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Alabama Voices: Grow in harmony

By Mitch Reid

Did you know that Alabama has more freshwater species of animals and plants than any other state? Unfortunately, we are losing those species rapidly. Recent scientific research shows Alabama's projected extinction rate on par with the tropical rain forests.

Alabama's freshwater species are in desperate need of protection, and that's why the Alabama Rivers Alliance and seven other groups have recently joined the Center for Biological Diversity in filing a formal petition with the federal government asking it to list more than 400 species living in Southeastern waters as threatened or endangered.

If successful, this will require our local, state, and federal governments to consider the impacts to these species before permitting further destruction of our environment.

Alabama's natural resources are in dire straits. The old-fashioned practices of clear-cutting our forests, damming our rivers and paving our state are literally killing it.

Today, Alabama's freshwater species are some of the most threatened on the planet. In our state, the combination of incredibly

rich animal life, pervasive threats, and few existing protections are leading to the demise of hundreds of species. As an example of this, Alabama's Coosa River has seen more losses of species than any other equally sized river system in the United States, mostly caused by a series of large dams and damage from pollution and logging.

Human population growth and increasing demand for freshwater resources has placed and will continue to place many aquatic species at risk. In the Southeast, demands for freshwater for electricity production, irrigation, agriculture, and industrial and residential development are increasing. Limited water supply is already an area of conflict in Tennessee, Alabama, and Georgia in particular, where rapidly growing metropolitan areas such as Atlanta, Birmingham and Nashville have drastically increased the demand for freshwater.

In the agricultural sector, the construction of numerous large factory farms throughout the Southeast has led to increased water demands. Increasing drought due to global climate change is expected to exacerbate the threat of limited water availability to aquatic and riparian species in Southeastern states.

Sadly, as has so often been pointed out before, our state leaders are turning a blind eye.

Today, Alabama finds herself at a crossroad. With our economy rebounding and with increasing recognition from the international community as an inviting, business-friendly investment location, Alabama stands ready to spring forward as a leader in America's recovery. It is, however, critical that we approach these opportunities with wisdom and restraint so that we do not inadvertently sacrifice the very things that make this state so wonderful, that we don't burn down the house in our rush to renovate the attic.

As we progress forward we must be ever mindful to grow in harmony with nature and stop the cycle of destruction which is currently ravaging our state. Time and again environmental protection is framed as the enemy of progress. This argument is patently wrong and is often disingenuously promoted by those whose only interest is short-term profit-taking.

As demonstrated by businesses across the state, from banks to Bass Pro Shops, development done right can occur with minimal impact on our environment while creating

significant savings for progressive companies brave enough to break from the status quo.

The time is now to bring these ideals to the forefront of political discussion in our state. Our elected officials and those appointed by them must embrace the responsibility inherent in their office and ensure the protection of our natural heritage for future generations.

In the past, Alabama has adopted a “Damn the Torpedoes” approach to economic development in which the protection of our environment was at best a secondary consideration to the short-term financial interest of our often disproportionately powerful industries and interest groups. A consideration that is often met with public hostility and

undercut by backroom subterfuge.

Rather than leading from the front as examples of responsible stewardship, the most influential in our state habitually take sides against precaution and conservation, choosing instead to belittle those in the community brave enough to speak out in warning. No doubt they will use their fear tactics again.

The Alabama Rivers Alliance recognizes and universally supports efforts to develop strategies to build our economy and provide jobs and security for our citizens. In order to do this smartly, the paths we choose must allow Alabama to grow in harmony with the world in which we live.

Given the overwhelming destruction that we have witnessed in the last

century, which continues even today, it is now clear that the current philosophy of development at any cost is no longer possible if we want to continue to refer to this state as “Alabama the Beautiful.”

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