



For Immediate Release
Monday, September 26, 2005

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New Legislation Threatens Endangered Species in PA

Wildlife Biologists Highlight the Role of the Endangered Species Act in the Bald Eagle's Recovery and Other Local Conservation Efforts

Kempton, PA — Wildlife biologists highlighted the crucial role of the Endangered Species Act in bald eagle recovery efforts in Pennsylvania during an educational tour of Hawk Mountain Sanctuary today. Environmental advocates present criticized new legislation that would weaken endangered species protections, saying that the “Threatened and Endangered Species Recovery Act of 2005,” introduced by House Resource Committee Chair Richard Pombo (R-CA) last week, would “eviscerate” the Endangered Species Act and have devastating effects on species recovery efforts in the region.

“The bald eagle’s remarkable recovery in Pennsylvania and surrounding states owes much of its success to the Endangered Species Act,” said Douglas Gross, a wildlife biologist specializing in endangered birds at the Pennsylvania Game Commission. “The habitat protections and reintroduction funds provided by the Act played key parts in the bald eagle’s comeback.”

The bald eagle is one of the best known and most easily-identifiable birds in the United States. Last century, it was nearly forced into extinction in most parts of the country due to hunting, habitat loss and poisoning from pesticides. Conservation and recovery efforts enabled by the federal Endangered Species Act helped lead to the bald eagle’s resurgence in the 1980s and ‘90s. This year, the Pennsylvania Game Commission reported a total of 94 documented bald eagle nesting pairs in 25 of the state’s 67 counties. With approximately 6,000 nesting pairs now thriving in the lower 48 states, steps have been taken to remove the bald eagle endangered species list.

“The bald eagle is a remarkable bird, and we couldn’t be happier with its recovery,” said Dr. Keith L. Bildstein, Director of Conservation Science at Hawk Mountain Sanctuary, who led the tour. “The number of bald eagles spotted at our lookouts has increased dramatically over the last two decades. It’s an example of just how effective environmental protections can be. Not too long ago, this bird was on the verge of extinction in the region.”

Since becoming law in 1973, the Endangered Species Act has protected more than 1,800 species from extinction. The law makes it illegal to “harass, harm, pursue, hunt, shoot, wound, kill, trap, capture or collect” species listed as threatened or endangered, and also works to prevent habitat loss and degradation. The Act is credited with the on-going recovery of species like the bald eagle, the American alligator, the gray whale, the whooping crane and the green sea turtle.

In spite of these benefits, the law has come under attack from timber companies and other large corporations that benefit from access to public lands. The legislation introduced by Rep. Pombo, currently being considered by Congress, would weaken the Endangered Species Act by:

- Repealing existing “critical habitat” provisions that protect endangered species on public lands.
- Letting federal agencies decide whether or not they will respect species recovery efforts.
- Eliminating important protections for species listed as “threatened” as opposed to endangered.

“The Pombo legislation is the one of the most serious attacks on endangered species protections in the past thirty years,” Caitlin Winans, Endangered Species Campaign Coordinator for National Environmental Trust. “This bill was written for the wealthy special interests that donate lots of money to members of Congress and expect to profit off of public lands in return. It is exactly the type of legislation that makes Americans so cynical about politicians.”

“The goal of the Endangered Species Act is not just to protect threatened and endangered species, but to aid in their ultimate recovery,” said Arthur Stamoulis, Director of Government Affairs for Clean Air Council, a statewide environmental group. “The bill being debated by Congress right now gives up on species recovery altogether. At its best, it would allow some species to continue teetering on the brink of extinction. You can expect to see much of the nation’s natural heritage disappear forever if this bill passes.”

“The Endangered Species Act saved America’s bird, the bald eagle, and it was just getting warmed up,” said Tim Schaeffer, Executive Director of Audubon Pennsylvania. “The peregrine falcon, whooping crane, and brown pelican are just a few of the species whose population numbers have improved since being placed on the endangered species list. The Endangered Species Act is an incredible conservation success story.”

The educational tour took place at Hawk Mountain Sanctuary, located in East-Central Pennsylvania along the Appalachian Flyway. The sanctuary is home to stunning mountain overlooks and world-renowned ornithological research facilities. More than 20,000 eagles, falcons, hawks and other raptors migrate through the sanctuary each autumn. The sanctuary is open to visits from the public. For more information, visit: www.hawkmountain.org.

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