for handing decisions over to whoever writes the biggest campaign contribution check.

Sensible Republicans like Rhode Island Sen. Lincoln Chafee must make certain Pombo's attack on ESA suffers the extinction it so richly deserves. Safeguarding species and the habitat on which they depend is a duty we and our government owe to this great land.