

Giving a hoot about an owl

May. 21, 2008 10:53 PM

Among the endangered species listed below, name the one subcategory about which most of us could care less:

1. Construction workers.
2. Real-estate agents.
3. Mortgage bankers.
4. Hotel and restaurant employees.
5. Pygmy owls.

That's what I thought you'd say.

Strangely enough, members of the human race (particularly the working class) don't tend to inspire the same high-quality legal advocates as do representatives of the animal kingdom.

With that in mind, the good folks at the Center for Biological Diversity in Tucson have filed a notice of intent to sue the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in order to have the cactus ferruginous pygmy owl placed on the nation's endangered species list.

"The pygmy owl is near extinction in Arizona and sharply declining in northern Sonora. It desperately needs the protection of the Endangered Species Act to survive," said the center's Noah Greenwald.

There are wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The nation is in a recession. Gas prices are going through the roof (assuming you haven't lost your roof to the mortgage crisis).

And as unemployed people all over the Valley will tell you, there is no endangered-species act for those who have had their jobs outsourced to places like India.

Nor is there any federal protection for the shrinking ranks of factory workers.

With that in mind, I asked Greenwald why any of us should give a hoot about an owl.

"It's a tough question," he said. "I suppose the best thing is for us to put the loss of the pygmy owl into a larger context. Essentially we're losing habitat for endangered species all the time. And we are losing species at a greatly accelerated rate - a thousand times what scientists consider to be a natural rate of extinction. What that speaks to is that we not only undermining the ecosystems that pygmy owls depend on, but that we ourselves depend on. In other words, the more that the Earth's ability to support different species is lost, the more its ability to support *us* is lost."

What does that mean to a person struggling just to support himself and his family, however?

"I believe that the loss of biodiversity is connected to people's quality of life," Greenwald said. "When a species like this is in danger or disappears it is a bellwether, a canary in the coal mine, for the rest of us. If we make all of our decisions based on short-term interests we're going to end up paying at some point."

What would putting the pygmy owl back on the endangered species list do? I asked.

"If it were listed, it would cause places like Pima County to work on a conservation plan and to plan growth better," he said. "It would force us to make better decisions about where we are going to build and how much. The choices we make along those lines have a long-term impact."

That would be evident to anyone who has lived here for more than a few years and has watched the desert dug up, paved over and planted with rye grass. While the wildlife are banished. I've never seen a pygmy owl, for instance, and asked Greenwald if he had.

"No, I haven't," he said. "They may be gone in northwest Tucson. There are some in Arizona, but probably fewer than 30."

I get the point Greenwald is trying to make, but I doubt he'll convince many people to see things his way. During tough times we tend to use whatever means we have and whatever resources are available to survive.

It's like they say: A bird in hand is worth . . . (wait, we don't *have* a bird in hand) two in the . . . (wait, there aren't any birds there, either).