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Pygmy owl leaves a conservation legacy

The star's view: Designation as an endangered species did almost nothing to curb growth on the Northwest Side. But the owl inspired the county's conservation plan.

Despite lawsuits and predictions of a doom from home builders, federal protection of the cactus ferruginous pygmy owl has had little effect on growth throughout the Northwest region.

Which makes a plan announced this week by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to take the owl off its list of threatened and endangered species largely irrelevant.

The idea to preserve the prime saguaro forest land was a good one in 1999 when Fish and Wildlife put the tiny owl on its list. It was a win for environmentalists. But the construction and home building industry predicted disaster. They said construction would come to an end and land values would take a dive.

They were wrong. An investigation by the Star in 2002 showed that permits for new homes on the Northwest Side increased after the federal designation while permits declined in other areas of the county.

The biggest impact the Star could find was that the endangered species designation changed where development occurred in the Northwest.

Instead, the disappearing owl appears to be the big loser. The problem was a

weak U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which did little to protect the creature other than pencil its name onto the list. Today, there are only 20 or so of the adult owls in Arizona.

Yet even as the numbers dwindled, the pygmy owl played a major role in expanding the protection of all native creatures in Pima County. County Administrator Chuck Huckelberry credits efforts to protect the owl as the catalyst for the historic Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan.

As part of the plan, voters approved \$174 million in bonds to acquire and set aside sensitive habitat. The land acquisitions are meant to protect 53 desert species, including the owl.

Even developers supported the conservation plan, which Huckelberry shepherded through six years of research, discussion and negotiation. It will help preserve much of what makes Tucson special. But the plan largely skipped the Northwest region, where those development pressures pushed land prices so high the public would get little for its investment.

The county, instead, looked to larger tracts farther from population centers. It's hard to argue against this approach knowing earlier government efforts at Northwest preservation, through the Endangered Species Act, produced such poor results for the owl.

Even so, those who have championed the cause of the owl aren't giving up. The Center for Biological Diversity will petition Fish and Wildlife to expand protection of the owl rather than doing away with it by having the entire Sonoran Desert population listed as endangered species, said Kieran Suckling, policy director for the center.

That way, protection would take a broader and binational approach, recognizing that habitat from the Phoenix area south to the border is essential for survival of the owl.

Home builders fought the listing to begin with, so they aren't likely to accept this proposal. They'll have a hard time arguing economic doom this time, though.

Still, with only 20 of the owls left in the state and habitat in the path of growth, the owl is disappearing. All that's likely to remain is the irony of a broad conservation plan inspired by a bird that is rapidly disappearing from Arizona.

It was too high a price to pay.

But in the end, a local conservation plan designed to save dozens of species promises to succeed where a contentious federal designation without enforcement failed.