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OPINION

Saving species

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Developers along Alabama's coast probably didn't like having to alter plans for high-dollar condos to preserve the sandy living quarters of a few mice.

But in taking steps to protect the endangered Alabama beach mouse, developers learned, they actually helped themselves. By moving seaside developments farther from the water and behind the dunes where the mice live, the condominiums were better protected when inevitable storms pummeled the coast.

The same self-interested logic applies locally. Keeping the Cahaba River clean to protect the little critters that call it home also helps preserve our source of good drinking water.

As those examples demonstrate, it's wrong to portray the federal Endangered Species Act as some sort of radical program that protects obscure and unimportant plants and animals at the expense of people. Generally speaking, what's good for the them is ultimately good for us, too.

That's why Congress should proceed with more caution than it has shown so far in trying to rework and curtail the Endangered Species Act, which protects close to 1,300 species of plants and animals.

The House moved the measure along with record speed, passing it Thursday, 229-193. All seven Alabama House members voted for the revised act. Although similar measures have passed the House in years past only to die in the Senate, there's some indication that senators, too, might want to revisit the 32-year-old law.

To be sure, simply revisiting the act isn't a bad thing. There is always room for improvement with any law. It's important, too, that the law strikes the right balance between protecting the environment and the interests of landowners - the supposed goal of those wanting to retool the Endangered Species Act. But the fear is the environmental protections aren't going to get a fair shake in this process. That would be a bad thing.

This is a debate that is especially important to Alabama, which is one of the most biologically diverse states in the continental United States, with the third-highest number of species protected under the law.

These rare and imperiled creatures need continued protection. Even if some of us are tempted to think of them as small and unimportant in the grand scheme of the universe, we should be humble enough to recognize there's a delicate balance in God's creation. Congress would be wise to move cautiously and not upset that balance.

FILE The Alabama beach mouse is an endangered species.