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How the Trump Administration is Gutting the Endangered Species Act

by [Gina-Marie Cheeseman](#)

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If in years previous, Republicans in congress have taken consistent and steady aim at the Endangered Species Act (a fundamental, globally modeled environmental regulation enacted by a Republican president), the Trump administration kicks it up a notch.

Endangered species are not animals and plants to protect under the Trump administration. Like people, nature is something to be exploited.

Back in August, the Trump administration finalized [rollbacks](#) to regulations that implement key provisions of the Endangered Species Act. Those rollbacks could lead to hundreds of animals and plants becoming extinct.

Three different rules [weaken](#) the Endangered Species Act. Each one weakens the Act. One of them weakened the consultation process, while the other two reduces designating critical habitat, weakens the listing process for imperiled species, and stops all protections for wildlife newly designated as threatened. The new rules also prohibit the designation of critical habit for species threatened by climate change and significantly limits the ability of federal agencies to designate critical habitat in unoccupied areas.

"These changes crash a bulldozer through the Endangered Species Act's lifesaving protections for America's most vulnerable wildlife," said Noah Greenwald, the Center for Biological Diversity's endangered species director. "For animals like wolverines and monarch butterflies, this could be the beginning of the end."

The Endangered Species Act has long been under attack

Enacted in 1973, the Endangered Species Act has prevented 99 percent of the species under its protection from extinction. Species saved by the Act include the bald eagle, peregrine falcon, and American alligator.

Before Trump's election, Republicans have tried to [weaken](#) the Act. The Center for Biological Diversity documented in a 2016 [report](#) that since 2011 there was a 676 percent increase in legislative attacks on the Act. Republicans are responsible for 94 percent of those attacks. Before Trump's election, the 114th Congress introduced more than 20 bills to weaken protection for just the gray wolves. That Congress accounted for 45 percent of all legislative attacks on endangered species in the last 20 years.

Fast forward to the Trump administration when listing new endangered or threatened species has significantly slowed, as *The Hill* [reports](#). Trump has only finalized 21 species for protection under the Act, which amounts to fewer than a third of those finalized under the Obama administration. It is also less than other Republican presidents. President Obama listed 71 species by the same time in his administration, while President George W. Bush listed 25 and President George H.W. Bush listed 146.

Why the Endangered Species Act is under threat

Since it is such an important tool to protect animals and plants, why would anyone want to weaken it? The reason is simple. Some politicians are beholden to industry. Take David Bernhardt, the Interior Secretary, who previously worked for a lobbying firm whose clients included the Westlands Water District of California's Central Valley. If the name of that water district sounds familiar, perhaps you remember the Kesterson Reservoir, which lies within the Westlands, where irrigation drainage containing selenium poisoned wildlife.

The Westlands Water District was close to completing a permanent water contract with the Interior Department a month ago. "The permanent contract would supplant a series of two-year contracts that have governed Westlands' access to federal water in recent years, diminishing the opportunity for public review," as the [Los Angeles Times](#) reports.

The Interior Department swears that Bernhart did not take part in any of the negotiations with the Westlands, but he is the head of that federal agency. And he did [work](#) for an agency that represented the Westlands. That is the very definition of a conflict of interest. Or in the words of the [Western Values Project](#), he is the "Trump administration's most conflicted and corrupt cabinet member."