



DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

Fish and Wildlife Service

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ENDANGERED SPECIES ACT MARKS 20TH ANNIVERSARY WITH STRING OF SUCCESSES

Two decades ago, the bald eagle, American alligator, gray whale, and peregrine falcon seemed destined for extinction. Twenty years have passed since the Endangered Species Act became law, and today the alligator no longer needs the protection of the Act. The bald eagle, gray whale, and peregrine show great promise of returning to healthy numbers.

"The Endangered Species Act is one of this country's most successful conservation laws," said Mollie Beattie, director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Interior Department agency charged with implementing the Act. "Without the Act in place, we might have lost our national symbol along with many other lesser known species and with them many important ecosystems."

In fact, four species have recovered to the point that they no longer need the Act's protection, while 17 have been upgraded from endangered to the less serious threatened category. And more success stories are on the way.

"In 1993 alone, the Fish and Wildlife Service has been able to propose removing one species, the arctic peregrine falcon, from the list, as well as upgrading seven species to threatened," Beattie said. "I expect these numbers to climb dramatically over the next several years as more and more listed species begin to reach recovery goals."

(over)

Other species that once teetered on the brink of extinction are responding well to efforts to save them. The whooping crane, down to only 16 birds in the 1940s, now numbers more than 250 in wild and captive flocks. Found only in zoos for a number of years, the California condor once again soars high above the mountains of southern California. And the red wolf, which had to be rescued from extinction through a last-minute removal of animals from the wild, is again roaming native haunts in the Southeast.

Black-footed ferrets, small mammals that once inhabited vast stretches of the Great Plains, were thought to have become extinct by the 1970s. But in 1981, a farmer's dog killed a ferret, leading biologists to discover a tiny remnant population near Meeteetse, Wyoming. Ten years later, captive breeding programs paid off with a reintroduction of black-footed ferrets into the wilds of Wyoming's Shirley Basin.

Innovative cooperative management efforts between government and private interests are also producing dramatic results for species recovery. The Georgia-Pacific Company recently announced it would manage millions of acres of its forestland in the Southeast using measures aimed at meeting the habitat needs of the endangered red-cockaded woodpecker. In return, the company has been assured its timber activities meet applicable requirements of the Endangered Species Act.

This cooperative atmosphere has triggered increasing interest in development of habitat conservation plans and special rules, mechanisms of the Act that allow development projects and protected species to co-exist. Habitat conservation plans, formulated by agricultural, developmental, or other interests, allow projects to go forward in areas occupied by listed species as long as the species' overall welfare is maintained. Plans are already in place for such species as the northern spotted owl, desert tortoise, and Florida scrub jay, with dozens of others in the works. A special rule under the Act is providing similar but larger-scale planning for the coastal California gnatcatcher, which lives in several densely populated southern California counties.

"What we've come to understand over the past 20 years is that this country's economic vitality is ultimately dependent on its overall environmental health," said Beattie. "When we list a species, regardless of what that species is, we're getting a clear signal that the natural resources we ourselves depend on--clean air, adequate water, a healthy diversity of life--are truly in jeopardy. By ensuring the continued existence of endangered species, we ultimately ensure our own survival."