

<https://www.nationalparkstraveler.org/2021/03/groups-push-eastern-hellbender-be-protected-esa>

Groups Push For Eastern Hellbender To Be Protected By ESA

 Share / Save

By [NPT Staff](#) - March 5th, 2021 1:45am

The Eastern hellbender can grow to two feet/USDA

"Hellbenders," massive salamanders that can reach 2 feet in length, have not had it easy in recent decades. Back in 2011 the Ozark hellbender, which have been found in [Ozark National Scenic Riverways](#), was [designated an endangered species](#). And now conservation groups want the Eastern hellbender protected by the Endangered Species Act as well.

On Thursday the groups filed [a formal notice of intent to sue](#) the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service over its decision in April 2019 to deny Endangered Species Act protection to Eastern hellbenders. These river-dwelling salamanders live in clear, fast-flowing mountain streams in 15 Southeastern, Midwestern and Northeastern states. They have now been eliminated from much of their historic range.

They still are thought to occur in [Great Smoky Mountains National Park](#) in Tennessee and North Carolina as well as [New River Gorge National Park and Preserve](#) in West Virginia, where they also are called "Allegheny Alligators" "snot otters" and "devil dogs." The nicknames reference the loose, frilly skin along the salamander's sides and its mucus-like covering, which is believed to provide protection from abrasion and parasites and may have antibiotic properties.

"Hellbenders are under pressure from a multitude of threats throughout their range, and those threats are only expected to worsen in the coming years," said Brian Segee, a senior attorney at the Center for Biological Diversity. "Until it's reversed, the Trump administration's denial of protection to these endearing salamanders will doom them to continue on a path toward extinction."

Nearly 80 percent of hellbender populations have already been lost or are in decline due to agricultural and industrial water pollution, habitat destruction, sedimentation, warming waters, dams and other impoundments, and climate change, according to the Center. While acknowledging that those threats will likely intensify, the Service nonetheless found, in April 2019, that the hellbender's protection under the Endangered Species Act is not warranted.

“Hellbenders are like the canary in the coal mine. This ancient species is now almost gone from much of Appalachian streams because they are incredibly sensitive to pollutants and the destruction of their habitats when smothered by sediment,” said Morgan Johnson, a staff attorney at Waterkeepers Chesapeake. “Hellbenders are usually the first species to vanish when clean mountain streams are contaminated and disturbed.”

“Hellbenders thrive best in clean streams and creeks and provide an important litmus test for water-quality concerns, but we have seen a steep decline in their numbers within the middle Susquehanna watershed,” said John Zaktansky, executive director of the Middle Susquehanna Riverkeeper Association. “An endangered or threatened status for this creature, which has helped us better monitor our network of waterways, would go a long way to securing their future — and the future of the waters in which they live.”

The Service’s decision to deny protection to the hellbender was in large part based on population augmentation efforts such as the use of artificial nest boxes or release of juvenile hellbenders raised in captivity from wild-caught eggs. While laudable, the ability of these efforts to rebuild populations is unproven, and they do not help to address or diminish the many threats hellbenders face.

“The Trump administration’s refusal to federally protect the Eastern hellbender was scientifically and legally indefensible,” said Daniel E. Estrin, general counsel and advocacy director for Waterkeeper Alliance. “These sensitive and unique creatures are suffering the proverbial ‘death by a thousand cuts’ as a result of pollution, climate change, and encroachment on their limited habitat — all caused by humans. We must protect them before it’s too late.”

When the Ozark hellbender was given ESA protection in 2011, its populations had declined an estimated 75 percent since the 1980s, with only about 590 individuals remaining in the wild, according to a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service determination at the time. “It is believed numbers have dropped because of degraded water quality, habitat loss resulting from impoundments, ore and gravel mining, sedimentation, and collection for the pet trade,” the agency said.

Now conservation groups believe the same determination should be made for the Eastern hellbender.

“With continued development, loss of habitat, and constant erosion happening along our waterways, many aquatic species like the Eastern hellbender are being misplaced and losing the pristine environment they need,” said Ted Evgeniadis, the Lower Susquehanna Riverkeeper. “The federal government must review the same facts again and warrant the protection of the hellbender under the Endangered Species Act.”

“The hellbender needs and deserves all the help it can get, and I’m hoping that augmentation efforts can help rebuild some of its depleted populations. But only the mandates of the Endangered Species Act have the power to truly protect these salamanders’ habitats and put the species on a path to recovery,” said Segee.

The notice to sue was filed by the Center, Waterkeeper Alliance, Lower Susquehanna Riverkeeper, Middle Susquehanna Riverkeeper and Waterkeepers Chesapeake.

Hellbenders are primarily nocturnal and move by walking on stream bottoms, but can swim short distances to avoid predators. Hellbender lifespan is estimated to be at least 25-30 years and may be closer to 50.

The Center petitioned to protect the eastern hellbender under the Endangered Species Act in 2010. The October 2017 “not warranted” finding came after two legal agreements the Center entered into with the Fish and Wildlife Service in 2013 to expedite protections.