Forbes

Report: Endangered Species Act Works

May 30, 2012

Island fox Copyright USFWS

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The Endangered Species Act gets a lot of flack for its budget, its long project trajectories, and its ability to hinder development planned by businesses and landowners.

Adding to this chorus was Doc Hastings, chairman of the Committee on Natural Resources of the U.S. House of Representatives, who said that the Act is a failure:

"The purpose of the ESA is to recover endangered species — yet this is where the current law is failing — and failing badly. Of the species listed under the ESA in the past 38 years, only 20 have been declared recovered. That's a 1 percent recovery rate."

Partially in response to this statement, the Center for Biological Diversity published a new report Earlier this month, On Time, On Target: How the Endangered Species Act Is Saving America's Wildlife.

The activist organization (that uses the ESA to conserve habitat) looked at 110 protected species from all 50 states to determine how well the Act is working for them. It found that 90 percent of the studied species are recovering on time to meet recovery goals set by federal scientists.

One I know personally, the San Miguel Island fox (Urocyon littoralis littoralis). This cat-sized fox lives on San Miguel, one of the islands in Channel Islands National Park off the coast of Southern California. Six of the islands have unique subspecies of this little fox. The reason for their dramatic decline is human-caused.

DDT-contaminated sludge deposited at White's Point on the Palos Verdes Peninsula had spread throughout the Santa Barbara Channel. The Channel Islands had resident populations of bald eagles, who fed on marine critters contaminated with DDT. They could not reproduce because the poison made their eggshells too thin.

As the bald eagles died out, golden eagles migrated from the mainland. Eagle species are typically territorial, so while the balds held sway on the islands, the goldens didn't come to roost. But with the balds weakened, the goldens took up residence and began dining on terrestrial prey as is their wont: feral piglets released by historic human ranching operations on the islands and the tiny island foxes, who only have one to four pups a year. Many island species are ecologically naïve to predators with whom they did not co-evolve, and the foxes were completely unprepared for the aerial assault. Their populations declined by about 90 percent in about six years during the 1990s.

I met the foxes when I volunteered with the National Park Service in 2002 and 2003 to help build pens for captive breeding on Santa Cruz Island (for Urocyon littoralis santacruzae) and to help conduct vet checks on captive foxes on San Miguel Island.

The foxes bred well in captivity, but early releases were soon snapped up by golden eagles, so the park service had to first relocate the goldens to the mainland and then reintroduce the balds, carefully stewarding their eggs until the channel cleared of DDT. They succeeded, and the fox populations are back to pre-eagle predation levels.

It's a happy story, and not an uncommon one, according to the Center for Biological Diversity's report.

The reason many endangered species are not yet recovered (delisted) is because the projects to ensure their recovery are not yet completed. It takes time for species to breed successfully through multiple generations, and most recovery plans are scheduled over decades. The report says:

We confirmed the conclusion of scientists and auditors who assert that the great majority of species have not been listed long enough to warrant an expectation of recovery: 80 percent of species have not yet reached their expected recovery year. On average, these species have been listed for just 32 years, while their recovery plans required 46 years of listing.

In a 2006 report (PDF), the U.S. Government Accountability Office agreed with this idea, concluding that the success of the Endangered Species Act cannot be judged by the number of recovered species because most species have not been listed long enough to reach their planned recovery level:

The recovery plans we reviewed indicated that species were not likely to be recovered for up to 50 years. Therefore, simply counting the number of extinct and recovered species periodically or over time, without considering the recovery prospects of listed species, provides limited insight into the overall success of the [U.S. Fish and Wildlife] Services' recovery programs.

The center's study found that, on average, species recovered in 25 years, while their federal recovery plan predicted 23 years.

Nevertheless, many species that have not been listed long enough to reach their recovery goals increased dramatically since being protected by the Endangered Species Act. For example, as of 2009, the Santa Cruz Island fox population had rebounded to 700 from fewer than 100, according to The Nature Conservancy, one of the landowners on the island.

The study also found a strong trend that demonstrated that being on the Endangered Species list moves species toward recovery: "The longer they are listed, the more likely they are to be recovering."

Of course, the Center for Biological Diversity is not a dispassionate observer. The organization has long been a strong proponent of the Endangered Species Act, using it to further its work. From its website:

The Center's innovation was to systematically and ambitiously use biological data, legal expertise, and the citizen petition provision of the powerful Endangered Species Act to obtain sweeping, legally binding new protections for animals, plants, and their habitat.

Indeed their methods on this study come across as likely to produce a positive message. Out of the 1,391 listed endangered and threatened species, the report says: "We identified 110 threatened or endangered species that have advanced toward recovery since being protected under the Endangered Species Act."

Still, that doesn't taint the results, said Noah Greenwald, endangered species program director for the center:

It's true that the 110 are ones that we had information to indicate they had improved in numbers and were advancing towards recovery. We eventually would like to study all of the listed species, but this will take some time. I would not, however, say this taints the results. One of the criticisms of the Act is that few species have been recovered. What the 110 species report shows is that there are many more species that are on the road to recovery.

Greenwald also pointed out that the study's findings are similar to a 2006 analysis of ALL federally protected species in the Northeast, also conducted by the Center for Biological Diversity, "and thus is an unbiased sample with representative results."

That study found that 93 percent of the species were stabilized or improving since being put on the endangered species list and 82 percent were on pace to meet recovery goals.