



# Santa Maria Times

Lee Central Coast Newspapers

## Guest Commentary

### Jenny Loda: Saving salamanders a highway at a time

Sep 26, 2017 Updated Sep 29, 2017

Contributed Photo, Caltrans

The average driver cruising Highway 246 may not know the newly-built wildlife undercrossings were created to speed the recovery of one of California's most endangered species.

The project is a collaboration between Caltrans, state Department of Fish and Wildlife and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The goal is to give Santa Barbara County's California tiger salamanders a fighting chance for a comeback.

That work would never have occurred without Endangered Species Act protections. The success of these and similar recovery projects shows just how much we need this core environmental law. It also highlights the danger posed by legislative attacks from congressional Republicans attempting to weaken or dismantle critical endangered species protections.

#### Hwy 246 undercrossing construction

A completed Highway 246 undercrossing west of Buellton will allow California tiger salamanders and other small animals safe passage from one side to the other, Caltrans officials said.

As a wildlife biologist who has seen how much damage roadways can do to imperiled animals, I am overjoyed about projects that reduce the number of creatures crushed by cars and trucks.

The Highway 246 improvements will allow the tiger salamanders, which are also designated as a California endangered species, to move more freely between essential habitats like burrows and breeding ponds. It's also encouraging that some recommended actions in the federal recovery plan finalized for the salamander last year are already underway.

The local tiger salamander population is found only in Northern Santa Barbara County. When protected under the Endangered Species Act on an emergency basis in 2000, these salamanders were only known to occur in 14 ponds. Thanks to being listed as an endangered species, they are now found in six meta-populations spread across 60 ponds.

Endangered Species Act protections provided for the salamander 17 years ago have played a critical role in better understanding this species and supporting recovery actions like the highway undercrossings.

The salamander has faced numerous threats. Likely the biggest reason for its decline is the loss of large amounts of habitat in Santa Barbara County. But barriers to its natural movement have also played a significant role. The new highway features will help salamanders and other small animals safely cross the busy roadway without being killed.

Such preventive actions would never have happened without the Endangered Species Act. As one of the country's most effective conservation laws, the act has saved more than 99 percent of plants and animals afforded its protections from going extinct.

The good work being done for the salamander is hardly the only Endangered Species Act success story in California. The crash of several Island fox subspecies in the Channel Islands, followed by their spectacular recovery is one of the most amazing conservation success stories in recent memory.

A mere dozen years after these tiny foxes were protected under the act, they have not only eluded extinction, but the foxes on three of the islands have recovered so well they were removed from the endangered species list, just like California brown pelicans, gray whales, bald eagles and Island night lizards.

A report on America's endangered birds from the organization where I work, the Center for Biological Diversity, found that 85 percent of the North American birds listed under the Endangered Species Act have either increased in numbers or remained stable since being protected.

At a time when Republicans in Congress have made a habit of turning the Endangered Species Act into a punching bag, launching 46 legislative attacks against the law since January, it is uplifting to see the Act in action.

Calls to gut the Endangered Species Act are counterproductive to preserving our natural heritage. Instead, Congress should provide more funding to help save our most imperiled species from being lost forever.

Jenny Loda is reptile and amphibian staff attorney with the Center for Biological Diversity in Oakland.