



Dead as dodos

Is common sense on endangered species extinct?

September 22, 2005

The low success rate of the Endangered Species Act shows that the law must be changed, according to Congressman Richard Pombo and his allies. His logic and his legislation are faulty.

On Monday, Pombo, a California Republican who chairs the House Resources Committee, introduced a bill to "reform" the landmark environmental law. Some news accounts characterized the Pombo bill as an "overhaul." It's more like a monkey-wrenching.

Pombo notes that less than 1 percent of 1,300 plants and animals listed as "endangered" or "threatened" have recovered. Meanwhile, 21 percent of all listed species are losing ground, and only 6 percent are said to be "improving."

Parroting Pombo, a House Resource Committee Web site says that's about all you need to know: "A review of the numbers alone serves as irrefutable evidence of the fact that the ESA needs serious legislative improvement."

It serves as no such thing. Actually, the evidence suggests the obvious: Our efforts to save species haven't been able to offset our conscious or unwitting attempts to destroy them.

Pombo's argument, oblivious to this fact, is both shallow and illogical.

Plants and animals become extinct for a host of reasons, many of them anthropogenic. As a Fish and Wildlife Service document notes, sonar vexes whales and dolphins, and salmon can be chewed up in hydroelectric turbines. Fixing such problems is difficult, unless humans are to forgo modern navigational tools or hydropower.

People often cause extinction. We spurt poison into the air, land and water. We spread invasive species. We slaughter whole parts of ecosystems. And we destroy habitat.

All of those things result from technological change, development and population growth. Such genies don't return quietly to their bottles.

Nonetheless, Pombo's bill, which was considered by his committee Wednesday, would weaken the Endangered Species Act under the guise of "reforming" it. Under the existing law, the federal government has the power to protect "critical habitat" for endangered species. Pombo's bill would eliminate that power.

But it would initiate a non-binding "integrated recovery planning process." And it would give political appointees, rather than scientists, the power to make some scientific determinations.

The critical-habitat section of Pombo's bill is perhaps most troubling. As the FWS notes, "Lack of suitable undisturbed habitat is the principal biological factor that limits our prospects of achieving full recovery for many listed species."

The existing Endangered Species Act has allowed the protection of critical habitat for 466 species, government documents show. And there is much evidence that the law doesn't need an overhaul. Just last month, a peer-reviewed article in the scientific journal Ecology Letters reported that almost two-thirds of the species listed for 13 or more years have stabilized or are improving. And the more spent on recovery, the more likely the species was to recover.

Now is not the time to rip the entrails out of the Endangered Species Act, which was signed into law by a noted tree-hugger named Richard Nixon.

Shortly before dying, Hamlet notes a "special providence in the fall of a sparrow." The great Dane had finally decided to act. But his action was both tardy and inappropriate. Pombo's bill would replicate the error. In the United States, meanwhile, two species of sparrow are already extinct.