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## Politics aside, Endangered Species Act has enviable record of success

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You don't have to look far to find an animal or plant in the United States that's been spared from extinction by the Endangered Species Act and is now on the path to recovery.

In Hawaii, we witness the Act's success with the hard-earned return of several endemic but long-struggling bird populations, including the Hawaiian coot, the Hawaiian duck and the state bird – the Hawaiian goose, all of which were victims of overhunting and habitat destruction brought on by unbridled development.

The list of success stories goes on. A new study by the Center for Biological Diversity finds that of 110 protected species studied, 90 percent are right on track to meet recovery goals set by federal scientists.

The Endangered Species Act, signed by President Nixon in 1973, has become America's strongest environmental law. It has saved 99 percent of the 1,482 native species under its care from disappearing forever. Indeed, scientists estimate that were it not for the Act, 227 additional species would have gone extinct in the last 35 years.

But the Act isn't just about avoiding extinction. It's about setting these species on a trajectory to recovery — and eventually taking them off the endangered species list.

Still, the Act has had its critics over the past four decades, especially those intent on drilling for more oil, clear-cutting more forests or blasting away more mountaintops to extract coal.

So it's not surprising there's been resurgent opposition to the Act in Congress. Last summer, the U.S. House of Representatives proposed a bill that would have stripped all funding for new species protections and safeguards for habitat that's crucial to the survival of endangered plants and animals. (Fortunately, the bill failed.)

More recently, Rep. Doc Hastings (R-Wash.), chairman of the House Natural Resources Committee, has called for

hearings on the Act. He claims it's "failing badly" because just 1 percent of all listed species have been taken off the list. The claim simply doesn't meet the smell test, for the simple reason that most species protected by the Act were not expected to have recovered yet.

Specifically, 80 percent of species haven't been listed long enough to reach their projected delisting date, according to the new study of 110 species. On average, species were expected to be recovered 46 years after they were protected under the Act, yet have only been listed for 32 years.

So a little patience is in order. And our recently released study offers a research-based measure of how well the Act is helping species recover.

The study finds plants and animals in all 50 states – from Florida panthers to Aleutian Canada geese in Alaska – that are recovering at the rate prescribed by federal scientists.

Both the Hawaiian coot and the Hawaiian duck have rebounded from declining populations of only several hundred in the middle of the last century to more than 2,000. The Hawaiian goose population, reduced to only 30 birds in 1918, had increased to about 1,700 by 2006.

Even with those success stories, Hastings and his allies are correct on one point: The Endangered Species Act can be improved. But not by gutting it, as these politicians might like. On the contrary, science-based studies suggest the Act could be strengthened if we move to protect species sooner, increase habitat protection, and raise the bar on what constitutes a recovered, sustainable population.

But right now, the best way to measure species recovery and the success of the Act is by taking an exhaustive look at all available evidence to measure the recovery rates of individual species.

When you take time to do that, you find broad evidence that the Endangered Species Act not only protects species from extinction but leads to the recovery of healthy populations.

That's very good news for all species, including our own.