



Vote puts Hawaii's rare species at risk

THE ISSUE

Rep. Neil Abercrombie has voted to rescind protections for endangered species.

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HAWAII'S reputation as the endangered species capital of the world should stir its political leaders to do as much as they can to prevent further harm to the state's unique plants and animals.

Don't count Neil Abercrombie as one of them.

The congressman twice stained his bantam environmental credentials last week when he voted in favor of two measures, one to lift a decades-long ban on opening coastal areas for disruptive natural gas development and another to gut the 1973 Endangered Species Act.

The first would not significantly affect Hawaii, but the second would offer up nene, monk seals, koloa, io, silverswords and other plants and wildlife for extinction.

Abercrombie, unlike his House colleague Ed Case, went along with the Republican majority, led by California Rep. Richard Pombo, a fierce anti-environmentalist, to send to the Senate the bill to undo the law while handing out taxpayer dollars to private landowners should their property be home to a protected species.

Abercrombie says the law has failed in species recovery, adopting the Republican line that only 1 percent of endangered species have been rescued. By those numbers, the law has a 99 percent success rate since that many have not gone extinct.

The revisions would minimize the role of scientists and wildlife experts in recovery plans and allow political appointees to make final decisions, a practice typical of the science-adverse Bush administration. Most odious of the changes is one that would eliminate critical habitat necessary for a species' survival.

Like the act's adversaries, Abercrombie erroneously contends that the law has spawned "horrendous" numbers of lawsuits. However, legal action has been sought primarily when the government fails to follow the law or by opportunistic landowners taking advantage of compensation provisions. The changes also would boost costs to enforce the act twofold, with more than \$600 million a year going to benefit landowners.

Abercrombie's actions may place him in the endangered category among Hawaii voters who tend to favor species protection. Extinction also extends to politicians.