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# The Oregonian

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## Endangered Species Act still needed 40 years later: Guest opinion



In 2013, conservation groups sued under the Endangered Species Act to stop logging on state forestland that might affect the marbled murrelet, seen here in a file photo. (AP Photo/Esther Burkett)

By Noah Greenwald

From 200-year-old Douglas firs more than six feet in diameter to the annual salmon runs that have drawn generations of fishermen to the banks of our rivers, the Pacific Northwest has long been defined by its remarkably diverse collection of native plants and animals.

Nowhere is that more apparent than Oregon, where thanks to the protections of the Endangered Species Act, thousands of Chinook salmon still make their way each year from the Pacific Ocean up the Columbia and Willamette rivers, through downtown Portland and on to the shallow gravel spawning beds in the far reaches of the Cascades.

We can also thank the Endangered Species Act for the Northwest Forest Plan, without which we wouldn't have towering old-growth forests that are a source of awe for people from around the world, that clean our streams for salmon and people, and that support thousands of wildlife species from northern spotted owls to elk.

As to be expected of any conservation efforts, the act and the Northwest Forest Plan face relentless attacks from those determined to return to the unsustainable logging practices of past generations. But as we mark the 40th anniversary of the act, which occurred on Dec. 28, Oregonians should pause to celebrate our success at preventing the extinction of species and, in the process, helping to protect some of Oregon's last-remaining stands of old-growth forests.

Since being passed almost unanimously by Congress, the act has prevented extinction

of 99 percent of the more than 1,500 plants and animals it protects. And in the process it has put many of those species on the road to recovery, including Steller sea lions, which just this fall were declared recovered.

As we've seen in Oregon, the act has also provided us with the tools to protect entire ecosystems.

Oregonians witnessed the power of those tools in 2013, when conservation groups, including the one I work for, filed a lawsuit under the Endangered Species Act to protect the marbled murrelet from logging by the state of Oregon on the Tillamook, Clatsop and Elliott state forests, forcing the state to drop multiple timber sales in the murrelet's old forest habitat.

This lawsuit also highlights the judiciousness of the Endangered Species Act. Our lawsuit was only necessary because the state had broken a promise to protect habitat for the spotted owl and murrelet. In 1995, the state had developed a "habitat conservation plan," under which it was allowed to log old forest habitats for the two birds, provided other habitat was protected over the long term. After the habitat was logged, however, the state reneged on its promise and moved to log protected areas.

This reminds us of exactly why we need the Endangered Species Act moving forward – because it provides the kind of balance that 40 years our congressmen determined was necessary to overcome the temporal lure of politics and short-sighted economic development.

That challenge was laid out on the first page of the landmark law:

"The Congress finds and declares that — various species of fish, wildlife, and plants in the United States have been rendered extinct as a consequence of economic growth and development untempered by adequate concern and conservation;"

The challenge today and moving forward into 2014 and beyond is unchanged.

And what we've learned with scientific certainty over the past four decades is that with the tools provided by the Act, we can not only save species but balance our short-term economic needs with the long-term needs of our environment and economy. Indeed, despite the constraints of logging the last old-growth forests on federal lands, our economy is stronger than ever.

Without the act there would be no balance at all.