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Pa. is failing to act to halt extinction: The game commission backtracks and lets bats continue to be decimated

By Mollie Matteson / November 26, 2012

The Pennsylvania Game Commission press release read like a page ripped from a horror movie script: A fast-moving fungal contagion -- white-nose syndrome -- had spread across as many as 30 counties wiping out more than 98 percent of three bat populations.

The northern long-eared bat, the tri-colored bat and the little brown bat were all on the verge of disappearing forever.

The Aug. 11 release made it clear immediate action was required: "With precipitous population declines, remaining individuals are critical to the preservation and restoration of the species in this Commonwealth. These three bat species clearly are in imminent danger. ..."

As a result, the commission announced it was considering listing the bats as endangered in Pennsylvania. The announcement mentioned potential conservation measures such as limiting some logging in roosting areas in the summer months and curtailing wind turbines on a handful of late summer and fall evenings, when winds are light and bats are likely to be foraging, mating or migrating.

Immediately, industry PR machines roared into action, claiming even the limited seasonal cutbacks would "crush" the state's economy and put thousands out of work. Timber and coal mining interests were particularly vociferous in their opposition to the proposal. State legislators, eager to join the fray, hounded the commission about its "disastrous" plan. As you might guess, not a lot of details were offered to support the claims of economic collapse.

The game commission quickly bowed to the pressure. Its Oct. 4 press release sounded as if the bat disease

considered by scientists to be the worst wildlife epidemic in North American history had somehow vanished into thin air.

Here's how Pennsylvania Game Commission Executive Director Carl G. Roe explained the 180-degree flip: "While we rely on sound science to guide our actions, we also consider public input and the resulting impacts of our actions. We look forward to working with concerned parties on both sides of the issue."

The game commission's newly stated goal -- to "craft solutions that protect bats without threatening the industries that employ thousands of Pennsylvanians" -- sounded more like a statement from an economic development agency than a game commission that touts a primary value of "always placing wildlife first in all decision-making."

Juxtaposing imperiled species with vague, exaggerated claims of potential job losses has long been a favored weapon among congressional conservatives pushing to gut the nation's Endangered Species Act. It's a tactic that avoids candid, constructive discussions about human-caused habitat destruction and climate change that have resulted in a global extinction crisis, with plants and animals now dying out at thousands of times the historic rate.

In the same way, the political gamesmanship of Pennsylvania elected officials and the skittishness of the game commission don't somehow magically change the fact that more than 99 percent of the state's six hibernating bat species have disappeared since white-nose syndrome arrived in the state in 2008. And far beyond any exaggerated impacts on energy and timber industries, the crisis does come with a very real economic cost: The value of bats' pest-control services to Pennsylvania agriculture is estimated at \$292 million annually.

But what about the irreparable biological cost: Just how close does a species have to come to vanishing before the state admits it's endangered and takes action to protect it?

During the four decades since Congress passed the Endangered Species Act, it has prevented the extinction of 99 percent of the plants and animals placed under its care. And a study of more than 100 of those protected species earlier this year by the Center for Biological Diversity found that 90 percent are on target to recover as projected.

But the success of the federal Endangered Species Act, like that of similar state laws, continues to be undercut by our well-documented habit of putting off protecting even our most imperiled plants and animals until they're virtually wiped out.

Rarely has that troubling dichotomy been more clearly displayed than in Pennsylvania, where, after admitting three bat species are plummeting toward immediate extinction, state officials charged with protecting wildlife have now opted to simply study the issue to death.

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