Defenders of Wildlife

Economic Benefits of the ESA

Americans care very deeply about protecting our country's native wildlife. Sacrificing America's wildlife for short-term economic gain is a bad bargain. Economic cycles come and go, but extinction is forever.

What would happen without the ESA? Over nearly four decades, the ESA has brought hundreds of species back from the brink of extinction. Without the ESA, there would likely be no wolves, no grizzly bears, no Florida panthers. No bald eagles, no California condors, no peregrine falcons, no Florida manatees. No Pacific salmon, no cutthroat trout, no shortnose sturgeon. And the list goes on…

The ESA supports sustainable, local economies. Wildlife and resource management are inherently local activities, creating jobs and protecting the environment in communities across America. By preserving critical habitat for imperiled wildlife, the ESA also helps provide clean air and clean water, and protects our natural resources. The end result is healthier communities for our families and generations to come.

The ESA is often caricatured as a rigid, inflexible, and draconian law, but this couldn't be farther from the truth. Here's why:

1. THE ESA IS EXTREMELY FLEXIBLE.

The Endangered Species Act is one of America's most flexible environmental laws, providing many exceptions and alternatives that allow economic growth while continuing to protect America's wildlife heritage.

Ø *The Act allows the vast majority of development projects to proceed unaltered.*

Between 1998 and 2004, less than one percent of the 429,533 development projects that underwent Section 7 consultation were temporarily put on hold. Only one project could not proceed; the rest were implemented after modification.

Ø *Private citizens and businesses can obtain exemptions for impacts to protected wildlife.*

The Act identifies eight different types of activities that are eligible for exemptions. For example, habitat conservation plans protect important habitat for endangered species while enabling local economic development. The habitat conservation plan for East Contra Costa County in California represents an agreement among a diverse group of stakeholders, including ranchers, developers, environmentalists, cities, the county, and water and park districts. The plan will protect about 30,000 acres of habitat for 28 species, while giving the cities and county the right to urbanize 12,000 acres.

In west-central Idaho, private landowners who agree to voluntarily protect sage grouse are exempt from future legal requirements after the species is listed. Healthy sage grouse habitat is vital to hunting and fishing, which adds $7 billion each year to the Western economy.

Ø *The government must already consider the economic impacts of protecting critical habitat for imperiled wildlife.*

The Act not only requires the Secretaries of the Department of Interior and Commerce to consider the economic and national security impacts of a critical habitat designation, but it also allows them to exclude an area from critical habitat if the costs outweigh the benefits. For example, in designating critical habitat for 19 species of salmon and steelhead, the National Marine Fisheries Service excluded 1,987 miles of streams in the Pacific Northwest and 771 miles of streams in California. These exclusions

reduced the economic impact in the Northwest by $243.6 million and in California by $100.5 million.

Ø *States with the most listed species have still achieved tremendous economic growth.*

California, Florida, and Hawaii have among the highest number of federally listed species and were ranked in 2005 as among the states with the 15 highest economic growth rates. California and Florida were also among the four states with the highest gross state product. Both states also have some of the most comprehensive state laws on endangered species whose protections and requirements often go beyond federal ones.

2. THE ESA CREATES ECONOMIC BENEFITS BY PROTECTING WILDLIFE

By protecting wildlife and critical habitat, the ESA creates jobs for wildlife-dependent communities and protects plants and animals that may someday cure fatal diseases.

Ø *The Act provides millions of dollars each year for local communities.*

A 2006 study by University of Montana researchers found that the return of wolves to Yellowstone National Park brings an estimated $35 million in tourist revenue and double that once the money filters through the local economy. In Florida, the total economic value of maintaining healthy ecosystems in Clay, Duval, Putnam, and St. Johns counties exceeds $3 billion per year. Benefits include erosion control, maintenance of nutrient cycles, establishment of nurseries for fish and game species, and waste management.

Ø *The Act provides national economic benefits by boosting wildlife-related tourism.*

Wildlife-related recreation (hunting, fishing and wildlife watching) generated more than $120 billion in revenues in 2006. Wildlife watching alone generated almost $45 billion and provided more than 860,000 private sector jobs. Visitors to national parks, refuges, and other public lands spend $28 billion a year on fishing, hiking, hunting, and wildlife watching, leading to more than 400,000 private and public sector jobs.

Ø *The Act protects critical habitat for imperiled wildlife that provides clean air and clean water, prevents erosion and protects vital natural resources.*

The National Wildlife Refuge System alone, which is home to many threatened and endangered species, produces at least $46 billion per year in ecosystem service benefits. At the national level, annual benefits from ecosystem services total $33 billion from soil maintenance, $30 billion from insect pollination, up to $72,000 per acre in flood control, and $3 to $8 billion from the commercial value of products from natural and managed forests, including timber, fuel wood, game, fruits, nuts, mushrooms, and honey.

Ø *The Act protects plants and animals that may someday cure fatal diseases.*

Species from around the world have provided far-reaching benefits to human health. The pacific yew tree produces a toxin with anti-tumor properties that led to the development of Taxol, a natural cancer-treatment drug. Other species include the Madagascar periwinkle flower (Hodgkin's disease and childhood leukemia), mamala tree (anti-AIDS and cancer properties), purple foxglove flower (heart failure and heart disease), and Gila monster lizard (diabetes).The Act continues to play a vital role in protecting several species currently being studied, including:

- Crocodile blood, for use as a powerful antibiotic;
- Desert pupfish, for treatments for kidney disease; and
- Black bear, for prevention of osteoporosis.

Mary Beth Beetham, Director of Legislative Affairs, mbeetham@defenders.org, (202) 772-0231
John Motsinger, Communications Associate, jmotsinger@defenders.org, (202) 772-0288
Defenders of Wildlife, 1130 17th Street NW, Washington, DC 20036