



Protect animals, not developers

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Last Thursday, a US House of Representatives panel overwhelmingly approved a rewrite of the Endangered Species Act authored by Rep. Richard Pombo (R-CA).

The bill would shift the emphasis of the Endangered Species Act from defensive habitats to defending landowners. Even Pombo said of the bill, “It’s about a new era in protecting species and protecting habitat at the same time we protect property owners.” It’s good to know someone’s looking out for those poor, impoverished developers.

The bill bans the government from creating “critical habitat” for species where development is limited. Pombo says this changes the purpose of the Endangered Species Act from protecting habitat to recovering species. However, species have a hard time recovering if they don’t have their natural habitat.

Provisions in the bill include compensation for a landowner if the government blocks a proposed development because of habitat concerns. Also, it sets deadlines for the government to answer questions about whether development plans would affect habitats; if the government can’t make a decision within a year, the landowner is free to proceed with the project. (The bill originally set this deadline at 90 days, but that was amended.)

Modifications to the Endangered Species Act are much needed, that much is true. Since going into effect in 1973, only 15 of 1,830 threatened or endangered species have recovered enough to be taken off the list. However, “only” nine species have gone extinct. It’s clear the act, the way it currently stands, does a bit to protect wildlife but not nearly enough, but Pombo’s modifications would certainly not help improve recovery rates.

Perhaps the country needs to change the way it thinks about wildlife. Rather than trying to dominate nature, we should try to live in balance with it. Ranchers in the Midwest have long griped about wolves eating their livestock. However, a three-year study by Utah State University recently reported that wolves in an agricultural area of northwestern Minnesota eat mostly deer, muskrats and moose. Domestic livestock made up just 15 percent of the wolves’ diet. Plus, the livestock wolves did kill were mainly “vulnerable” animals, including diseased adults, calves and sheep, which suggests either wolves don’t attack healthy adult cattle or the adult cattle are able to fend off wolves. This doesn’t necessarily mean ranchers shouldn’t worry about wolves, but that maybe the two can learn to share the land.

In Yellowstone National Park, the re-growth of the wolf population means good news. Before the wolves were re-introduced to the park in the 1990s, elk dominated the landscape and ate more than their share of willows and aspens, which hurt the beaver and songbird populations. Now, wolves keep the elk in check and the park has found a restored sense of balance.

It’s a crazy thought, isn’t it? Learning to live with animals rather than destroying them when they interrupt our business? Just because we have the power to “control” animals doesn’t mean we need to needlessly exercise that power. Besides, nature has proven time and again there is nothing we can do that she can’t undo.

Pombo’s bill will face the House sometime in the next few weeks and then go to the Senate, where it is not predicted to pass easily. While there is definitely room in the Endangered Species Act for improvement, taking away critical habitats and giving landowners more power over endangered animals is a step in the wrong direction.