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Unwitting landowners pose threat to endangered species



We read disturbing reports about landowners purposefully destroying endangered species: A Florida developer shoots all the individuals of a species of endangered bird living on his land so he can obtain building permits; sheep ranchers in Montana poison bald and golden eagles that prey on young lambs; western landowners systematically eradicate endangered tortoises from their land so it can be developed; and so on.

Although these horrible accounts receive a large amount of media attention, they are the exceptions. The biggest threat to endangered species that make their homes on private land is not malicious landowners but the inadvertent destruction of habitat.

"I can think of so many examples where people are unknowingly affecting endangered species populations, but only a few examples where people are intentionally trying to hurt endangered species," said Dennis Figg, endangered species coordinator for the Missouri Department of Conservation.

Many people don't realize that their land is suitable habitat for an endangered species. "People do things they don't know they shouldn't do," commented Figg. "They hay a grassland at the wrong time because they don't know that an endangered species is using it. Or

they drain a low part of a field, not knowing that an endangered wetland plant was there."

When landowners are informed that their land is home for an endangered or rare species, they often are willing to accommodate. "The vast majority of people are concerned, helpful and want to do the right thing by endangered species," said Figg.

In 1992, the Missouri Department of Conservation (MDC) initiated a pilot program to inform landowners who have endangered species populations on their land. During the program, MDC biologists worked with interested landowners to develop management plans. These plans provided landowners with detailed information about the species that live on their land and how land-use practices could be tailored to protect these species.

Although MDC's program was not continued beyond the pilot stage, most of the landowners reached during the program were interested in knowing that an endangered species was on their property and wanted to see that species continue to share their land.

Landowners who have endangered species on their property rarely want the public to know about it. For example, public attention to a local bald eagle's nest or patch of rare orchids might encourage unwanted

sightseers to trespass on private land. Unguided sightseers could also disturb, or even destroy, the endangered species they seek to observe.

"I talked to someone not too long ago who has Ozark cavefish on their property. They haven't told any of their neighbors, but they are very sincere about protecting and managing the Ozark cavefish," noted Figg.

While the Endangered Species Act was primarily designed to protect species that live on public lands, some parts of the act allow action to protect endangered species on private lands. In some cases, the federal government can prevent citizens from destroying habitat used by an endangered species. For such "taking" of property rights to occur, the government must prove that an endangered species population is being harmed and must also provide monetary compensation to the landowner. As you can imagine, this process usually takes several years in the courts. Clearly the best solution is not litigation, but cooperation.

Most of Missouri's endangered species occur on private lands. The concern and cooperation of landowners is an essential part of preserving Missouri's rare and endangered species. For more information on Missouri's endangered species, write the Missouri Department of Conservation, PO Box 180, Jefferson City, Mo., 65102-0180.

If you have a suggestion for a column, a gripe, a success story or whatever, write it down and send it to me, care of the Columbia Daily Tribune, PO Box 798, Columbia, Mo., 65205.