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People Power Essential to Saving Endangered Species



Noah Greenwald
Endangered species program director,
Center for Biological Diversity

Spotted owls, Florida panthers and California red-legged frogs all have something in common -- they're endangered species and they can't vote or make campaign contributions. That's why Congress in 1973 wisely wrote the Endangered Species Act to allow citizens to act on species' behalf.

Now, a study published in the internationally acclaimed journal *Science* has found that citizen action on behalf of vanishing plants and animals is crucial in ensuring they get the protection they need to survive.

The study conducted by Berry Brosi, a scientist at Emory University, and Erik Biber, a professor of law at University of California, Berkeley compared the degree of imperilment of species that were listed as endangered at the sole initiation of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service versus those protected after a petition or litigation by citizens. The researchers determined that "citizen-initiated species are significantly more threatened than FWS-initiated species," and ultimately that citizens "play a valuable role in identifying at-risk species."

The timing of the study could not be better.

Efforts to secure protections for endangered species by groups like the Center for Biological Diversity are coming under increasing criticism by Republican members of Congress like Rep. Doc Hasting (R-WA), as well as industry flacks, fringe private property rights groups and, in some cases, even the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service itself.

According to these critics, petitions and litigation filed to list species as threatened or endangered are "impeding true recovery efforts."

These condemnations are not just idle cannon fodder. Earlier this year, the House Appropriations Committee passed a bill that would cut funding for listing species by a third and for two years in a row, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has requested and received language that caps the total amount of money that can be used to respond to petitions from citizens.

Contrary to the critics' claims, Brosi and Biber's study clearly shows that citizens play an important role in helping identify species that are truly in need of protection and, later, ensuring that they receive protection in a timely manner. In the same way that we benefit from early diagnosis and treatment of illnesses, protecting imperiled species sooner rather than later increases the odds of survival and, ultimately, lowers the cost of recovery.

These findings should come as no surprise. Prior to filing a petition or lawsuit, the Center for Biological Diversity works closely with scientific experts and organizations to carefully identify species in need of protection.

As a prime example, the Center filed a petition last month with world-renowned conservation biologists Thomas Lovejoy and E.O. Wilson seeking federal protection for more than 50 of our country's most critically imperiled reptiles and amphibians, including the alligator snapping turtle, Illinois chorus frog, Key ringneck snake and many others.

More than a third of amphibians and more than a fifth of reptiles are at risk, making these two of the most imperiled groups on the planet. Since 1980, at least 122 amphibian species worldwide have gone extinct. And yet, amphibians and reptiles make up less than 5 percent of the approximately 1,400 species on the endangered species list and a majority that have been identified as at risk by scientists remain unprotected. The Center's petition seeks to rectify this situation

and ensure that more frogs, turtles, salamanders, snakes and lizards are not lost forever.

The Center dedicated more than a year of work on the part of multiple staff preparing the extensive 454-page petition. Many of these 53 species are at the very brink of extinction. They don't have the luxury of waiting until the government, by its own initiative, assesses their status. That could take years or decades and, by then, they could be gone. Independent scientists, citizens and groups like ours are there to make sure that doesn't happen.

Brosi and Biber sum it up this way:

“Calls to streamline the ESA and to rely exclusively on FWS to identify and list species might mean that a significant number of species that deserve legal protection -- especially those that are politically unpopular because of the potential to obstruct development projects -- would be left out in the cold.”