

## Endangered Species Act isn't the enemy

KEITH GIDO / TIERRA CURRY  
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### Protecting our endangered fish will help protect all of us in the long run.

Fewer than 50 years ago many Great Plains farmers could pump hundreds of gallons per minute from the seemingly bottomless aquifers hidden deep below the surface.

Now some are lucky to get that amount in a year.

Hardly are the farmers to blame — they're simply doing their best to provide reasonably priced, U.S.-produced food.

But we're now starting to fully understand the cost of our water consumption choices, both to humans and wildlife.

Whether we're experiencing a prolonged regional drought or flooding from prolonged downpours, the bottom line hasn't changed: When it comes to our diminishing surface and groundwater

supplies, we must face up to the fact that we're in the midst of a conservation crisis of immense proportions.

The deterioration of aquatic habitat in Kansas has been ongoing since the 19th century. By 1900 almost 90 percent of Kansas had been plowed, and some fish populations were already in danger. The Dust Bowl of the 1930s was an early signal our land use practices were not sustainable.

Then in the 1960s the groundwater withdrawal started, and reservoir construction increased. Both practices reduced suffering from short-term climatic extremes but put our native fishes in jeopardy of extinction.

Many Great Plains fish species were already pushing toward extinction by the time the Endangered Species Act was passed 40 years ago.

Here in the plains, not everyone has positive thoughts about the Endangered

Species Act. Farmers fear, unnecessarily so, that discovery of an endangered species on their land will shut them down. In fact, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service works closely with private landowners, offering incentives for conservation of federally protected species.

Along with protecting our most imperiled plants and animals, the Endangered Species Act plays an important role in helping us recognize our often wasteful water-use practices. No law is perfect, but it's clear we're much better off with the Endangered Species Act than we'd be without it. To date it has prevented the extinction of 99 percent of plants and animals it protects, along with helping to preserve the health of the landscapes they inhabit.

There's not much doubt that the act has aided in the conservation of fishes in the Great Plains, such as the Topeka shiner and pallid sturgeon, by encouraging protection and enhancement of critical habitats and es-

establishing captive rearing programs.

It's understandable that not everyone can fully appreciate the value of some of these now rare species. But the point is, not so long ago these fish could be found in great abundance through entire river systems. And their relatively quick demise is a barometer of the broader water conservation crisis that everybody should care about, if only for their own sake.

Still, there's much to be optimistic about. Many farmers are turning to promising dry-crop methods. And there are plenty of opportunities to continue the work of improving or creating passageways through dams and road crossings that block natural migrations and are critical to preserving fish populations.

One of the most important ways to get funding for these kinds of improvements is through the Endangered Species Act. We still have plenty of fish, and habitats, right here in Kansas that would benefit from those protections.

Although some landowners are wary, the truth is

fish and wildlife officials are looking for impact, not conflict. So in the great majority of cases, officials are not cramming anything down anybody's throat — the Endangered Species Act is just guiding how we spend a relatively tiny portion of our tax money in an environmentally constructive way.

In the long run, that's a good thing for all of us.

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