

Species' survival at stake; Udall et al. face a fight

Editorial

Between now and August recess, Congress could be a busy bunch of boys and girls — especially on the environmental front: The party in control is bent on bending conservation and preservation laws so far out of shape that they'll be unrecognizable. And this summer seems to be their time for attacking.

A prime target is the Endangered Species Act, signed into law in 1973 by none other than Republican President Richard M. Nixon.

Without that law, environmentalists credibly argue, America no longer would have its national symbol, the bald eagle — nor, very likely, grizzly bears out West and panthers in the swamps of Florida.

Yeah, but it went too far, says the act's highest-profile opponent, California Rep. Richard Pombo — too many niggling li'l species have wound up stopping development of our country. His solution seems to be total repeal of the act 10 years hence — then replace it with a nice-sounding set of laws and regulations, the effects of which would include: Elimination of requirements to rebuild populations of endangered species. Reduced protection for such species — and their habitat. Taking money from conservation funds to pay landowners and developers for the inconvenience of obeying what's left of the law. Pushing environmental-protection groups out of the decision-making process. Making it easier for habitat-threatening industries to sue whoever stands

in their way. Pombo personifies the reaction we warned environmental extremists against when they were suing the federal government on behalf of species whose presence they couldn't prove, and when they were playing obstructionist games against federal efforts to mitigate fire dangers and otherwise watch out for humans.

But in those days, Congress was in the control of Democrats, so hardly anyone, least of all the goodhearted guardians of our woods and wildlife, would have guessed how vehement the backlash would be.

Whether moderation in conservation's behalf would have forestalled the current assault on the Endangered Species Act or not, we don't know — but we're seeing what looks like a vicious backswing of the political pendulum.

The next few weeks will be tough ones for the likes of Tom Udall, Northern New Mexico's conservationist champion in the House of Representatives. It'll be his job, and that of a relative few representatives, to reach across the aisle to Republican moderates and reasonable conservatives; to remind those Republicans that their constituents might like lots of what they do — but that GOP voters can have strong environmental streaks.

If there's anything those voters have in common with liberals, it's a love of nature — and a wish to preserve what's left of it for their kids and their grandkids.

The Dems could do no better than echo President Nixon: "Nothing is more priceless and more worthy of preservation than the rich array of animal life with which our country has been blessed." He said that only a few months before leaving office in disgrace — but those are words Republicans of today must more than merely echo; they must act by standing up for the creatures that share our insignificant, but unique, ball of dirt and water.

We wish our representative well in the challenge he faces — and urge the entire New Mexico congressional delegation to resist the impending assault on the Endangered Species Act, one of our nation's truly great achievements.