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Endangered Species Act must be strengthened



"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

"Fossil" Bill Kramer and his ilk constantly attack the Endangered Species Act as the source of national economic ruin and loss of private property rights. While failing to examine the issues seriously, he provides his audience with emotionally charged attacks on the eco-fanatics who supposedly are "running the government."

One egregious example is the blame hoisted upon the Endangered Species Act for the destruction of homes in California by wildfires last year. To preserve the habitat of an endangered kangaroo rat, the act prohibits removal of brush around open areas. Several landowners claimed they could have saved their homes from fire if they would have

been allowed to remove surrounding brush.

However, the General Accounting Office found that brush removal would not have saved any of the destroyed homes. Jessica Mathews of the Council on Foreign Relations summarized the GAO report in a recent Washington Post article.

"The riverside fire had 100- to 150-foot-high walls of flame and 80 mile-per-hour winds," wrote Mathews. "It consumed 12,000 acres in six hours. The fire easily leaped roads, highways, bare fields and the San Diego Canal. Clearing even 1,000 feet around homes could do little against winds able to carry burning embers a mile or more."

Yet, "Fossil" Bill and others continue to use erroneous claims about the wildfires to call for a gutting of the Endangered Species Act. The argument for strengthening the Endangered Species Act is a more powerful one.

If the act addressed biodiversity from an ecosystem level — ensuring the health of entire ecosystems instead of one or two species — fewer species would become endangered.

Like the canary in mines of old that warned the miners of a dangerous work environment, endangered species indicate that an ecosystem is already in great danger.

"The ESA is emergency room medicine where preventative care is needed," Mathews concluded. "When a population is down to its last few hundred individuals, there is little room for tradeoffs. Without the authority to act while a species is still in relatively good shape, the law loses most of its potential efficiency."

Opponents of the act argue that the species it protects are disappearing naturally. In fact, the earth's biodiversity is suffering from a man-made extinction that is beginning to rival extinctions in the planet's geologic history caused by ice ages and meteor impacts. Mathews noted in her article that more than 33 species have become extinct while awaiting protection under the Endangered Species Act.

The historically relentless and uncaring destruction of North America's biodiversity is sadly akin to that of Native-American cultures by white Europeans. During the 19th century, Native-American culture was seen as unimportant and an impediment to national prosperity. Our government sent out troops — often in direct violation of treaties — to destroy tribes.

The hallmark of this century has

been the destruction of wilderness and ecosystems. We're devouring an average of 200 acres of land every hour for development. We don't understand the ecosystems we are destroying and we don't realize their value. Our government's policies are often actually designed to encourage the destruction of ecosystems.

In 100 years, will posterity judge us as short-sighted fools or as caring stewards?

The battle for North America's biodiversity is being fought now. On one side are greed and partisan politics. On the other are wisdom and an appreciation for the natural world. Only forthright action by Congress to strengthen the Endangered Species Act can help to conserve our biological wealth.

Write your senators and representatives in Congress and tell them to support a strengthening of the Endangered Species Act. You can reach Sens. Kit Bond and Jack Danforth by writing them in care of the U.S. Senate, Washington, D.C., 20510. You can write Rep. Harold Volkmer in care of the U.S. House of Representatives, Washington, D.C., 20515.

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.