

Island night lizard: Another protected species back from the brink

By Noelle Swan, Staff writer
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The island night lizard was delisted as an endangered species in the US this week, after three decades of restoration efforts. Its recovery highlights an increased success rate in reestablishing endangered species.

After three decades of restoration efforts, the US Fish and Wildlife Service removed the small lizard from the endangered species list Monday.

The mottled lizard is a small, omnivorous reptile found only on three of California's Channel Islands. The FWS listed the species as endangered back in 1977, because invasive herbivores had decimated the islands' vegetation that the lizards relied upon for shelter. In 1984, the FWS partnered with the National Parks Service, which owns Santa Barbara Island,

and the US Navy, which owns San Clemente Island and San Nicolas Island, to remove the invasive species and replenish the islands' vegetation.

The FWS currently lists more than 1,500 different species of plants and animals as protected under the Endangered Species Act of 1973.

"We are getting very, very much better at the science and the management of endangered species," says Stuart Pimm, a conservation ecology professor at Duke University in Durham, N.C.

Success stories include remarkable recoveries of the whooping crane, the American crocodile, the gray whale, and the California condor.

The act has prevented 99 percent of listed species from reaching extinction, 2 percent of which have recovered to levels sufficient for delisting, says FWS spokeswoman Jane Hendron.

"The Endangered Species Act is one of the single most successful pieces of wildlife conservation legislation — ever," Ms. Hendron says.

Protecting endangered species and restoring their habitats, however, do come with a cost.

In the case of the island night lizard, the federal government spent more than \$500,000 on recovery efforts in 2012, according to FWS budgetary accounting.

Federal budgets are only one accounting of the economic costs of species recovery, says Michael Stroup, an economics professor at Stephen F. Austin State University in Nacogdoches, Texas.

"One important cost that's sort of lost in the mix is the lost economic opportunities when the Endangered Species Act comes in and tells the private land owner that they have to stop economic activity

because of endangered species,” Mr. Stroup says. “If the federal government comes in and restricts the use of your land, that kind of amounts to a taking.”

When the government outright seizes public land via eminent domain, landowners are entitled to compensation. In the case of the Endangered Species Act, very few landowners ever receive such recompense, Stroup adds.

However, most conservation restrictions apply to federally owned land rather than privately held land, says Duke’s Pimm.

“What private land owners do is very largely off limits to the Endangered Species Act,” he says. “The federal government has never wanted to take on landowners in a big way.”

Pimm dismisses the notion that species recovery is bad for the economy.

“When bald eagles come back, when people see peregrine falcons, when people go whale watching, when people go to national parks and appreciate the biodiversity there, that is all very, very substantial economic activity,” he says.

Conservationists and businesses most routinely butt heads over natural resource extraction, such as logging and oil and gas exploration, says Rep. Raúl Grijalva (D) of Arizona.

“The complaint is always that nothing is moving in terms of being able to use natural resources in extraction,” he says. “That’s just not backed by actual numbers: 7.9 million acres have been approved for oil and gas extraction; yet for conservation, there’s only been 2.9 million [acres].”

Stroup argues that the problem is not the extent of conservation, but the distribution of the economic burden.

“It’s a small number of business owners and people who are bearing that sole loss of benefits to create a benefit that’s going to help all the people of the United States that appreciate the different species that the act is trying to protect,” he says.

Rep. Doc Hastings (R) of Washington has introduced bills in Congress to give local stakeholders a role in the process of listing and delisting species.

The House Natural Resources Committee “felt that the local communities that are going to be impacted need to be part of these discussions when the listings are made and so forth, and they should be part of the decisionmaking process,” Representative Hastings says.

Representative Grijalva says such bills would “narrow the scope of application and basically make the laws powerless, essentially creating so many exemptions that they just become paper tigers.”

The Hastings bills also would put additional pressure on the FWS to transition species off the list.

“The law has been in effect for some 40 years, yet only 2 percent of the species that have been listed have been recovered,” Hastings says.

The counterargument, made by FWS’s Hendron, is that species recovery can take decades.

“Species don’t become threatened or endangered overnight,” she says. “When we do see progress in their status occurring, we have in some cases proposed reclassifying a species from endangered to threatened.

They may not be off the list yet, but they are making progress.”

The House Natural Resources Committee will hold a hearing April 8 to discuss the Hastings bills. No related bills have been introduced in the Senate.

The Endangered Species Act is always under political threat, says Tierra Curry, a senior scientist in the Portland, Ore., office of the Center for Biological Diversity. The act has been consistently underfunded, Ms. Curry says.

“FWS needs more money in order to protect all the species that need to be protected and in order to develop recovery plans for all of the species that are already protected,” she says. “We need to make endangered species protection a fiscal priority.”

There are many species in need of protection that have not yet been granted endangered status, she says.

“There are even species out there that are endangered that aren’t even described yet,” Curry says. “In some cases, there are species that have likely gone extinct before they ever get described or protected.”