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## Keep Wildlife Protection Intact

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The Endangered Species Act has helped protect iconic South Carolina animals such as the loggerhead sea turtle and the wood stork, so a Trump administration plan to strip away some of that protection rightly has conservationists worried. The alarming proposal must be stopped.

The U.S. Department of Interior says the changes would advance conservation by simplifying and improving how the act is used. But it's difficult to fathom how stripping away automatic protections for threatened animal and plant species, and limiting habitat safeguards for recovering species, would help their survival.

For conservation groups, the government's anti-environment intent is painfully clear.

"This is a wholesale assault on the Endangered Species Act and the protections it provides to endangered species," attorney Sierra Weaver of the Southern Environmental Law Center told Post and Courier reporter Bo Petersen.

The move is part of a worrisome attempt to scale back an array of critical federal land, sea and wildlife protections.

Much of this is overseen by the Interior and Commerce departments in a troubling melding of wildlife and business interests. If the changes are enacted, bald eagles and other wildlife would be the ultimate losers.

For example, instead of safeguarding vulnerable animals, the proposal could eliminate a requirement that federal industry permitting agencies consult with wildlife agencies and scientists before making permit decisions. It's revealing that the change would include permits for oil and natural gas exploration off the South Carolina coast, where the right whale is on the verge of extinction.

The proposal even builds in some leeway for recklessness, dropping restrictions on the incidental disruption or killing of animals listed as threatened rather than endangered, according to the American Bird Conservancy. Turtles, eagles and manatees could be affected by such a wrong-headed action.

The proposal would make it easier to eliminate habitat protected areas.

"Critical habitat is essential for maintaining and recovering species, but this change would allow the loss of habitat to occur drip by drip," said Steve Holmer, policy director of the American Bird Conservancy.

“Eventually,” he said, “there could be little critical habitat left.”

Rather than protecting the outdoors and wildlife, Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke is trying to diminish protections, Brett Hartl, government affairs director for the Center for Biological Diversity, told ABC News.

“These proposals would slam a wrecking ball into the most crucial protections for our most endangered wildlife,” Hartl said. “If these regulations had been in place in the 1970s, the bald eagle and the gray whale would be extinct today. If they’re finalized now, Zinke will go down in history as the extinction secretary.”

The act provides important protection for more than 700 animals and almost 1,000 plants in the United States, including 36 in South Carolina. In another sign of the anti-science crowd’s ascendancy, the proposal would restrict protections for areas affected by climate change, potentially endangering animals such as polar bears.

These proposed changes to the Endangered Species Act can’t be allowed to happen. There will be a 60-day public comment period. In the meantime, let your congressman know that this is a bad idea that must be halted in its tracks. And, while you’re at it, remind them that drilling off our coast is a bad idea too.

The act must be allowed to continue providing protection instead of being twisted into a tool that would allow the federal government to look the other way while threatened and endangered species are harmed.