

CAPITOL CONSERVATION

Wildlife Diversity Funding Initiative off to Congress

PROMINENT AMONG THE NATIONAL UNREST OF THE PAST SEVERAL MONTHS IS CRITICISM OF THE FEDERAL THREATENED AND ENDANGERED SPECIES PROGRAM. THE PRESS HAS FEATURED SEVERAL SITUATIONS WHERE APPLICATION OF THE LAW HAS DENIED VARIOUS PROPERTY OWNERS FLEXIBILITY TO MAKE DESIRED USE OF THEIR LANDS. ACTION GROUPS HAVE SPRUNG UP, SOME NO DOUBT ASSISTED BY VESTED INTERESTS, THAT ARE CALLING FOR SEVERE AMENDMENTS OF THE BASIC LAW AND/OR REGULATIONS UNDER WHICH THE PROGRAM IS ADMINISTERED. OF COURSE, PEOPLE RAILING AGAINST GOVERNMENT PROGRAMS IS NOT NEW. ONLY THIS TIME THE SITUATION SEEMS MORE EXTREME BECAUSE A RARE BUTTERFLY, OBSCURE PLANT OR SOME SUCH SUDDENLY ARISES AS AN OBSTACLE TO AN OWNER'S PLANS TO CONVERT PROPERTY TO SOME DIFFERENT AND MORE PROFITABLE USE.

There is a reason for the threatened and endangered wildlife and plant species program that many miss, particularly those people that have little or no regard for or understanding of the complexities of the natural world or the relevance of a "healthy" natural world to their personal well-being.

The following paragraphs, from the March 1995 issue of the Federal Department of the Interior's newsletter, "People, Land & Water", offer some impelling reasons why people should care: ...communities of native plants hold in reserve an irreplaceable gene pool that scientists can draw upon in their research for new medicines or improved agricultural crops. Of all medicinal drugs, 40 to 50 percent originate in wild plants, but only 2 percent of the world's plant species have been chemically analyzed. Only recently did scientists discover that a chemical called taxol, extracted from Pacific yew trees, is effective against a broad range of cancers. (And until recently timberland operators had been clearing

the Pacific yew as an undesirable pest plant.) Scientists can only speculate at the countless other medicines that are out there waiting to be discovered.

"Agricultural researchers also tap this native gene pool. At present, 90 percent of the world's food comes from a mere 20 plant species. To improve and protect these vitally important food crops, scientists add genetic material from selected native species. These new genes improve resistance to diseases, insect pests, and drought.

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"Native plants are an integral part of all ecosystems. Each species belongs to a carefully balanced system that supports other species. In a healthy ecosystem, plant and animal species interact to keep the system working properly. Birds feed on berries from shrubs; seeds from the berries are deposited by the birds, thus dispersing the shrubs. Earthworms churn up the soil, aerating it and improving plant growth; the plants drop their leaves, providing the earthworms with organic matter for food. The intricacy of ecosystems— each with thousands of

species of plants, animals, insects and bacteria — boggles the mind. There is no way to know beforehand what the loss of even one species will mean to an ecosystem and, subsequently, to species such as humans who rely on that ecosystem."

In an effort to get ahead of the threatened and endangered species curve — that is, waiting until an animal or plant species is in trouble before initiating conservation efforts — a coalition of national conservation organizations, including the International Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies and the Wildlife Management Institute, is seeking new funding to launch what it calls a wildlife diversity initiative. The group believes that \$350 million a year would help agencies prevent species from becoming endangered or extinct. The money will be raised, providing Congress agrees, from a surcharge on equipment and accessories used by the 160 million Americans who now enjoy the outdoors. It is estimated that various outdoor recreation equipment manufacturers presently earn \$18 billion annually from Americans' love for wildlife.

"A healthy future for wildlife means a healthy future for outdoor recreation and the businesses that depend on it," wildlife diversity funding advocates say. It is expected that a bill will be introduced in Congress and public hearings scheduled yet this year. The groups point to the successes of the long-established federal aid to sport fisheries and wildlife restoration programs, also funded through surcharges on rods, reels, firearms, ammunition and allied equipment as models for the wildlife diversity funding initiative. What with the current Congress' devotion to the user-pay principle, the initiative's advocates hold out hope for congressional approval. The adverse reaction of some manufacturers of the equipment on which a surcharge would be levied is expected.



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