

The Newport Daily News

March 8, 2006

Species act needs help from Chafee

EDITORIAL

“Nothing is more priceless and more worthy of preservation than the rich array of animal life with which our country has been blessed,” President Nixon said when he signed the Endangered Species Act in 1973.

More than 30 years later, the law that led to the revival of the American bald eagle and other species - including the piping plover here on Aquidneck Island - itself is endangered.

The U.S. House of Representatives last fall narrowly passed a bill that completely would rewrite the Endangered Species Act. Spearheaded by U.S. Rep. Richard Pombo, R-Calif., the bill would weaken protections for endangered species while creating loopholes that could benefit developers, utilities, timber companies and pesticide makers and users - in other words, those whose activities have been curtailed to prevent a variety of animals, insects and plants from disappearing from the Earth.

Unfortunately, that seems to be the way of the federal government of

late - take a strong environmental law passed some 30 years ago and try to strip it of any worth.

The U.S. Senate Environment and Public Works Committee is working on its own revision of the Endangered Species Act. As chairman of its Subcommittee on Fisheries, Wildlife and Water, Sen. Lincoln Chafee, R-R.I., plays a critical role in this discussion and decision-making process.

Chafee asked the nonprofit Keystone Center to study the act and make recommendations to further the Senate's discussions. Last month, the center's Working Group on Habitat reported that the regulations could be improved to better address the biological needs of species and reduce the concerns of regulated parties, with specific focus on habitat protection, the most controversial aspect of the act. The group also stressed the need for a centralized operation and better incentives, both of which likely would require more funding.

While the group did not come to a clear consensus on how best to achieve those goals, it did provide significant fodder for discussion. A

full report from the Keystone Center is expected “within days,” according to Chafee spokesman Stephen Hourahan. Meanwhile, Chafee is negotiating with other senators to wait for the full report before debating any proposed changes to the act.

Unfortunately, that may not happen - Sen. James Inhofe, R-Okla., chairman of the Environment and Public Works Committee, said this week he may advance his own version of the act if Chafee's committee does not do so soon.

We urge Chafee - who likes to align himself with his father, the late U.S. Sen. John Chafee, as an environmentally minded Republican - and his fellow senators not to rush headlong into changes that could threaten the success of the Endangered Species Act. That success is symbolized best by the comeback of the American bald eagle, which was reduced to as few as 450 breeding pairs in the 1960s and has flourished to about 9,000 pairs, precipitating its removal from the list.

Overall, 50 percent of species on the federal list have stabilized or are improving. Species that have been

on the list for 15 years or more fare better - 66 percent are stable or improving, studies have shown.

That record is even more noteworthy in the Northeast, where no endangered species have gone extinct and 93 percent have increased their population size or become stable since being protected under the act, according to a recent study by the Center for Biological Diversity.

-
"The Endangered Species Act has been remarkably successful," said Kieran Suckling, policy director of the center and author of the report. "Humpback whales, bald eagles, brown pelicans ... sea turtles, piping plovers, roseate terns, red-bellied turtles, and dwarf cinquefoils are just a few of the species that are recovering quite nicely."

Locally, readers may relate best to the piping plover, a species of bird that nearly was wiped out because of overhunting in the 1800s, when their feathers were used in women's hat wear. Increased development and recreational use of the beaches also reduced their numbers over the years, but with the benefit of federal protection - plovers are listed as threatened in Rhode Island and endangered in other areas of the country - and growing awareness, recent figures show there are as many as 1,400 plover pairs along the Atlantic Coast, more than 50 of which are in Rhode Island. Four years ago, the first plover sighting on Aquidneck Island in more than 50 years was reported - and each year since, a few of those birds have made Sachuest and Third beaches in Middletown their home.

In a February press release, Chafee cited the piping plover as an exam-

ple "of the power of the ESA to protect and recover species."

The piping plover also rated a mention in a recent press release from the Rhode Island Public Interest Group. We join that group and others in calling upon Chafee to take a strong stand in support of the Endangered Species Act, and to give no quarter to special-interest groups who have been fighting it for years, despite its record of environmental success.