

The Patriot-News

What do Tea Party Republicans have against the long-eared bat?



Myotis septentrionalis, northern myotis (Vespertilionidae) with growth of *Geomyces destructans* clearly evident. LaSalle County, Illinois. January 2013. Photo credit: University of Illinois/Steve Taylor

By Mollie Matteson - September 15, 2014

Few species in the United States are facing greater extinction pressure than northern long-eared bats, with declines of up to 99 percent in the heart of their range, including the Northeast.

Scientists have confirmed that amid the worst global plant and animal extinction crisis in human history, bats are being devastated by one of the most destructive wildlife epidemics in modern times – white-nose syndrome, a fungal contagion that has already wiped out nearly 7 million bats and affected seven of America's hibernating bat species.

But none of these disturbing facts were the focus of this week's Harrisburg field hearing on the bat by the Tea Party-controlled House Natural Resources Committee, which as part of its ongoing campaign to gut the Endangered Species Act instead opted to spin exaggerated, fear-mongering tales of job losses and property owners forced to coexist with bats.

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That left me, a senior scientist with the Center for Biological Diversity, as the only bat-friendly witness on a panel otherwise loaded with industry and state representatives opposed to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's proposal to protect the bat as endangered.

As a result, nearly all the testimony had more to do with protecting the rights of resource extraction industries than protecting the long-term health of the bats, the habitats they need, and the valuable contribution they make to maintaining ecological balance.

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To that end, the committee attempted to raise concerns about the science underpinning the protection proposal. But the fact is, the science is solid: The best-available research by top scientists suggests that if we don't protect the bats now we risk their extinction.

That's why after an exhaustive review of the facts, the Service correctly decided last October to propose designating the bat as endangered.

Yet, following intense criticism from the logging, mining and oil and gas industries as well as state natural resource agencies fearful of possible restrictions on logging and development, the Service hit the pause button earlier this summer, delaying until April 2015 its final decision on protecting the bat.

The postponement, which was not based on any substantial new scientific finding, is one of several recent decisions in which the agency has pointed to scientific uncertainty as reason for reconsidering protection proposals.

In fact, absolute certainty has never been the standard for protecting endangered species, nor should it be. That would be a recipe for never protecting any species – exactly the intent of Tea Party Republicans controlling the House Natural Resources Committee.

Instead, the tried-and-true Endangered Species Act process that has prevented the extinction of 99 percent of protected species relies on the best-available scientific and commercial data.

Listing recommendations are subjected to scientific peer review before they are finalized.

In the case of the northern long-eared bat, the science is quite compelling. Last year, when the Service made its listing recommendation, the best available science showed 99 percent declines in the Northeast.

This year, biologists at the now-annual white-nose syndrome symposium, taking place this week in Missouri, report that populations of northern long-eared bats are starting to nose-dive in the Midwest and Southeast.

Given that white-nose syndrome has already spread to 25 of the 39 states where the northern long-eared bat is found, it's clear the future existence of this bat is very much in doubt.

Already, the bat disease has touched all the places where the bat was most numerous, and it continues to spread.

Endangered Species Act protections prohibit harming or killing bats, which is important -- we simply cannot afford to lose any more bats, to any cause.

As part of that process there will be opportunities for landowners, industries and states to engage in conservation programs that safeguard the bat while allowing activities such as logging, mining, and wind energy to continue with minimal adjustments.

And because bats consume thousands of tons per year of insects that attack crops and valuable timber, protecting the northern long-eared bat will have substantial economic benefits.

In Pennsylvania alone, researchers have estimated that the value of bats to agriculture is \$292 million annually

The effort by Tea Party Republicans to suggest that preserving our irreplaceable biodiversity and our economic stability is an "either-or" proposition simply does not reflect the facts nor the nation's best long-term environmental or economic interests.

If we lose the discipline of allowing science, rather than short-term economic goals, to guide our decisions about protecting species, we'll throw away the well-documented power of the Endangered Species Act to protect plants and animals and the habitats we all depend on for a healthy planet and economy.

Mollie Matteson is a senior scientist at the Center for Biological Diversity where much of her work focuses on raising awareness of white-nose syndrome and stopping its spread across the country.