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The Birmingham News

Eastern diamondback rattler might get federal protection

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By Thomas Spencer -- The Birmingham News The Birmingham News

The eastern diamondback rattlesnake ranges from the coastal plain regions of North Carolina to eastern Louisiana. In Alabama, it can be found in south Alabama's coastal plain and the adjacent band of red hills to the north. (The Birmingham News/Joe Songer)

BIRMINGHAM, Alabama -- The eastern diamondback rattlesnake may deserve protection under the Endangered Species Act, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service said Wednesday, launching a more in-depth process of information-gathering to determine whether protection is warranted and, if so, in what form.

The decision comes in response to a petition filed last year by a coalition of environmental groups that argued that populations of North America's largest venomous snake were in sharp decline.

The snake ranges from the coastal plain regions of North Carolina to eastern Louisiana. In Alabama, it can be found in south Alabama's coastal plain and the adjacent band of red hills to the north.

MORE INFO

For more information and for links to submit public comment go to www.fws.gov/southeast or write to: Public Comments Processing, Attn: FWS-R4-ES-2012-0006; Division of Policy and Directives Management; U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; 4401 N. Fairfax Drive, MS 2042-PDM; Arlington, VA 22203.

The state of North Carolina lists the snake as endangered, and scientist believe it to be gone from Louisiana and increasingly rare in South Carolina, Alabama and Mississippi.

The principal threat to the snake is the widespread loss of the longleaf pine forest habitat the snakes prefer, biologist say. Hunting of the snakes for their skins, for meat and for contests such as the annual Opp Rattlesnake Rodeo also have contributed to the decline, according to the petition filed by representatives of the Center for Biological Diversity, the Coastal Plains Institute, Protect All Living Species and One More Generation.

However, not everyone believes the eastern diamondback is in decline. Don Childre, a snake hunter, a planner for the city of Opp and a lead organizer of the town's rodeo, said he planned to make his voice heard. The service is accepting comments on whether the diamondback needs protection. Childre expects he'll be drowned out by snake huggers.

"All the snake freaks will respond and the rest of the populace will never know it's being proposed," he said. "The whole thing boils down to a group of people who want to tell other people what to do. There is no shortage of those things here. Our city clerk caught one in her flowerbed this week and killed it with a hoe. Their solution to the problem is let the rattle snakes reclaim their territory -- which is our neighborhoods."

According to FWS officials, it may be years before a conclusion is made about the status of the eastern diamondback because of a backlog of more than 200 species being considered for the endangered or threatened species list. But regardless of that decision, officials made it clear that human self-defense trumps the Endangered Species Act.

"Safety is always paramount," said FWS spokesman Tom MacKenzie. "The Endangered Species Act doesn't preclude self-defense or protecting one's family."

The snake is not directly protected at the state level, said Roger Clay, a wildlife biologist, with the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources.

However, regulations aimed at protecting other endangered species such as the eastern indigo snake indirectly benefit the diamondback. Alabama has banned the practice of pumping gasoline in gopher tortoise burrows, a method used to drive snakes out for capture.

Additionally, conservation efforts to encourage restoration of long-leaf pine on both public and private lands could help the snakes.

However, persuading people to protect snakes is harder than, say, manatees.

"Unfortunately snakes are not the most popular animals," Clay said.

In the 1970s, snake hunters brought in as many as 400 rattlers to the Rattlesnake Rodeo.

This year, only 27 snakes were collected. Childre said the smaller hauls in recent years have been misinterpreted as a sign of the snake's decline. But Childre said the rodeo no longer offers prizes and fewer hunters are out looking for them.

Harold Mitchell, a wildlife biologist in the Panama City field office of the Fish and Wildlife Service, said a decision on whether to list an animal is not dependent on a species' public relations or charisma.

"We are not going to get caught up in the debate about whether the snake is popular or dangerous, Mitchell said. "It comes down to science, not whether the creature has fangs or feathers. This is about a biologically unique form of life and that is really all that it is about."

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