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Sohn: The fostering lessons of an endangered turtle

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Science, given even just half a chance, can save us from ourselves — if we're careful to stir in morally right motives.

The Endangered Species Act is an perfect example. Consider the bald eagle, Tellico's snail darter, the Tennessee River's lake sturgeon, the nondescript St. Francis' satyr butterfly in North Carolina, and a brand new hatch of Komodo dragons and Roti Island snake-necked turtles at the Chattanooga Zoo.

The science that saved or is saving those special species is the U.S. Endangered Species Act, a nearly five decade-old federal law that the Trump administration has recently taken a hatchet to in much the same way this president's twisted White House has done to many American traditions and institutions. The result now is that the Endangered Species Act is itself endangered.

In August, Trump's administration changed the endangered species process in 30 ways — most in ways scientists and environmentalists say weaken the law.

Just follow the money. One of the most critical Trump changes would allow costs to industry to be taken into account when deciding whether and how to protect species.



Think of it this way: Had the chemical and pesticide industry had its way, DDT would still be in widespread use on farms and orchards. Not only would the eagle likely be extinct, many other birds would be, too. And along the way, more of us might have succumbed to cancer and/or seen our children harmed by birth defects. Instead, DDT — eventually found to be a probable human carcinogen and possible reproductive toxin — was discontinued in the United States.

On Friday, the Chattanooga Zoo announced the first successful hatching of a Roti Island snake-necked turtle, a critically endangered species with only two known populations surviving in the wild. Indigenous to the small island of Rote in Indonesia and known for its strikingly long neck, the turtle is threatened mostly due to being heavily targeted in the pet trade and having a limited habitat, according to a zoo statement.

Back in September, the zoo announced its first successful hatching of three Komodo dragons, the largest, heaviest lizards in the world but listed as a vulnerable species with only 5,000 left on a handful of Indonesian islands.

The zoo began housing Komodo dragons in 2012 through the participation of the Association of Zoos and Aquariums' Species Survival Plan, a population management program focusing on animal breeding of threatened species.

On Tuesday, The Associated Press reported on an effort to save the tiny St. Francis Satyr butterfly, one of Earth's rarest butterfly species with perhaps only 3,000 in existence. Its only home on earth is on the world's most populated military installation, smack in the middle of the Fort Bragg's artillery range.

"There, as a 400-pound explosive resounds in the distance, a tiny St. Francis Satyr butterfly flits among the splotchy leaves, ready to lay as many as 100 eggs," the AP writes. "Now, thanks in great measure to the 46-year-old federal act, they are found in eight more places — though all of them are on other parts of the Army base. And if all goes well, biologists will have just seeded habitat No. 10."

More than 1,600 U.S. species have been protected by the Endangered Species Act. More than 99.2% of the species protected by the act survive. Only 11 species have since been declared extinct, having already pretty much died out when they were listed. On the other hand, 39 U.S. species — about 2% of the overall number — have made it off the endangered list because of recovery. Think bald eagles, peregrine falcons and American alligators.

The act was passed overwhelmingly in 1973. The House voted 355 to 4 in favor and Senate approval was unanimous. President Richard Nixon signed it into law on Dec. 28 of that year.

There is no doubt that the law in some cases slowed things down — like the construction of the Tellico Dam on the Little Tennessee River when the snail darter was found there. The Supreme Court ruled in favor of the tiny fish, but Congress found a compromise by amending the act to exclude the Tellico project and allow the dam's final completion. In the meantime the snail darter, like the eagle, was saved with extra science efforts. Last July, the Center for Biological Diversity petitioned the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to lift the snail darter's Endangered Species protection.

Trump's intended strangulation of one of the most powerful environmental laws in history comes in the wake of a report from the United Nations earlier this year that more than 1 million plants and animals around the world face extinction, some within decades, owing to human development, climate change and other threats. Here that includes the 101 federally listed species in Tennessee, as well as the 78 in Georgia and 132 in Alabama.

Without question, it's a dangerous action to be removing protections at a time when scientists warn that a million species could become extinct. The new rules should be legally challenged and overturned.

Nearly 50 years of science and democracy show we can have a progressive, far-sighted, environmentally conscious law and still grow jobs and towns and farms — even bomb ranges.

Science and democracy make good habitat for us all if we work at it.