

Missouri's Eastern hellbender salamander proposed for endangered species list

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A subspecies of Missouri's largest salamander has been proposed to be listed as an endangered species following a review by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

If the proposed listing is ultimately approved, the Eastern hellbender will join the Ozark hellbender, also found in Missouri, as an endangered species because of habitat loss, threats from pollution and sale of the rare creatures in the pet trade.

The proposed listing, which only covers Missouri Eastern hellbenders, drew the ire of the Center for Biological Diversity, which had argued that all Eastern hellbenders receive protected status.

"This decision reeks of the Trump administration's utter disdain for protecting our environment and the weird and

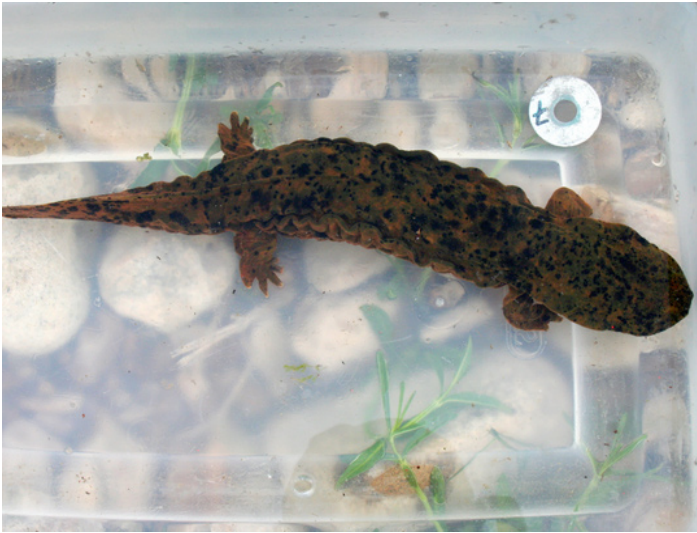


An Eastern hellbender salamander.
(Photo: Center for Biological Diversity)

wonderful creatures in it," said Elise Bennett, a Center for Biological Diversity attorney working to protect reptiles and amphibians.

"It flagrantly ignores the reality of the hellbender's dire situation and gives these imperiled animals a big shove toward extinction."

Eastern hellbenders can be found from New York to the deep south, but only Missouri's Eastern hellbenders were proposed for endangered species protection.



A hellbender held for processing after being captured

A hellbender held for processing after being captured during monitoring surveys. (Photo: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service)

The Missouri hellbenders are distinctly separate from other Eastern hellbenders populations and have no chance of interbreeding to help preserve the species, according to USFWS.

Hellbenders, sometimes nicknamed “snot otters” or “devil dogs,” are found in cool, clear, flowing rivers in central and eastern Missouri. They can grow up to 2 feet in length and weigh up to 5 pounds. Anglers occasionally catch them accidentally.

Their populations in Missouri have declined precipitously in recent decades.

The St. Louis Zoo has successfully bred hellbenders as a way to help replenish the creatures in Missouri.

As an endangered species, Missouri’s hellbenders would receive significant protections under federal law. Fines and potential prison time would be possible for people convicted of capturing, killing or selling hellbenders or destroying their habitat.

Hellbenders, with their slippery skin and loose folds along their sides, typically live under large, flat rocks in the riverbed, where they eat small fish, insects and crawdads.

In a news release, the Center for Biological Diversity said 78 percent of historically known hellbender populations have disappeared or are in decline. They face threats from chemical pollution and sedimentation caused by development, deforestation and dams.

The hellbender is particularly vulnerable to water contamination because of its permeable skin and sensitive eggs, which it lays in water, the Center notes.

“The Trump administration made a clear choice to shrug off a species’ struggle against extinction,” Bennett said in the news release. “Saving the hellbender would also save rivers and streams that many Americans use, but denying protections puts all that at risk. There’s no question we’ll be carefully scrutinizing this one.”

The Center for Biological Diversity says the Missouri Eastern hellbender population represents only 1 percent of the known Eastern hellbender population overall.