

# The Star-Ledger

## Editorial

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## Endangering species

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In 1973, Congress and President Richard Nixon came together to temper the rapid extinction of fish, wildlife and plants -- America's biological heritage. The result was the Endangered Species Act, and it's been on the hit list of the political patrons of developers and landowners ever since.

The act now faces its gravest threat, courtesy of Rep. Richard Pombo (R-Calif.), who wants to turn the law topsy-turvy, promoting development over conservation.

The Pombo bill would weaken protections for habitat, the land and water areas that are crucial for species' survival. Developers could speed ahead with construction, no matter what the wildlife consequences, if the federal Fish and Wildlife Service fails to answer certain scientific questions within 90 days. This deadline is deliberately impossible.

Developers would be entitled to compensation if they are barred from building because a protected species calls their property home. Without ironclad safeguards, this would create an invitation to fast-buck artists to buy land to collect public money.

Critics say the Endangered Species Act is a failure because few of the 1,200-plus critters on the endangered list have returned to robust population levels. But most creatures don't make the list until their numbers are shockingly low, and restoring a population can take 100 years or more.

That said, the law is far from perfect. Red tape and delays are common. Congress has never provided the money needed to do the thorough planning that helps species flourish. And programs offering sensible incentives to protect endangered species can be made more attractive to property owners.

Pombo, who will hold a hearing today, is pushing for a vote in the House of Representatives as early as next week. There will be pressure on every Republican in the House to go along.

The House's moderate Republicans, including Reps. Rodney Frelinghuysen (R-11th Dist.) and Jim Saxton (R-3rd Dist.), must resist the strong-arm tactics and continue to be strong voices for the environment.

The Endangered Species Act was written 32 years ago to ensure every species can continue to make its own unique contribution to the nation's ecology. That wise goal won't be safe until Pombo's "reform" is made extinct.