

The Endangered Species Act

The Endangered Species Act is one of the most popular and effective environmental laws ever enacted. It is a commitment by the American people to work together to protect and restore those species that are most at risk of extinction.

We humans have always been a part of nature. We evolved in wilderness among plants and animals that have existed for thousands of years. Unfortunately, the natural systems we depend on are at risk, and plants and animals worldwide are disappearing. In the United States alone, hundreds of plant and animal species, including the eastern elk, the passenger pigeon, and the California grizzly bear, have become extinct since the time of the first European settlements. In fact, scientists estimate that 539 species have gone extinct in the United States in the past 200 years.

The Endangered Species Act provides us with hope that we can not only slow these extinctions, but also restore our native wildlife. The ESA provides common sense and balanced solutions for government agencies, landowners and concerned citizens to protect and restore endangered species and their habitat. It is based on three key elements – listing species as threatened or endangered, designating habitat essential for their survival and recovery, and ultimately restoring healthy populations of the species so they can be removed from the list.

The ESA works, with citizen involvement, to preserve not only large and charismatic species, like grizzly bears and bald eagles, but those that are small, equally unique, and beautiful, such as the southwestern willow flycatchers and small whorled pogonias. The far-sighted vision of the Endangered Species Act is that all these species will not merely survive in the sterile confines of zoos but thrive in the natural, wild environments where they evolved over millions of years.

The protection afforded by the ESA currently extends to over 1,200 species, and most of them have completely recovered, partly recovered, had their habitat protected or had their populations stabilized or increased as a result. As important, millions of acres of forests, beaches, and wetlands – those species' essential habitats – have been protected from degradation and development.

Because it preserves plants, animals and the ecosystems they depend on, the Endangered Species Act is perhaps the most powerful and most significant environmental legislation ever passed in the United States. In some ways, it has also been the most successful, despite the fact that its potential has not even been tapped due to decades of underfunding and intransigence. Despite attacks from right-wing think tanks, some members of Congress, and extractive industry spokespeople, more than three quarters of Americans support a strong Endangered Species Act. The Endangered Species Act is the United States' best tool for reducing the rate of extinction.