

SUMMIT COUNTY CITIZEN VOICE

Water: Utah's Virgin River placed on 'most-threatened' list

Unsustainable water use threatens river ecosystems



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FRISCO — Many of the West's rivers are facing unrelenting pressure from unsustainable water use. Some have already been pushed near the brink, including the iconic Virgin River in Southern Utah, recently named as one of ecosystems most at risk from water development in a recent report from the Endangered Species Coalition.

"The problem is pretty simple: People aren't leaving enough water in the Virgin River, and so the endangered fish that depend on that water are struggling to survive," said Tierra Curry, a biologist at the Center for Biological Diversity. "The situation in the Virgin is so dire that the woundfin went extinct in the wild. This report is a wake-up call that we have got to do a better job caring for our freshwater environment."

The Virgin River originates in southern Utah and cuts through Zion National Park. It's home to native woundfin, endangered fish found only in the Virgin River. The woundfin went extinct in the wild in 2005. Populations continue to be restocked from a hatchery but are

unable to persist because not enough flow is provided by water managers for the fish to be able to survive and reproduce.

The report, *Water Woes: How Dams, Diversions, Dirty Water and Drought Put America's Wildlife at Risk*, highlights how reductions in the quality and quantity of water threaten wildlife in 10 ecosystems across the country.

The woundfin, named for spines on the sharply pointed fin on its back, is a three-inch-long silvery blue minnow. It is one of the most highly specialized minnows in the world with adaptations for living in swift, shallow, sandy desert streams. It lacks scales, has leathery skin and very small eyes, and is shaped like a small torpedo.

The woundfin was protected as an endangered species in 1970 because of degradation of its Virgin River habitat. The Virgin watershed is home to more than 80 imperiled species including the federally endangered Virgin River chub, the endangered southwestern willow flycatcher and the highly imperiled Virgin River spine-dace.

Among the other at-risk ecosystems named in the "Top 10" report are Florida's Everglades, the Colorado River, the Ozarks, the Tennessee River and the Sierra Nevada mountains.

For each ecosystem, the report identifies some of the endangered species that live there, as well as the conservation

measures required to help them survive. Member groups of the Endangered Species Coalition across the country nominated the species and ecosystems for inclusion in the report; the submissions were then reviewed and judged by a panel of scientists. Most of the imperiled species are fish, but the report also identifies two amphibians, two birds, two mammals and one plant, all of which are facing water challenges within the 10 ecosystems.

The Endangered Species Coalition has produced a “Top 10” report annually for the last five years. Water Woes can be downloaded at: <http://waterwoes.org>. Previous reports are available on the coalition’s website, www.stopextinction.org.