

## **Protecting endangered**

Rancher and congressman Richard W. Pombo has made no secret of his contempt for the Endangered Species Act.

The California Republican believes the 1973 ground-breaking environmental law intended to preserve rare plants and animals imposes too great a burden on property owners for too little return. He's been itching to repeal it ever since he arrived in Congress in 1993.

Now, while most lawmakers' attention is heavily focused on the aftermath of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, Mr. Pombo is making his move.

Last week, he unveiled a rewrite of the law that would strip out its most vital provisions while providing generous compensation to corporations and landowners inconvenienced by protections that remain. With support from like-minded Democrats as well as Republicans, the bill sped through the House Resources Committee, which Mr. Pombo chairs, and approval by the full House is expected tomorrow.

That would leave the Senate, where environmental enthusiasm is higher but nonetheless on the wane, as the endangered species' last hope.

A high-pitched, all-or-nothing battle would be pointless and unproductive. Mr. Pombo would be wiser to seek a genuine compromise with lawmakers such as Rep. Wayne T. Gilchrest, a moderate Maryland Republican and environmental advocate who also serves on the Resources Committee.

Mr. Pombo complains that the law has restored healthy populations to only 16 of the more than 1,800 species on its endangered list. But recovered species include the American alligator, peregrine falcon, brown pelican and gray whale - soon to be joined by the bald eagle and grizzly bear. That's no small accomplishment.

What's more, only nine endangered plants and animals have been lost.

The law could be considered a success if all it had done was call attention to the impact of human activities on the wildlife that contributes so much beauty and delight to life. But it also goes beyond that to declare preserving these owls and cactuses and snail darters a national priority.

The Endangered Species Act deserves similar protection from Mr. Pombo.