

KAMBER BLUE BUTTERFLY | JOHN AND KAREN HILL/USFWS/NOAA U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE



A variety of federal, state, local and international laws are in place to protect and manage wildlife and wildlife habitat. From local and state wildlife habitat conservation plans to the Endangered Species Act (ESA) and the Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) to the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), our government has recognized the importance of maintaining healthy ecosystems for wildlife, plants and humans alike.

With increased pressures from irresponsible, poorly planned development and air and water pollution threatening the health of our environment and the survival of individual species, we need strong laws now more than ever. As constituents, it is our duty to hold our elected officials responsible for upholding these laws and making sure protections for wildlife and habitat remain strong.

To fulfill our duty, we must communicate with members of Congress. There are several different ways to do this. You can effectively convey your concerns via personal letters or use e-mail to get in touch quickly. You can call them to register an opinion on urgent issues. And you can make a personal visit to their district or Washington, D.C., offices. Whatever route you choose, let the tips that follow guide you.

## Put It in Writing

Letter writing is still the most popular choice for communicating with Congress. You can write a personal letter, or participate in an organized campaign and send a signed postcard. You can mail, fax or e-mail your letter. Each method has its positives and negatives and is treated differently depending on the office. The most important thing is that your message is getting to Congress.

Regardless of the method you use to write your legislator, you must include the following basics:

- **The purpose of your communication.** Address only one issue in each letter, and, if possible, keep it to one page.
- **Your personal perspective.** Tell your representative why you care about this issue and why they should. Tell them if you're interested in birding or wildlife watching, science or economics.
- **The associated bill number if there is one (for example H.R.#, or S.#)**
- **Your full name and return address.**

**Also be sure to properly address your letter:**

### To a senator:

The Honorable [full name]  
(Room #) (name of) Senate Office Building  
U.S. Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator [full name]:

### To a representative:

The Honorable [full name]  
(Room #) (name of) House Office Building  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representative [full name]:

## Pick Up the Phone

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To find your legislators' local and Washington, D.C., phone numbers, search the online congressional directory at <http://thomas.loc.gov/>, or call the U.S. Capitol switchboard at 202-225-3121. Ask to be connected to your senator's and/or representative's office. Then ask to speak with the aide who handles the issue on which you wish to comment, as members of Congress are often difficult to reach.

Identify yourself by name as a constituent and tell the aide that you would like to leave a brief message such as: "Please tell Senator/Representative (Name) that I support the Endangered Species Act and oppose any attempts to weaken protection for wildlife and habitat." Briefly state your reasons for your opinion and ask for your senator's/representative's position. You can also request a written response to your call.

## Meet Face to Face

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Most legislators are eager to meet with their constituents. Your opinions are valuable to them, and by meeting with them you can be very influential. Keep in mind that you don't have to be an expert to get your point across. The message you bring to a meeting is that of a concerned, voting constituent.

You can schedule a meeting in your legislator's local office or travel to Washington, D.C. You can also attend an open house or town hall meeting hosted or attended by your member of Congress. Keep in mind that sometimes you won't get to meet directly with the elected official, but instead will see a member of his or her staff. These people are important advisors to the legislator on issues and the concerns of their constituents.

Whether you meet with the member or a staff person, be prepared to answer these basic questions with conviction:

- **What is the issue?** Be ready to briefly discuss the principles of the issue. Know your facts, and be prepared with anecdotal information. Remember, members of Congress and Capitol Hill staffers learn about dozens of issues every week. It is critical that you tell a compelling story. Don't be afraid to say, "I don't know." It's always better to get back to someone with the correct answer (which also provides you with another opportunity for contact) than to be inaccurate.
- **Why should I care?** Clearly articulate the reasons why your member of Congress should care about your issue. If possible, make the issue local—talk about how and why it's important to their district/state and their constituents. Highlight issues that are personally important to the legislator. Is he or she a birder, hiker or scientist? Is there any other sort of personal connection with wildlife or the outdoors?
- **What do you want me to do about it?** It is vital to be clear on what you're asking the member of Congress to do. It could be any number of things: sponsor a bill, sign a letter, speak to their colleagues or with the media about the issue, etc.—but you have to remember to ask for exactly what you want.

When you lobby a congressional office, you're part lawyer, part salesperson and part cheerleader. You must make your case and provide the information and encouragement needed to sell legislators on your issue. As a constituent, you're a particularly effective lobbyist because you're also a voter. Voters can have much more leverage than the "inside-the-beltway" crowd. Remember, what is most important is your personal story and passion for the issue, not your expertise on all the details. Combine that with the following keys to lobbying success and you're sure to be effective.

## KEYS TO SUCCESSFUL LOBBYING

- **Be prepared.** Do your homework before the meeting. Know a little about the congress person you're lobbying (priorities, committee assignments, district/state information, relevant legislation sponsored or introduced). Have materials available to help make your case—without information overload. Have a good understanding of the opposition to your issue so you can better defend your position.
- **Be patient.** Be prompt but flexible. Members' schedules are tightly packed, so if interruptions occur during your meeting, be patient. If a member has to leave, you can always ask to speak with the staff person in charge of the issue.
- **See a staffer.** You may not get face time with the member of Congress, but instead meet with a staff person. Aides are the eyes and ears of the legislator and can be influential whatever their age or experience level.
- **Be positive.** Start with a compliment. If possible, thank the member for a good stand he or she recently took on an issue. If you voted for the member, mention that.
- **Keep it brief and basic.** Typical meetings last anywhere from 10 to 20 minutes. You don't have a lot of time, and you don't want to over-

load a busy legislator with too much information. In addition to keeping it short, keep your meeting focused on the message you're there to present. If anyone strays off the topic, try to refocus on the reason you're there.

- **Listen.** A good lobbyist not only talks, but also takes time to listen. Listening allows you to gauge the level of interest and knowledge of the member/staffer on your issue and provides an opportunity for you to engage in open discussion.
- **Get a commitment.** Conclude your meeting by securing a commitment from the member/staffer on the issue to sign a letter, cosponsor a bill, stay off a bill, etc. Also ask for the opportunity to follow up with staff and to provide additional information/material that would be helpful.
- **Follow up.** Write a note expressing your thanks for the meeting and repeating your request for a commitment. Also include any additional requested information.



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## Don't Forget

- Defenders of Wildlife can provide you with information and materials, but your passion and commitment to wildlife and conservation are your biggest selling points.
- Whether you phone, write or visit, ask for a response. Press your legislators to tell you how they plan on voting and why.
- If your legislator votes your way on issues that are important to you, express your thanks. Your gratitude shows legislators that constituents DO pay attention to what they're doing in Washington, D.C., and that they have the support of people in their district who care about the issues and appreciate their work.
- Share what you've done with Defenders (use the Action Form on page 15). Your commitment and involvement inspire us and make us more effective in our work.



GRIZZLY BEARS | CHRIS SERWHEEN, U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE