

Joshua trees should be protected by state endangered species act, group says

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Environmentalists are calling on the state to protect Joshua trees, as climate change and habitat destruction threaten the iconic Mojave Desert plant.

The Center for Biological Diversity on Tuesday, Oct. 15, petitioned the state Fish and Game Commission to list the Western Joshua tree as a threatened species under the California Endangered Species Act, which would go beyond existing laws aimed at protecting the plants on public and private lands, said Brian Cummings, the center's conservation director and Joshua Tree resident.

"The Joshua tree, particularly with the [exponential growth of attendance](#) at [Joshua Tree National park](#), has become an international icon," Cummings said. "It's unfortunately becoming a symbol of our failure to address climate change."

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[Researchers at UC Riverside's Center for Conservation Biology](#) found that only 19% of Joshua Tree National Park's Joshua tree habitat will survive past 2070, even with efforts to reduce greenhouse gases. Joshua trees are moving to higher elevations, with cooler climates and moister soil, while adult trees in hotter, drier areas are struggling to produce offspring. The young plants that are produced, however, are not surviving, the study found.

An effort by Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-California, to protect the plant under the federal Endangered Species Act failed to gain approval from the Trump Administration.

Protection under state law, which has stronger protections for plants than federal law, Cummings said, means the state would create a plan to save the species, lead to more proactive management of Joshua trees on state park lands and would call for more scrutiny of projects proposed for property with Joshua trees.

Cummings said he hopes the petition encourages state, local and federal agencies and private citizens to work together "to help the species survive the very difficult decades ahead and the tree can ultimately become a symbol of successful biodiversity protection the age of climate change."

The petition focuses on Western Joshua trees, as opposed to eastern Joshua trees, which stretch from Joshua Tree National Park west along the northern slopes of the San Bernardino and San Gabriel mountains, through the Antelope Valley, north along the eastern flanks of the southern Sierra Nevada and east to the edges of Death Valley National Park and into Nevada, the center said.

The state commission is expected to vote on the petition during a public hearing next year.