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U.S. Navy credited with recovery of island night lizards

By Louis Sahagun

In what is being hailed as an environmental victory for the U.S. Navy, the island night lizard has been taken off the list of federally endangered species.

An estimated 21.3 million night lizards occupy 21-mile-long San Clemente Island, one of the highest densities of any lizard on earth, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced this week.

The population number is especially significant because the 57-square-mile volcanic isle, about 75 miles northwest of San Diego, hosts the only ship-to-shore bombardment training range in the United States.

The lizard's recovery on San Clemente and two other Channel Islands -- San Nicholas and Santa Barbara -- was credited to habitat conservation and restoration efforts by the U.S. Navy and the National Park Service.

"The incredibly high numbers of lizards on San Clemente Island," Christopher Sund, commanding officer of Naval Base Coronado, said, "shows that unique island species can thrive alongside high-tempo Navy operations through protective management."



The island night lizard, which lives on three Channel Islands off the Southern California coast, has been taken off the list of endangered species. (Don Bartletti / Los Angeles Times)

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The lizard that scientists know as *Xantusia riversiana* was listed under the Endangered Species Act in 1977 due to severe habitat loss caused by ranching, grazing and the introduction of non-native goats, pigs and rabbits, which browsed native plants to oblivion and trampled the landscape.

The islands' unique assemblage of flora and fauna, including night lizards, has been on the rebound since the goats, pigs and rabbits were removed in the mid-1990s. Also important has been cultivation of native vegetation on the islands.

Much larger than its mainland cousins – up to 8 inches long compared with 2-inchers in the California desert – the lizard with bright stripes and mottled green scales spends its entire life within a few yards of ground and bears its young live, as mammals do.

Collette Adkins Giese, an attorney with the Center for Biological Diversity said: “It’s amazing that the Navy was able to save this precious creature from extinction, and still be able to carry out its mission.”