

Short shrift for endangered species

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It's not entirely surprising that endangered wild plants, birds, animals and fish get short shrift when it comes to recognizing the impact global warming might have on their populations.

After all, our U.S. Senate can't get its act together to enact even a modest climate change bill that would begin to curb greenhouse gas emissions and encourage greater investment in clean renewable energy. These are actions most climatologists believe are essential to mitigate a global warming process already under way, and thereby minimize harmful impacts on agriculture, coastal cities and watersheds fed by melting snowpacks and glaciers atop the world's great mountain ranges.

In that regard, at least we're consistent: We're giving short shrift to our own survival as a species as well.

Nevertheless, policymakers in Washington should heed the warning of a recently published study co-authored by Dr. Tony Povilitis, president of Life Net Nature, and Kieran Suckling, executive director of the Center for Biological Diversity, which reveals a major failing in recovery plans issued

for federal endangered species — the fact that only 10 percent of them address global warming.

The study examined all 1,209 federal endangered species plans issued between 1975 and 2008. Fewer than 5 percent of plans completed before 2000 addressed global warming. New plans issued between 2005 and 2008 show a much-better recognition of the impact that climate change will have on species already endangered, with 59 percent addressing global warming.

When the recovery plans do consider the impact of global warming, as might be guessed, the conclusions generally don't bode well for the endangered species.

For example, here's what the recovery plan for Atlantic salmon has to say: "Climate change poses a high threat to the conservation and recovery" of Atlantic salmon in the Gulf of Maine. "Any prolonged or significant warming of Maine's climate would probably make the survival of Atlantic salmon in Maine more difficult."

The plight of endangered mountaintop birds and mammals is particularly urgent, since rising temperatures

threaten to eliminate their habitat.

Following up on its scientific review of federal endangered species recovery plans, the Center for Biological Diversity on Tuesday filed petitions to protect four mountaintop species, from Hawaii to Maine, that are threatened by climate change — namely the 'Ōiwi, a Hawaiian songbird; the white-tailed ptarmigan, a grouse-like bird of the Rocky Mountains; Bicknell's thrush, a northern U.S. songbird; and the San Bernardino flying squirrel of southern California.

"These four species are literally going to be pushed off the top of the mountain," said Noah Greenwald, endangered species program director at the center.

In both cases — for species already endangered and for species that if warming trends continue will become endangered — the solution is the same.

"Levels of atmospheric heat-trapping gases must be reduced soon to avoid substantially higher risk of species extinction," Povilitis and Suckling wrote in their study of federal recovery plans.

Shaye Wolf, a biologist at the Center for Biological Diversity, underscores that point with these words: "If we don't rapidly reduce greenhouse gas pollution, scientists predict that one third of the world's species will be condemned to extinction by 2050."

Meanwhile, our U.S. Senate fiddles.