



Extinction and the Endangered Species Act: A Summary

Capping two years of research, the Center for Biological Diversity released a report on May 1, 2004 identifying all species that became extinct or missing in the first 21 years of the Endangered Species Act. The number — 108 — is shockingly high and indicates a grave failure in federal management of the nation's most powerful environmental law.

While only 21 percent of the extinctions involved species on the endangered species list, a full 79 percent were not on the list. Lacking legal protection, recovery plans, critical habitat, and recovery funding, these species went extinct due a lack of commitment and attention. "Virtually all of these species could have been saved if the Endangered Species Act was properly managed, fully funded and shielded from political pressure," said Kieran Suckling, executive director of the Center for Biological Diversity and one of three authors of the paper. "Instead they were sacrificed to bureaucratic inertia, political meddling, and lack of leadership."

Highlights of the study:

- Lengthy listing delays, sometimes as long as 20 years, contributed to the extinction of 83 species.
- Seventy-nine percent of all plants and animals to become extinct since 1973 were not listed as endangered species.
- Seventy-seven percent of those species were known to be endangered, but protection was repeatedly delayed for 10 or 20 years until extinction occurred.
- Eighty-five species became extinct with no Endangered Species Act protection.
- Twenty-four species became extinct while waiting on the federal candidate or warrant review list.
- Seventeen species became extinct while the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service illegally delayed processing of petitions to protect them.
- In some cases, the agency knew the delay would cause extinction, but chose to do so rather than confront powerful political interests.

"Listing delays and extinctions have plagued the Fish and Wildlife Service for 30 years," said Brian Nowicki, coauthor of the paper, "but the Bush administration has pushed the crisis to an unprecedented level. It has virtually shut down the listing program, placing an average of just nine species on the list per year. The Clinton administration averaged 65 listings per year, Bush Sr. averaged 59, and even Reagan mustered 32. It's a disgrace."

The primary zones for extinction were the Pacific Islands, the western United States, and the Southeast. Hawaii suffered almost half of all the extinctions. California ranked second. Southern states, including Texas, Alabama, and Florida, also ranked high.

The Center for Biological Diversity called upon the Bush administration to fully fund the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's request for \$153 million to list all species waiting for protection on the federal candidate list. The Bush administration asked Congress for just \$17 million. We also called on the administration to immediately propose listing for all candidate species for Endangered Species Act protection and to develop a five-year plan to finalize protection for them all.