

Groups plan to sue feds to protect ‘Don’t Tread on Me’ snake

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Don’t tread on this rattler.

On Tuesday, the nonprofit Center for Biological Diversity filed a formal notice of intent to sue the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for failing to protect the eastern diamondback rattlesnake under the Endangered Species Act.

The world’s largest rattlesnake, an early symbol of American revolution, is going extinct, a Florida researcher and three environmental groups say, because of habitat loss and people killing the snake for its meat and skins.

Often referred to as the ‘Don’t Tread On Me’ snake,’ the eastern diamondback graced the Gadsden flag. The flag helped inspire resistance to the British during the American Revolution, and in recent years became a favorite at Tea Party rallies.

“Eastern diamondbacks are rapidly disappearing all across the southeastern United States, and in some states they’ve more or less vanished,” Collette Adkins Giese, the center’s reptile and amphibian specialist, said in a prepared statement. “At this point, the only thing that’s going to save them is Endangered Species Act protection.”

In August 2011, the three groups petitioned the federal government to add the eastern diamondback rattlesnake to the nation’s list of protected species. Bruce Means, an adjunct



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professor at Florida State University and president of the Coastal Plains Institute, filed the petition along with three nonprofits: Center for Biological Diversity, Protect All Living Species and One More Generation.

The petition started a multiyear review under the Endangered Species Act to determine whether the snake warrants protection as a “threatened” species. In response, in May of last year the fish and wildlife service ruled that listing the snake may be warranted and initiated a full status review. The agency’s decision on whether to list the snake was due Aug. 22. The lawsuit launched Tuesday seeks to speed that decision and federal protections for the snake, according to the Center for Biological Diversity.

The eastern diamondback was once plentiful in longleaf pine savannas across the southeastern United States. But only about 3 percent of its original habitat remains.

Thousands of the rattlesnakes are killed annually for their skins and meat with no limits on annual harvest in Florida, Alabama, Louisiana, South Carolina, Georgia and Mississippi. In Alabama and Georgia, the species is targeted by “rattle-snake roundups” -- festivals that offer prizes to encourage hunters to collect and kill them for their meat and skins.

Environmentalists want the snake’s remaining habitat preserved, and negative public attitudes toward them changed.

The snake poses little public safety risk, the conservationists say. Although venomous, more people are killed every year by lightning and bee stings, they said.

The snakes can reach six feet in length and weigh 12 pounds or more. They are distinguished by dorsal pattern of diamonds, yellowish belly, dark tail with rattle, and infrared-sensitive pit between the eye and nostril.

The snake has almost been wiped out in Louisiana, is declining elsewhere in its range and has become uncommon in much of Florida.