

Lawsuit seeks to protect ‘Hellbender’

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by Ken Ward Jr

If you’ve eaten at Hellbender Burritos up in Davis, W.Va., you may have wondered about the joint’s namesake. Here’s some new information from the Center for Biological Diversity:

The Center for Biological Diversity filed a lawsuit today against the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for failing to protect eastern hellbenders under the Endangered Species Act. The hellbender is North America’s largest amphibian, growing more than 2 feet long. It is found in streams from New York to Mississippi and is threatened with extinction due to water pollution and dams. The Center petitioned for protection for the eastern hellbender in 2009, but the Service has failed to make a final decision on the petition. As fully aquatic salamanders, hellbenders never leave the water; and in highly polluted waters, they develop dramatic skin lesions.



Collette Adkins Giese, a lawyer with the center, said:

Hellbenders reflect the health of their streams, and they’re telling us clearly that we need to do a better job of protecting our rivers. Protecting the hellbender and its habitat under the Endangered Species Act will help protect water quality for all of us.

The center’s release continues:

It is unknown in how many states the large amphibian still survives. States in its range include New York, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Ohio, Illinois, Indiana, Virginia, West Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, the Carolinas, Georgia, Alabama and Mississippi.

The eastern hellbender is one of two hellbender subspecies. The other, the Ozark hellbender, is found in streams in northern Arkansas and southern Missouri and was protected under the Endangered Species Act in 2011.

Hellbenders are known by a number of colorful common names, including alligator of the mountains, big water lizard, devil dog, mud devil, walking catfish, water dog and snot otter.

Ancient animals that have changed very little over time, hellbenders are uniquely adapted to aquatic life. They have paddle-like tails for swimming and flattened bodies and heads that fit in crevices and allow them to cling to the river bottom. Numerous folds of skin on their sides allow increased oxygen absorption from the water. They have lidless eyes and largely rely on vibrations and scents for communication and foraging; they secrete toxic slime to ward off predators but are not poisonous to humans. Hellbenders forage at night, preying on crayfish, insects, dead fish and other amphibians, and are in turn eaten by fish, turtles and snakes. Males build nests by making saucer-shaped depressions in gravel and then defend their nests until young are about three weeks old. Hellbenders reach sexual maturity at 5 to 8 years and may live as long as 30 years.

The eastern hellbender is one of 10 species across the country that the Center is prioritizing for Endangered Species Act protection this fiscal year. Under a settlement agreement with the Service that expedites protection decisions for 757 species, the Center can push forward 10 decisions per year. The other priority species for 2013 include a fox, two birds, a toad, two reptiles, a fish and two freshwater invertebrates. The species are facing extinction for many reasons, chief among them habitat loss, pollution, and sea-level rise from climate change. They include the Sierra Nevada red fox, Florida Keys mole skink, Suwannee moccasinshell mussel, Panama City crayfish, MacGillivray's seaside sparrow, boreal toad, bridled darter, a New England songbird, and critical habitat for the loggerhead sea turtle.