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Feds Tout Endangered Species Act Success for Three Species

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(CN) – The Nashville crayfish has an inordinately narrow habitat range. In fact, it exists in only one place in the world – the Mill Creek watershed located squarely in Nashville, Tennessee.

Urban encroachment into its habitat prompted the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to list the species as endangered in 1986. But a recovery program initiated since has proven so successful that the service will officially delist the crayfish Tuesday.

"The ESA continues to be a dynamic tool for recovering wildlife, even in the nation's urban settings," said Leo Miranda, regional director for the service's southeast division.

ESA stands for the Endangered Species Act, the embattled federal law that provides protection for endangered and threatened species throughout the United States. Even as industry groups attack the law as unnecessarily restrictive and an impediment to economic growth, the ecological successes of the recovery programs mandated by federal law continue to accumulate.

On Tuesday, as the delisting of the Nashville crayfish is published on the federal register, Fish and Wildlife will also publish the reclassification of the June sucker, a fish native to the Provo River and Utah Lake watershed in northern Utah, moving it from endangered to threatened.

The sucker was also originally listed in 1986 and the fish population has improved substantially since the listing, according to the service.

"The viability of June sucker in its native range – as indicated by its representation, resiliency, and redundancy – has improved significantly since the time of listing, largely due to the efforts of the (recovery program)," the service said in the proposed delisting.

Bradshaw's desert parsley. (Peter Pearsall / U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service)

The agency also announced the delisting of a perennial herb native to the Pacific Northwest, as its population has recovered significantly since it was first listed in 1988.

Bradshaw's desert parsley is only found in the Willamette Valley of Oregon and the adjacent valley of southwestern Washington.

At one point, the combination of agricultural production and the introduction of non-native herbs had botanists convinced the herb was extinct until it was rediscovered in 1979. Since the listing in 1988, the plant has flourished in its native habitat, to the point where approximately 24 million flowers bloom in 24 distinct populations across the range.

"It's always good news when a plant or animal is saved from extinction, so today we celebrate Bradshaw's desert parsley and the Endangered Species Act," said Tierra Curry, a scientist at the Center for Biological Diversity in Portland. "This lovely wildflower is yet another success for America's most effective conservation law, which has saved more than 99% of species placed under its care."

The preservation of the wetland flower has also benefited the conservation of the prairie habitat in which it flourishes, according to Curry.

The June sucker is another success story for the Endangered Species Act. The fish population was decimated in the 1980s due mass harvesting for fertilizer, combined with the construction of dams in and around Utah Lake and its tributaries.

Agricultural runoff also created large algal blooms pernicious to the native fish and set the stage for the invasion of non-native carp that outcompeted the sucker.

Since the recovery program was focused on habitat improvements to the Utah Lake, the Provo River and other tributaries, it's not only the June sucker that has staged a comeback: the lake and tributary ecosystem has improved significantly.

"The successful efforts to recover the June sucker show the Endangered Species Act is working," said Ryan Beam, a Utah conservation advocate at the Center for Biological Diversity. "This important law benefits not just species like the June sucker, but people who depend on clean water.

The June sucker, named for the month in which it typically spawns, grows up to 24 inches and has gray or brown scales with a pale belly.

The Nashville crayfish is about two inches long and has four pairs of walking legs and two pincers. It's a critical component of the ecological food web, feeding on worms, fish eggs and snails, and provides nutrition for fish, reptiles and raccoons. It is also an indicator species and its recovery attests to the improvement of water quality in the Mill Creek watershed.

Miranda credited the Nashville Zoo and wildlife advocacy organizations for assisting in the successful recovery program.

"Any time we are able to work with diverse stakeholders to successfully recover a species is a good day," he said.

Beam, Curry and Miranda all said the delisting provides irrefutable evidence the Endangered Species Act and its recovery programs are successful. A total of 46 species have been delisted since the act was first passed in 1973, including 22 in the past year.

While the center was quick to praise Fish and Wildlife as it operates under the purview of President Donald Trump for delisting species, it remains highly critical of the Trump administration's current approach to further listing species with dwindling populations.

The Trump administration has listed 21 species under the act since Trump took office in January 2017, by far the lowest of any presidential administration at this point in their term.

The administration of George W. Bush was the only other time under 200 species received protection with the junior Bush granting protection to 62 species.

Under President Bill Clinton, Fish and Wildlife granted protections to the most species (523), while Obama, Reagan and the elder Bush landed somewhere in the middle.

The center says the Trump administration is unnecessarily delaying decisions on the listings of hundreds of species, despite the existence of a work plan developed by the fish and wildlife agency in 2016.

To that end, the Center filed a formal intent to sue the federal agency on Nov. 20, demanding immediate action on 274 imperiled species throughout the country.

"If we want to have more successes like the June sucker, we have to do more to protect species in the first place," said Beam.