



CBD to sue U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service over reptile protections

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In an effort to provide Endangered Species Act protection for seven kinds of amphibians and reptiles found in the southwestern United States, including the rare Yuman desert fringe-toed lizard found locally, the Center for Biological Diversity (CBD) filed a formal notice of intent to sue the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service Thursday.

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service officials contacted by the Yuma Sun declined to comment about the notice of intent, citing the pending litigation.

CBD, joined by several renowned scientists and herpetologists including E.O. Wilson, Thomas Lovejoy and Michael Lannoo, had initially filed a petition with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service seeking protection for the seven species in July 2012.

Also, more than 200 scientists sent a letter last year asking the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service to review the status of the petitioned animals.

According to CBD, the Fish & Wildlife Service is required to make an initial finding within 90 days of receiving a petition about whether protections may be warranted – but more than a year later, the agency reportedly still has not acted, leading to the impending lawsuit.

The 90-day finding is the first in a series of required decisions and requires the Fish and Wildlife Service to determine whether the petition presents sufficient information to warrant further consideration.

The Yuman desert fringe-toed lizard is considered a “sensitive” species by the Bureau of Land Management, but that designation offers no legal protection for them or their habitat, CBD officials stated. The lizard’s habitat is the southwestern Arizona and northwestern Sonoran desert area.

The small, camouflaged lizards – less than 5 inches long – have a fringe of scales along the sides of their toes to aid in running across loose sand without sinking, tightly overlapping eyelids, earflaps and valve-like nostrils to protect them from blowing sand. Development and off-road vehicles threaten their habitat, CBD officials stated.

The other species that CBD seeks Endangered Species Act protection for include the Rio Grande cooter, Arizona toad, Arizona night lizard, Bezy’s night lizard, reticulate collared lizard and Cascade Caverns salamander. According to CBD, these species are at risk due to habitat loss and other factors that threaten their survival.

“The Southwest is home to some of the nation’s most fascinating scaly and slimy creatures,” said Collette Adkins Giese, a CBD

biologist and lawyer focused on protecting amphibians and reptiles.

“Although few people have heard of, let alone seen, a Bezy’s night lizard or Rio Grande cooter, these unique species are an important part of the web of life and of what makes the Southwest unique. Without Endangered Species Act protection, we’re likely to lose these rare lizards, turtles, toads and salamanders forever.”

According to CBD, although amphibians and reptiles have existed for hundreds of millions of years and survived every major extinction period, they’re now dying off at up to 10,000 times the historic extinction rate because of human encroachment.

Conservationists find this loss alarming because the species perform important roles as predators and prey in their ecosystems and are valuable indicators of environmental health.

“There’s broad scientific consensus that amphibians and reptiles face a profound, human-driven extinction crisis that requires prompt action,” Giese said. “The Endangered Species Act has a nearly perfect record of stopping animals from going extinct – it’s hands down our best tool for saving rare amphibians and reptiles.”