Endangered Species Act Stirs Strong Feelings

Efforts in the U.S. Senate to update and modernize the 33-year-old Endangered Species Act (ESA) are an emotional topic for many. Opinions range from completely repealing the act to not changing a single word. Yet, it seems clear to many that sensible improvements-particularly those that focus on the recovery of species and not just habitats-are long overdue.Biologists say the ESA has not seen meaningful change since it was passed in 1973. As a result, of the nearly 1300 species listed as threatened or endangered, only 10 have recovered sufficiently to be delisted. During that same period of time, over 30 species have been found to be extinct. It can be argued that even those species that have recovered over the last three decades have done so with little help from ESA. For example, the bald eagle, which is recovered and about to be delisted, is often cited as an ESA success story. In fact, it recovered due to a ban on the use of the pesticide DDT and hunting restrictions that preceded passage of ESA. ESA specified critical habitat for the bird but, as it turned out, eagles are not particularly Visit website fussy about habitat. After a bad hurricane season destroyed critical habitat in Florida, the birds moved into residential neighborhoods where they thrived.



The same is true of the peregrine falcon that recovered primarily due to a privately funded captive breeding program and now lives on the plentiful pigeons in the country's largest cities. Yet, the designation of areas as "critical habitat" are the primary tool of the old ESA. These designations do not require scientifically developed recovery plans-even though recovering species is the Act's stated goal. That is why Resources Committee Chairman Richard Pombo designed the House-passed, bipartisan Threatened and Endangered Species Recovery Act to require recovery plans rather than simple, arbitrary designations of critical habitat. Such plans would be peer reviewed using best available science. Should such plans find some kind of habitat protection necessary, such protections would be put in place. If habitat proves irrelevant to recovery of a species, other, more effective means would be used. If the Senate enacts similar legislation, we might recover considerably more than 10 species over the next 33 years.