

The New York Times

JULY 19, 2008

• Editorial •

Another Species in Danger

Many animals are said to define true wilderness, but the best candidate is arguably the wolverine. The reason isn't so much its legendary ferocity or even the remoteness of its habitat. It's the fact that the wolverine is so intolerant of human disturbance.

The wolverine is in desperate trouble these days. Perhaps only 500 remain in Wyoming, Idaho and Montana. Even that number may be a considerable overestimate, according to a coalition of conservation groups that argues that the wolverine deserves the protection of the Endangered Species Act. They plan to sue the Fish and Wildlife Service if it does not reverse its recent decision to leave the wolverine to its fate.

The agency's decision was based mainly on the fact that there is a large number of wolverines in Canada. It claims that the wolverine populations of the two countries are contiguous and not distinctly separate, a claim conservationists dispute. If that logic — ignoring the health of an animal here if it is doing well elsewhere — had been allowed to prevail, many of the act's notable successes, including preserving the grizzly bear and the American bald eagle, would never have happened.

The wolverine is facing two powerful foes: climate change, which reduces the snow cover the animals need to make their dens and reproduce; and increased winter recreation in the Rocky Mountains, which tends to drive the wolverine out of its habitat. Add a third: the Bush administration's disdain for the Endangered Species Act.

Placing the animal on the list could conceivably restrict some commercial or recreational activities in the Rockies, at least in winter, annoying powerful Bush constituencies. As for climate change, the administration made clear in the case of the polar bear that it will not restrict greenhouse gas emissions just because a species is in trouble.

There have always been difficult compromises in applying the law, but over the last seven years the Fish and Wildlife Service has become a hostile gatekeeper, denying refuge to species that desperately need the government's full protection. That must change.