

Don't weaken the successful Endangered Species Act

By Jeff Miller
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This year is the 40th anniversary of the Endangered Species Act, America's landmark law to prevent the extinction of our most at-risk plants and animals. In the Bay Area, we can appreciate the protections this farsighted act has provided for our native wildlife and how preserving their habitat contributes to our quality of life.

Just last month, local agencies began the environmental review process for a series of fish passage projects that will allow steelhead trout to return to more than 10 miles of historic spawning and rearing habitats in upper Alameda Creek -- for the first time in half a century.

This regionally significant stream restoration has been driven by Endangered Species Act protections for steelhead trout, as have similar efforts to restore steelhead and iconic coho salmon in other Bay Area streams such as Codornices Creek, Suisun Creek, Napa River, Lagunitas Creek, San Francisquito Creek and the Guadalupe River.

The Endangered Species Act is one of our most successful environmental laws and the best tool we have for protecting biodiversity. The act's purpose is to stabilize populations of imperiled animals and plants in the wild and bring about their full recovery, at which point they can be removed from the endangered list.

The Endangered Species Act is the main reason we now have abundant and healthy populations of brown pelicans and peregrine falcons in the Bay Area. Both these species have rebounded as a direct result of federal protection and the subsequent banning of the pesticide DDT. Thanks to the Endangered Species Act, bald eagles recovered enough to come off the protected list in 2007. Bald eagles began nesting in the Bay Area in the 1990s and now regularly breed at half a dozen lakes around the Bay.

We've seen increased numbers of endangered California least terns and threatened western snowy plovers in the Bay Area because the Endangered Species Act protected sensitive nesting habitat on our beaches.

Endangered Species Act protections have also limited massive urban sprawl in the Bay Area that otherwise would have eliminated much of the remaining habitat for the region's distinctive and highly imperiled reptiles and amphibians.

The brightly colored San Francisco garter snake and Alameda whipsnake, the wetlands-dependent California red-legged frog, and the boldly patterned California tiger salamander would likely have disappeared from Bay Area habitats without the protections of the act.

A full 99 percent of the more than 1,400 plants and animals protected under the Endangered Species Act have been saved from extinction, and hundreds of them are on the road to recovery. The longer a species is protected under the act, the more likely it is to be recovering.

The protected species most likely to be recovering are those for which areas of critical habitat have been designated; a formal recovery plan has been prepared; and conservation money has been invested, all actions that result from federal protections.

The first 40 years of the act make it pretty clear that protection and recovery of our most at-risk wildlife is a good investment that brings additional benefits such as clean water, protected open space, recreational and educational opportunities and tourism revenue. On this anniversary, Bay Area residents should voice their support for the Endangered Species Act and oppose Congressional efforts to weaken it.

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