



Species Act succeeds with flying colors

-Ben Long

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The Endangered Species Act - which is being reviewed by Congress this week - is a soaring success. Just look up.

Look skyward for a while and you might spy an American bald eagle. Hundreds of them live in my home state of Montana. Across the United States, the bald eagle is a living, flying example of what works about the Endangered Species Act.

Rep. Richard Pombo, R-Calif., is spearheading the effort to change the landmark, 30-year old anti-extinction law. "The act isn't working to recover species now," Pombo said in a recent speech in Washington state. "At the same time it has caused a lot of conflicts."

Pombo evidently spends too much time inside his stuffy Washington office. If he got out in the forests and rivers more, he might know the story of the bald eagle.

The American symbol was listed as endangered in 1978. That year, surveys turned up only 12 bald eagle nests in all of Montana. Then, environmental laws such as the Endangered Species Act and a federal ban on the pesticide DDT kicked in. They protected the birds from chemical poisoning, destruction of habitat and needless, wasteful killing.

The results were gradual, but dramatic. By 2005, the number of bald eagle nests in Montana multiplied to 300 nests - 25 times the number before the bird was included on the endangered species list.

That's just one state. Eagles were similarly successful in other states as well. In 1999, the bald eagle's status was upgraded from "endangered" to "threatened." If trends continue, they will soon be officially recovered and all America will celebrate.

Today, Montana is one of the top 10 eagle-producing states in the United States. In a recent winter, I watched more than 30 eagles clean up a carcass in a rancher's back pasture. Bald eagle congregations have been tourist attractions at places like Canyon Ferry and Libby dams, where they feed on fish in the winter.

No matter how many times I see a bald eagle on the wing, I am taken aback by its beauty - and thankful for the Endangered Species Act.

Conflicts over endangered species make headlines. Success happens in quiet obscurity. But over time, the successes are dramatic indeed.

Gray wolves are another Endangered Species Act success story in the northern Rockies. Wiped out by over-zealous predator control a century ago, wolves began trickling back into Montana in the 1980s. Now, there are hundreds of wolves in western Montana, and more in neighboring Idaho and Wyoming.

Because Montana stepped up to the plate and agreed to manage these animals for the future, the federal U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service recently handed wolf management over to the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks. This is evidence of the flexibility built into the law.

While I don't like to see any animal needlessly wasted, I respect that ranchers need to protect their stock to make a living. The Endangered Species Act has allowed wildlife managers to kill problem wolves - even wipe out entire packs that made a habit of killing livestock.

We humans now dominate planet Earth. We share a responsibility not to push species into extinction. For 30 years, the Endangered Species Act has helped keep America the rich and beautiful land we love. My 17-month-old son loves watching finches and chickadees at the feeder outside our kitchen window. He will grow up also watching bald eagles, some perching on a snag close to our backyard.

What a change. When I was a kid, the only eagle I ever saw was on the back of a quarter.

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