

FACT SHEET

POLICY BASICS: WILDLIFE



Our country has been blessed with a rich array of plant and animal life, which supports our economy through expenditures on recreational activities. But in the early 1970s, the future was not bright for many of these species. The bald eagle—our national symbol—was on the verge of disappearing, and only a few hundred grizzly bears could still be found in the contiguous states.

Fortunately, since then, the enactment of the Endangered Species Act (ESA) and other environmental laws has saved hundreds of our nation’s species. But many are still threatened or endangered, and pervasive problems including habitat loss, the burgeoning international wildlife trade, rampant use of harmful pesticides, indiscriminate killing of native carnivores, and the introduction of incompatible, invasive species are worsening the situation. These growing problems, combined with chronically inadequate budgets and innumerable legislative assaults, mean we must do everything in our power to protect our nation’s wildlife and the laws that defend it.

PRIMARY STATUTES

Endangered Species Act

The ESA prohibits the “take” (i.e., killing or harming) of threatened and endangered species and requires action to recover listed species, including through habitat conservation. It is administered by the U.S. Department of Interior’s Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) for terrestrial and freshwater species and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s (NOAA) National Marine Fisheries Services for marine species.

Lacey Act

The Lacey Act prohibits the import, export, sale, acquisition, and purchase of fish, wildlife, or plants that are taken, possessed, transported, or sold in violation of U.S. or Indian law. It also prohibits interstate and foreign commerce in fish, wildlife, or plants taken, possessed, or sold in violation of State or foreign law.

Other statutes that protect species include the Marine Mammal Protection Act, which prohibits the take and import of marine mammals, and the Migratory Bird Treaty Act and Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act, which forbid the take, import/export, and purchase/sale of migratory birds and bald and golden eagles and their parts, nests, and eggs. Additionally, the National Invasive Species Act and Clean Water Act regulate the introduction of invasive species into U.S. waters through ballast water discharge from ships—a very common point of entry for such species.

MAJOR POSITIVE EFFECTS

- The ESA has saved hundreds of species from extinction, including the grizzly bear and bald eagle.
- Only 10 of nearly 2,000 imperiled plants and animals protected under the Act have gone extinct since its enactment—a success rate of more than 99 percent.
- Wildlife-related recreation generates nearly \$145 billion a year.
- By protecting wildlife and habitat, the ESA protects plants and animals that may someday cure fatal diseases, like the endangered Houston toad, whose serotonin and alkaloids treat heart and neurological diseases.
- The Lacey Act helps protect species by imposing harsh criminal penalties on wildlife traffickers.

MAJOR CONCERNS

Habitat Loss

Habitat loss—due mainly to agriculture, land conversion for development, water development (e.g., dams and other water diversions), pollution (e.g., pesticides), and global warming—is the one of the top threats to imperiled species. When habitat is lost or becomes fragmented, it is difficult for species to find food and mates, leading their populations to plummet.

Illegal Wildlife Trade

The international illegal wildlife trade is the second-greatest threat to our world's species. Each year, hundreds of millions of plants, fish, and animals are captured or killed and sold on the international market as food, pets, decorations, leather, medicine, and more. This trade is driving a number of species including elephants and rhinos toward extinction. It also fuels violence and unrest in other countries and threatens American interests, given the strong evidence that extremist groups rely on wildlife trafficking for funding. Unfortunately, the United States contributes to this epidemic as one of the world's largest markets for trafficked wildlife.

Invasive Species

Almost half of our nation's threatened and endangered species are at risk primarily due to invasive species—living organisms that are not native to an ecosystem and cause harm to that ecosystem. Traveling through ship ballast water, wildlife trade, and wood product shipments, invasive species wreak havoc on ecosystems and cost the United States tens of billions of dollars annually.

Traps and Poisons

Body-gripping traps, snares, and poisons are used by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Wildlife Services and others to kill tens of thousands of native carnivores such as wolves and coyotes every year. These inhumane devices also unintentionally injure and kill pets and federally protected species like eagles. These actions negatively impact ecosystems and do not effectively reduce livestock-predator conflicts in the long term.

UPCOMING ISSUES

Endangered Species Act Defense

The last session of Congress saw an unprecedented number of efforts to weaken the ESA, including attempts to exempt certain species from the Act's protections, make the Act less protective, and prevent FWS from safeguarding species that should be protected. Congress must defend against similar endeavors this session.

Adequate Funding for ESA Implementation

Funding cuts to the FWS and NOAA budgets have resulted in outdated recovery plans, years of delays in listing vulnerable species, inadequate agency consultations with other agencies under Section 7, and insufficient follow-up monitoring of ESA conservation plans. Further, the budgets of FWS's Law Enforcement section and International Affairs Programs must be restored so the agency can penalize wildlife traffickers and help foreign countries ward off poachers.

Wildlife Trade

The United States has taken great strides to end elephant poaching by imposing a near-total ban on the U.S. commercial ivory trade. Congress should vigorously oppose attempts to block or undermine these actions, including the Executive Order on Combating Wildlife Trafficking and the revised ESA Section 4(d) rule for African elephants. Further, Congress should pass legislation that removes the profit from wildlife trafficking by allowing law enforcement officials to seize financial gains of prosecuted wildlife traffickers and direct these funds to conservation.

Traps and Poisons

NRDC supports legislation limiting use of body-gripping traps, snares, and predator poisons (e.g., Compound 1080, sodium cyanide) and redirecting funding for Wildlife Services' predator control program to nonlethal conflict-prevention measures.

Invasive Species

Legislation attempting to exempt the shipping industry's ballast water discharges from the Clean Water Act should be rejected, as it would dramatically increase the risk of costly, devastating invasive species in our waters.

PUBLIC OPINION

- In a 2015 poll conducted by Tulchin Research, 90 percent of respondents supported the ESA, including 96 percent of those identifying as liberals, 94 percent of moderates, and 82 percent of conservatives.
- In the 2015 Tulchin poll, nearly 70 percent of respondents said they were more likely to vote for a pro-ESA member of Congress.
- A 2017 poll conducted by Hart Research revealed that more than 80 percent of respondents viewed saving at-risk wildlife from extinction as an important goal for the federal government.
- In the 2017 Hart poll, approximately 75 percent of respondents who identified as swing voters opposed dismantling protections for at-risk wildlife.