

# CAPE COD TIMES

March 1, 2006

## Scientists see hope for endangered species in the Northeast

By EMILY C. DOOLEY

PROVIDENCE - Eighty years ago, the American burying beetle disappeared from New England.

Reintroduced in 1994 on Nantucket and Penikese islands, more than 3,000 of the carrion-eating large beetles exist there today. Another 2,000 are on Block Island.

"It's working," Lou Perrotti, a Roger Williams Park Zoo zoologist, said yesterday. "We're actually doing it."

In the Northeast, stocks of humpback whales, Atlantic piping plovers and bald eagles also have increased, as have dozens of animals and plants listed under the Endangered Species Act.

It's proof that the protection act is a success, said Melissa Waage, a policy analyst with the Center for Biological Diversity, a nonprofit conservation organization. The center released a report about the status of 56 endangered species from New Jersey to Maine yesterday at a press conference at the Providence zoo.

Passed into law in 1973, the act



The piping plover represents a success story in species recovery.  
(Times file photo)

was created to prevent extinction and move species toward recovery and eventually off the list of the imperiled. Over time, 1,350 species of plants and wildlife have been added; 1,312 remain. Fourteen species have recovered.

Critics say that is a mere 1 percent success rate. Supporters counter that is a 99 percent success rate because few animals under federal protection have become extinct.

The study looks at species that have been listed, and their population growth or decline since being added.

It was the first comprehensive examination of species' stocks; additional reports for other regions will be released this year.

Piping plover numbers have increased to more than 1,400 pairs nationally. In danger because they nest and feed on flats and near the busy water's edge, the number of piping plovers in New England has surpassed a recovery goal for the region, with more than 600 pairs. Though increasing since 1986, the population is still under the total number required by the federal government.

The number of North Atlantic right whales, among the largest critically-endangered whales in the world, is also growing, according to the study.

It shows that the right whale population in the Gulf of Maine increased from 100 in the 1980s to 300 by the late 1990s.

But not everyone agrees. “None of our studies show they are growing at that level,” said Moira Brown, a New England Aquarium senior scientist in the right whale program.

The current estimate is between 300 and 325 whales and has been for some time.

“I think the Endangered Species Act has served its purpose well, but misinterpretation of it is not the best.”

Waage said the center used the best data available for its study.

On average, the recovery plan for a species requires 42 years, but the typical species has been listed only 24 years. There is time to go before efforts can truly be proven, she said.

But changes may soon be coming to the Endangered Species Act. An amended version passed by the House of Representatives and currently in Senate committee calls for a major overhaul.

“The act is working but the act itself appears to be in danger,” said Audubon Society of Rhode Island executive director Lawrence Taft

Sponsored by Republican Congressman Richard Pombo from California, the amended act gets rid of critical habitat designations, which allow federal regulators to impose strict rules, such as speed limits in areas where endangered species may be present.

Pombo’s committee says amending the act is necessary because the habitats contribute little protection

and consume federal resources.

## Hope for endangered species

### Atlantic piping plover

Range: Found along Atlantic coast from Newfoundland to North Carolina, including ME, VT, RI, CT, MA, NY and NJ.

Year listed as threatened: 1985

Population: 659 pairs in New England (total of 1,423 pairs)

### Humpback whale

Range: Found in all oceans of the world

Year listed as endangered: 1970

Population: Gulf of Maine - increased from 240 in 1986 to 647 in 1999; North Pacific - increased from 1,200 in 1966 to 6,000-8,000 in 1992

### North Atlantic right whale

Range: Southeastern U.S. to Bay of Fundy

Year listed as endangered: 1979

Population: Estimated at several thousand in the early to mid-1600s; may have numbered fewer than 100 by 1935; currently at 350.

### American burying beetle

Range: Formerly found across a vast range from Nova Scotia south to Florida, west to Texas and north to South Dakota. Now found in RI, MA, OK, SD, NE, KA, AR and TX. Was reintroduced on Nantucket and Penikese islands.

Year listed as endangered: 1989

Population: 5,000 adults in 2005 in the Northeast; historically could have numbered in the tens of millions.

Source: Center for Biological Diversity