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Latest ESA Success: The Return of a Once-rare Snake

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The Endangered Species Act has notched yet another success story: the return of the Lake Erie water snake.

This non-venomous snake, mostly found on the off-shore islands of western Lake Erie, once hovered on the brink of extinction. When it was protected under the Endangered Species Act in 1999, only about 1,500 remained in its namesake lake. Today, there are more than 11,000 individuals, and the biggest threats to this once-rare species -- loss of habitat and human persecution -- have been successfully dealt with.

The Obama administration recently announced that the snake is coming off the endangered species list. The snake's delisting is not only a huge step forward for this species, but it also provides a moment to reflect on the importance and unparalleled success of the Endangered Species Act.

Signed into law by President Richard Nixon in 1973, the Act is the nation's most important tool for saving plants and animals on the verge of disappearing forever. Since then, it has pushed hundreds of species toward full recovery by using science-based recovery plans to safeguard habitat and mitigate threats to survival.

The Act is responsible for saving bald eagles, peregrine falcons and American alligators and is in the process of saving many others, including polar bears, the gray wolf, the southwestern willow flycatcher and the extremely rare Miami blue butterfly.

(By the way, if you want to see what endangered species are near you, the Center for Biological Diversity just launched the free "Species Finder" app for Android phones.)

In fact, of the 1,300 or so U.S. plants and animals on the endangered species list, more than 93 percent are holding steady or improving. Many of them wouldn't even be here today without the Endangered Species Act -- a 2006 study found that federal protections spared about 227 unique species from extinction.

The Lake Erie water snake is the 23rd species to recover and be removed from the endangered species list, and more species are on the way toward recovery. But make no mistake -- saving species takes hard work and patience.

Shortly after the snake was listed, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service began implementing an ambitious recovery plan focused on habitat protection and public education about the snake's harmless nature and critical role in its ecosystem. In just 12 years, it recovered to the point where federal protections were no longer needed.

That, of course, won't be true for all plants and animals on the list. On average, scientists predict it takes about 42 years for a species to recover once it gets on the endangered species list. That's why, since most species have only been listed for an average of 24 years, it's premature to use the number of recovered species as a measure of the Act's success.

Unfortunately, some in Congress are intent on dismantling parts of the Act, stripping away some of the very same provisions that are responsible for saving the bald eagle, the grizzly bear and scores of other species large and small.

This isn't a problem that needs fixing. The Endangered Species Act works. Just ask the Lake Erie water snake