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Endangered species are signs of bigger problems



"The beauty and genius of a work of art may be reconceived, though its first material expression may be destroyed; a vanished harmony may yet again inspire the composer; but when the last individual of a race of living things breathes no more, another heaven and another earth must pass before such a one can be again."

— William Beebe

There are 476 plant and animal species listed as rare or endangered in Missouri. They have become scarce for a variety of reasons, including excessive hunting — mainly in the 19th century — habitat destruction and the invasion of non-native, exotic species.

These rare and endangered species are truly the jewels in Missouri's natural treasure chest. One species is the prairie mole cricket, an odd little insect that lives in the western region of the state. While most crickets have legs that are specialized for jumping, the legs of the prairie mole cricket are adapted for digging in the soil of tallgrass prairies, where it feeds on plant roots. This unique cricket grows up to 2½ inches long and is one of the largest insects in North America.

The mole cricket has declined because of the destruction of its habitat — Missouri's tallgrass prairies — and is currently listed as a rare species. However, its numbers have stabilized because of the protection of Missouri's remaining tallgrass prairie.

The Missouri Department of Conservation is farsighted enough to recognize that an endangered or rare species often is not an isolated problem but a symptom of an overstressed ecosystem. Therefore, the department's efforts aim to restore the quality, and sometimes increase the quantity, of the habitat in which an endangered species lives.

A recent article in the Missouri Conservationist illustrated how this philosophy is being used to help the Niangua darter, a small fish found only in Ozark streams.

"Are Niangua darters a problem because they are a threatened species? The answer is no. This small fish has declined because of water pollution and the diminishing stream resources in the Osage river system in the Missouri Ozarks. The decline of this fish is a signal we are overloading streams with sewage, grazing surrounding landscapes too heavily and overlooking activities like gravel removal that destabilize streambeds.

"There is a time and place for gravel operations, and grasslands can and should sustain grazing. Every community needs proper sewage disposal. All three needs are real, but they are often poorly met. The result is loss of streams and the diversity of the animals and plants that live in them. The Niangua darter is a signal we need cleaner streams."

When a species' existence becomes endangered, it is a clear indication that we are pushing an ecosystem's limit.

Being endangered doesn't mean the situation is hopeless. Animals such as the Palau dove and plants like the Rydberg Mil vetch and the purple-spined hedgehog cactus have recovered and been removed from the list of endangered species. In Missouri, the river otter, barn owl and alligator snapping turtle are on the rise.

You can observe a species that is on the increase in Missouri — the bald eagle — at one of the upcoming

Eagle Days. Each event runs from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. and features guided eagle watches, educational displays and a chance to see Phoenix, a bald eagle from the Dickerson Park Zoo.

There are three Eagle Days coming up: Jan. 9 and 10 at Table Rock Lake in Branson; Jan. 30 and 31 at Apple Shed Theater in Clarksville; and Feb. 6 and 7 at the Mingo National Wildlife Refuge in Puxico. For a map and more information write: Eagle Days, Missouri Department of Conservation, PO Box 180, Jefferson City, Mo. 65102-0180, or call 1-751-4115.

You can also get more information on Missouri's endangered species by writing to the department's Natural History Division at the address listed above.

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.