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Turn Control of Endangered Species Over to Whom?



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Florida developers must be licking their chops: The federal government recently handed over the keys to some of the most important decisions about endangered species over to the state government.

The Sunshine State has a long and notorious history of bending over backwards to accommodate developers at the expense of, well, pretty much everything else.

It's why, years ago, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service was forced to step in to protect panthers, manatees, sea turtles and hundreds of other Florida species from being swallowed by strip malls, sprawling housing developments, golf courses and opulent beachfront hotels.

But now the Fish and Wildlife Service says it's willing to give up its watchdog role in protecting Florida's endangered species in order to "streamline" the permitting process for development projects that may hurt rare plants and animals. That means that Florida's wildlife agency, not the feds, will be in charge of issuing permits to allow "take" of federally recognized endangered species.

In reality, the result will be fast-tracking more development and eliminating the federal government's independent check on the state's

zeal to log, bulldoze, drain and develop more and more of Florida's few remaining wild places.

Nothing like this has been attempted before - and for good reason.

The Endangered Species Act was established 40 years ago to keep ourselves in check, to make sure that, as we expand our massive footprint on the landscape, we don't leave extinct animals and plants in our wake.

Florida and the Southeast are particularly vulnerable. The region is a place of unparalleled aquatic biodiversity, harboring 62 percent of all fish species in the United States, 91 percent of all our mussel species and nearly half of all dragonfly and damselfly species.

And yet, Florida's track record for protecting species is pretty checkered. (Ever read Carl Hiassen?)

A major driver in this poor management is that, too often, the state has given itself over to the whims of powerful developers who care more about hefty profits from condos than rare turtles, birds and butterflies (ironically, the very type of wild nature that's such a draw for people moving to Florida).

The State has not always made decisions in the interest of species' conservation, including allowing approximately 94,000 imperiled gopher tortoises to be entombed from 1991-2007 and prematurely removing the Florida black bear from the state protected list while several subpopulations were still vulnerable to extirpation.

And the current governor doesn't show much sign for hope. Gov. Rick Scott recently signed a major rollback of Florida's growth management laws that will drastically increase sprawl and shut the public out of decisions about the growth of their communities.

But no matter who is in power in Tallahassee, it's vital that the federal government remain engaged and accountable for the management of federally protected species in Florida. Losing that independent, watchdog role that the feds play will only increase the odds that profit-minded, anti-wildlife forces will exert influence over the fate of these rare species - precisely in contradiction of the intent of the Endangered Species Act.

That says nothing of the precedent it will set. If this Florida experiment moves ahead, it certainly won't be long before other states will be calling for their own chance to manage plants and animals on the endangered species list.

Although it's not exactly analogous, we saw what happened when management of imperiled wolves was given over to states in 2011: more than 1,600 wolves have died as state agencies opened wolf populations up to increased hunting and trapping.

Nearly 40 years ago, Congress rightly empowered federal agencies to carry out the Endangered Species Act, knowing full well that saving these rare plants and animals is a national priority that ought to be spared the undue influence of political forces at either the national or state level.

Giving the keys of endangered species management over to states, Florida or otherwise, is like putting a teenager in the driver's seat of a school bus. It's unnecessary, misguided and far too much could go wrong.

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