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PROTECTING ENDANGERED SPECIES SERVES HUMANS' BEST INTERESTS

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Extinction of an animal species is a lot like pregnancy: It's an all-or-nothing proposition. Congress passed the Endangered Species Act in 1973 with that in mind. It's too late once a bird or turtle or even a lowly beetle is erased from the planet. The difficult but smart course is to act to save a species when its decline becomes apparent, not when it is all but irreversible.

It's too bad that shortsighted conservatives, big business interests and property-rights supporters on the radical end of the spectrum have opposed the Endangered Species Act from the start. For them, the law's successes over 32 years haven't made a difference. And with the White House and Congress in conservative Republican hands, attacks on the law have continued to escalate.

The New York Times reports that never in the history of the law have there been more court challenges to it. This, from the public and private sectors. At the same time, bureaucrats deep in federal agencies use executive power to weaken its provisions. The Justice Department, for instance, in a battle over an endan-

dangered salmon species, argued that dams are as much a part of the environment as the rivers they hold back.

There's room in the government's wielding of the act to give industry incentives for proper stewardship of the nation's plant and animal species. But in the end, state and federal governments need to signal private interests clearly that species protection is a national priority. The loss of one species can have unpleasant consequences for whole areas, if the loss tips the balance of nature.

Nearly seven of every 10 species protected by the act have stabilized or recovered, which amounts to a ringing success and a demonstration of the law's value. Protecting rare plants and animals from encroaching civilization isn't easy, but it is absolutely worth the effort.