

Save Our Species

October 3, 2005

If courtrooms were habitat, no species' survival would ever be at issue.

But in an effort to rewrite the Endangered Species Act to eliminate some of the most bitter fights, a bill passed last week in the U.S. House would simply undermine it. The Senate must reel back this one.

Most of its provisions would hamstring agencies that review development plans for their impact on endangered species -- and any developer told "no" would have to be paid fair-market value for the property involved. That's a license to extort taxpayers' money, not a strategy to preserve rare plants and wildlife. It would certainly eliminate court fights, but -- with much of the act reduced to a suggestion rather than a rule -- it would probably eliminate quite a few species, too.

Michigan has one of the success stories of the Endangered Species Act, the newly thriving wolf population that has expanded from small packs in Minnesota and Wisconsin all the way across the Upper Peninsula. But even that has spurred litigation. The reasonable decision to allow elimination of the few wolves that get into trouble, such as by killing farm animals, has been challenged in court and temporarily blocked by a federal judge in Washington, D.C. It's hard, even in environmental circles, to agree on what constitutes success.

But the time spent in court, whether for wolves or spotted owls or tiger salamanders, should not take away from the fact that very few species have gone extinct since the country decided to defend the ones known to be most at risk. The headline-grabbing battles should not take away from the fact that, for the most part, habitat accommodations can be made reasonably.

Americans should not have to give up on the idea that, even in this age of sprawl, they can preserve unique flora and fauna for their grandchildren to learn from. It is not too much to require developers to tiptoe around remnants of prairies, wetlands and woods that hold these seldom-seen creatures.

Absent a plan that promises more help for them, not less, the Senate should stop the House's meddling with the Endangered Species Act.