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On Endangered Species Day, Stories of Unparalleled Success



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No matter where you live in the United States, there's probably an animal or plant nearby that's been saved from winking out of existence by the Endangered Species Act.

The California least tern, a shorebird that had dwindled to just 225 pairs when it was protected in 1970, today has more than 6,000 pairs.

The black-footed ferret, once thought extinct throughout its range in the middle of the country, went from zero animals in the wild in 1991 to 838 last year.

The Florida population of the Atlantic green sea turtle, listed as endangered in 1978, grew by 2,200 percent between 1989 and 2011.

The list goes on and on. In fact, a new study by the Center for Biological Diversity -- released just in time for Endangered Species Day on May 18 -- 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.

But the Act isn't just about avoiding extinction. It's about setting these species on a path to recovery. On that point, there are amazing stories worth celebrating:

Aleutian Canada geese, once nearly driven extinct by foxes introduced to their nesting islands in Alaska and by habitat destruction and hunting in California and Oregon, were protected as an endangered species in 1967. Their population grew from 790 birds in 1975 to more than 60,000 in 2005. They've since been taken off the endangered species list -- seven years earlier than expected.

Shortnose sturgeon, once found in rivers and estuaries along the Atlantic seaboard, nearly disappeared because of overfishing, river damming, habitat destruction and poor water quality. They were placed on the endangered list in 1967, and now at least five populations have increased, including one in New York's Hudson River that has grown from 2,669 in 1979 to more than 60,000 today.

The blue whale population was reduced by as much as 99 percent due to whaling that occurred before the mid-1960s. The number of whales reported off the coast of California, the largest stock in U.S. waters, increased from 704 in 1980 to an estimated 2,497 in 2010.

You can find more of these stories at www.ESAsuccess.org.

But you wouldn't know the Endangered Species Act is a success at all by listening to some right-wing members of Congress. Many looking to tear it down have deemed it a failure because just 1 percent have recovered to the point where they can be taken off the endangered species list. Their claim simply doesn't meet the smell test, however, for the simple reason that most species protected by the Act that haven't recovered yet were never expected to have recovered yet.

Specifically,

- 80 percent of species have not been listed long enough to reach their projected delisting date.

- On average, the species studied were projected to be delisted in 46 years, but have only been protected for 32 years.

- 90 percent of species projected to be delisted by 2011 were successfully delisted by then