

Slimy amphibian is less protected than other animals

Point Park News Service - January 17, 2014

By Akasha Chamberlain, Point Park News Service

The eastern hellbender is far from cuddly. It's big, slimy and a little bit ugly, with inspiring nicknames like "snot otter" and "mud devil."

It is the amphibians' odd appearance, with its large flat head, tiny eyes and big grinning mouth, that makes it endearing to environmental lawyer Collette Adkins Giese.

The eastern hellbender is not considered threatened or endangered by Pennsylvania or the federal government, but Giese and the Center for Biological Diversity are fighting to change that.

Recently, the group of environmental watchdogs expedited the process for the hellbender's consideration under the federal Endangered Species Act.

Although the hellbender lives in an area that stretches down the East Coast from New York to Georgia and as far west as Arizona, Pennsylvania has the most significant hellbender population.

"Pennsylvania had a significant part of its range so Pennsylvania had a great responsibility to the region for that species," said Chris Urban, chief of the Natural Diversity Section for the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission.

Urban was hesitant to say if the Hellbender population is in decline in the state.



Eastern hellbender. Photo:
www.paconserve.org

"Is it in decline?" he said. "We're not sure. It looks like it is in certain areas, and in other areas we just don't have enough information to make an assessment yet."

Due to an extended local range and insufficient manpower to carry out a statewide study, Urban said there are only bits and pieces of information on some specific areas. Eastern hellbenders are elusive. Living underwater in fast-moving streams and rivers, they slide their flat bodies in between giant rocks to hide and catch crayfish

"It's going to take a long time to put the pieces together to see how it's really doing," Urban said, comparing the hellbender to the timber rattlesnake, which required 10 years of

extensive research in order to fully understand its population.

Having captured and micro-chipped 1,500 hellbenders, Peter Petokas has a graver outlook. Petokas, a research associate with Lycoming College's Clean Water Institute, said while some populations are stable and reproducing, others "declined dramatically."

"We have lost a lot of them. It's been disappearing throughout its entire range," said Petokas, who helps monitor some hellbender populations in Pennsylvania every two years.

The main reason for the hellbender decline is destruction of habitat through sedimentation, when dirt and detritus fill the spaces between large rocks where hellbenders normally occupy, as well as loss of water quality.

For Giese, the hellbenders are an important example of human interaction with the environment.



The Fallingwater Museum Gift Shop sells T-shirts for hellbender lovers. Courtesy of Fallingwater.

"If our waterways are not clean enough for the hellbender to survive, then they're not clean enough for us to want to recreate in them, to use for drinking water, and they're not going to be clean enough for all the other wild creatures," Giese said. "It's a sign that humans are not doing right by the environment, and we need to do better."

On a national level, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service acknowledged the eastern hellbender's population decline in 2011. However, after it failed to make a decision on the creatures' federal conservation status within one year, going against the requirements of the Endangered Species Act, the Center for Biological Diversity sued. Pending litigation, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service agreed to make a decision on whether to list the eastern hellbender by 2018.

A little over four years might seem like a long time, but in terms of the Endangered Species Act, it is a fast progression.

"This is one of those things that is frustrating for really all species in the United States," Giese said. "It is such a long process to get a species listed on the Endangered Species Act."

The hellbender is not alone in its struggle for protection

Although conservation is based on more than just an animal's appearance, the cute and fluffy seem to outweigh the creepy and crawly, with only 60 reptiles and amphibians listed out of the 1,400 animals on the federal endangered species list.

"I think amphibians and reptiles have been somewhat neglected leading to a backlog in protection," Giese said.

Public advocacy leads to valuable research dollars, which leads to concrete knowledge about a species' population and plays a big part in getting listed, Giese said.

"They sometimes don't attract the same amount of attention as more charismatic animals," Giese said.

The hellbender seems to be charismatic enough. It has its own merchandise. Fans of the slithery salamander can buy "I Heart Hellbenders" T-shirts from the Fallingwater Museum gift store.

But Urban stressed that popularity or passion for an animal should not take precedent over need when choosing animals for the Endangered Species List.

"I just think they're fascinating," Urban said. "It's one of those critters that is probably going to need more protection in the future, but we have to evaluate scientifically and be very objective about it and not just let emotions run into it."

Though he added: "They may be one of the coolest salamanders we have."