



Sunday, September 11, 2005

Endangered Species: A law that works

SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER EDITORIAL BOARD

There can be no slacking. America must continue saving endangered and threatened species.

Despite the claims of Republican congressional leaders, the Bush administration and property rights activists, the country has no need to modernize the Endangered Species Act. Likewise, there's absolutely no need to streamline the law, simplify it or drastically revise it.

To be sure, none of those ideas are completely lacking in merit. But they aren't valid starting points for any revisions to the act.

The one requirement is to maintain an effective deterrent to those in business, industry and government who plunder the environment. In the Northwest, that means, among other things, salmon protection, saving old-growth trees and keeping the orca population of Puget Sound viable.

As President Bush likes to say in many contexts, it is important to set clear expectations. In this country, we don't kill off species. Period.

The Endangered Species Act has provided great help in allowing Americans to live more respectfully with the environment, while continuing to accommodate population growth, greater mobility and an often-dynamic economy.

As the Post-Intelligencer's Robert McClure reported last week, Republicans in the U.S. House of Representatives look at the fall congressional session as the time when they can finally achieve their goal of revising the law. In fact, some of them, such as U.S. Rep. Richard Pombo of California, have been itching for this fight since at least 1995.

These days, Pombo, the powerful chairman of the House Resources Committee, manages to tone down his rhetoric about the law. He talks more about improving the law than freeing landowners from restrictions. But the only way he can earn trust is with legislation that, no matter what else it includes, provides at least as strong protections to the environment as the current law.

Philosophically, we agree with the idea that government ought to act more in partnership with landowners, companies and local governments. Saving the great and small creatures of the United States' land, air and water is a shared responsibility.

As critics point out, the act hasn't restored many threatened species to robust health. If consensus can be found, it's possible that Congress could craft better ways of restoring endangered species. But the starting point must be to prevent extinction. On that basic responsibility, Congress must not mess with the Endangered Species Act's great success.