

Science Still Suppressed in Obama-Salazar Interior Department

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So far the Obama administration has a poor record on endangered species protection, better than that of Bush but not by much. The Obama administration listed just two new endangered species in its first year, the least during the first year of any administration since Reagan. Furthermore, it followed in the footsteps of the Bush administration by removing the Northern Rockies gray wolf from Endangered Species Act protection despite scientists' assertions that its recovery still had a long way to go

The Fish and Wildlife Service continued this trend on February 25 when it removed ESA protection for the desert nesting bald eagle. The desert nesting bald eagle is a distinct population of bald eagle, uniquely adapted to its hot and dry environment. Less than 160 survive, and their numbers are declining due to water removal from rivers i.e. dams, agriculture, etc. and habitat loss. According to the Center for Biological Diversity and the Maricopa Audubon, their demise would result in "a significant gap in the overall bald eagle range," meaning that the survival of the sub-species is important to preserving the overall species and demands protection.

As was the case with the gray wolf, this decision followed on the heels of attempts by the Bush administration to remove protections for the desert nesting bald eagle. Those Bush-era attempts were rebuffed in court, and hopefully these terrible decisions will be as well. Still, it's remarkable how little change there has been in the Fish and Wildlife Service and the Department of Interior at large.

If it sounds to you like this decision was not based on science, you're right. CBD and the Maricopa Audubon unearthed FWS memos demonstrating that top Service officials suppressed science in their drive to remove protection for the population. The FWS's own scientists found that the population is "discrete and significant" i.e. should be protected under the ESA, but FWS Assistant Director Gary Frazer told them to change their findings.

Newly obtained documents reveal that U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service bald eagle experts have again been overruled by their political superiors in order to remove Endangered Species Act protection for Arizona's desert nesting bald eagles. An August 24, 2009, memo from Regional Fish and Wildlife Director Benjamin Tuggle to Assistant Fish and Wildlife Director Gary Frazer states that the Arizona population "is discrete and significant" to the bald eagle population as a whole "based on its persistence in an unusual or unique [desert] ecological setting." Tuggle's memo summarizes more than 30 years of biological studies and the consensus of every recognized bald eagle expert.

In a response dated December 4, 2009, Frazer dismisses the experts' opinion, advising that his "...staff will work with you on development of the revised version of the finding. Obviously, the finding should not simply cite my conclusion..."

Like under the Bush administration, top officials shaped the science to fit pre-determined policy, which is the opposite of how a regulatory agency should function.

Adding imperiled species to the ESA list and providing them with sufficient "critical habitat" protection to survive should be a no-brainer for any administration that considers itself remotely in favor of environmental protection, such as the Obama administration and Democratic leadership. Preserving biodiversity is important for its own sake as we are in the midst of the planet's sixth mass extinction, but protecting one species's habitat can protect an entire threatened eco-system, which is so crucial as global

warming progresses and species need space to adapt. Unlike say seriously reducing greenhouse gas emissions, this doesn't involve new legislation, just enforcing existing law. Is that too much to ask for from a supposedly pro-environment administration?

The environmental BiNGO's need to exit the veal pen and start raising hell about the bad decisions of Secretary Ken Salazar's Interior Department. As I wrote in my post on the de-listing of the gray wolf, it's clear that Salazar, a rancher who as a Senator voted frequently for oil drilling and ranching on public lands and for weakened wildlife protections, was a disappointing choice for Interior. This is especially true considering how much environmental groups contributed to the President's ground game in the campaign in terms of dollars and volunteers. He has certainly implemented more environmental protections than Bush-era predecessors, but has also presided over the de-listing of the gray wolf, allowing oil drilling off the Arctic coast of Alaska, and done nothing about egregiously destructive mountaintop removal coal mining.

Organized labor has been criticized by many as weak for continuing to support the Democrats as they fail to pass its primary legislative goal, the Employee Free Choice Act. But at least the unions got Hilda Solis as Secretary of Labor, who is ramping up regulatory action against rule-breaking corporations (see this article in the current edition of The Nation). Lisa Jackson was a good pick for the EPA in my opinion, but Secretary of Interior is just as important in terms of environmental policy, and the environmental groups should have leveraged their crucial campaign work to get a favorable pick at Interior. Instead, most of them went out of their way to praise the weak choice of Salazar. The only dissenting voice that questioned the pick was the Center for Biological Diversity.

Johann Hari had a great piece in The Nation on the failure of the environmental BiNGO's to push for significant climate action, thanks to shamefully close ties to polluting corporations as well as politicians. I think Hari under-emphasized the problem of domestic groups who don't take much corporate money, if any, like the Sierra Club (outside of their stupid Clorox program they don't take any), that cultivate a close relationship with the Democratic party. During the Bush era too many environmentalists became convinced that kicking the Republicans out of power was the end-game of environmental politics. Now it is clear that their support for Democrats doesn't necessarily translate into progressive environmental policy.

The Center is a wonderful and highly effective organization, especially in the courtroom, but it can only do so much on its own. Unless more environmental groups, especially more visible ones like the Sierra Club or NRDC, assert their independence and directly call out Salazar and Obama for these decisions, we will be stuck with 3-7 years of slightly less corporate- and developer-friendly policy at Interior than that of the Bush administration. Considering how bad the Bush-era Interior Department was, that is not acceptable.