



# *The Endangered Species Act*

## MORE THAN 40 YEARS OF SUCCESS

### BACK FROM THE BRINK IN THE SOUTHEAST

**F**or more than 40 years, the Endangered Species Act (ESA) has helped prevent the extinction of our national treasures. Because of the act, iconic species such as the bald eagle, peregrine falcon and American alligator are thriving once again. Hundreds of other species, including the manatee, Mexican gray wolf, black-footed ferret, California condor and whooping crane, are no longer on the brink of extinction. Such astonishing success makes the act a true symbol of our nation's commitment to protecting our natural heritage for future generations. It is also an example of the progress that can be made when we collaborate to conserve our local wildlife and habitat. With the participation of communities, businesses, conservationists, tribes and government agencies, we can preserve wildlife and still have a vibrant economy. But the biggest success is that all parties—both people and our most vulnerable creatures—have benefited from the ESA. Working together, we have saved hundreds of plants and animals for generations to come.



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#### Sea Turtles

All seven existing species of sea turtle, some of the oldest creatures on Earth, face significant threats from human activities and development. Capture, injury and drowning in commercial fishing gear is the leading

cause of death for sea turtles worldwide. But there are some bright spots, as we know that changes in fishing practices, when properly applied, can protect turtles.

Under the auspices of the ESA, the National Marine Fisheries Service has long required the use of turtle excluder devices (TEDs) in most shrimp nets. These innovative devices help turtles find their way out of shrimp nets, allowing the shrimp industry to continue to prosper even as Atlantic turtle populations begin to recover. Unfortunately, TEDs are not required in all shrimp nets or other fishing gear where they could save turtles from drowning. Once TEDs are required throughout the entire shrimp fishing industry, the pace of sea turtle recovery will accelerate.

Another fishery that has adversely affected sea turtles in the past is the long-line fishery which can have thousands of fishing hooks on each line in the water. The recent adoption of the use of circle hooks by the domestic long-line fishing fleet should significantly reduce the incidental take of sea turtles by making it much more difficult for turtles to become hooked on the line. These sorts of improvements in fishing gear demonstrate that it is possible to successfully conduct fishing operations while contributing to the conservation of sea turtles.

#### Manatee

The Florida manatee is an endangered marine mammal found in the coastal and riverine waters of Florida. This gentle sea cow is often mortally wounded by high-speed recreational boats and is threatened by the loss of warm-water sites that it depends on during cold weather. In response to being listed as an endangered species, significant resources from federal, state and local government agencies and the private sector have been directed towards research, protection and conservation of manatees. Beginning in 1980, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) identified areas that manatees use as warm-water refuges during cold weather. In 1983, the Crystal River National Wildlife Refuge was established to protect the manatee. In 2012, FWS protected manatees in the waters that surround the Crystal River refuge by designating all of Kings Bay and its tributaries a manatee refuge.

Since 2015, FWS and the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWCC) have created 25 manatee refuge and sanctuary areas. The FWCC has also added many other state speed zones and safe havens to its manatee protection regulations. Though still at risk, the manatee is around today largely thanks to the ESA.



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### Red-Cockaded Woodpecker

The red-cockaded woodpecker once flourished throughout the Southeast in the longleaf pine ecosystem. But clear-cutting, altered fire regimes and other changes in the regional environment left this group-dwelling bird with few places to live. As a result, the population dwindled, and the red-cockaded woodpecker was listed in 1970 under the law that preceded the ESA.

Since then, innovative partnerships involving state and local governments, military installations, private businesses and landowners, have helped the red-cockaded woodpecker population expand to nearly 6,000 groups.<sup>i</sup>

At Camp LeJeune, North Carolina, the Marine Corps has an active program to restore woodpecker habitat that still allows soldiers to train. Companies such as Georgia Pacific, Hancock Timber and the Pinehurst Resort and Country Club (former home of the U.S. Open Golf Tournament) have teamed up with FWS to establish conservation agreements that protect the red-cockaded woodpecker on their land throughout the Southeast region. It is through the ESA that these partnerships have been able to flourish. The outcome is that today more than 500,000 acres of private lands are part of efforts to restore this woodpecker to its native habitat.

<sup>i</sup> <http://www.fws.gov/rcwrecovery/files/rcwoodpecker.pdf>

<sup>ii</sup> <http://www.floridapanther.net.org/>

### Florida Panther

There are an estimated 100 to 160 Florida panthers left in the United States today.<sup>ii</sup> Once ranging across eight southeastern states, panthers were driven to near-extinction by settlers who killed them out of fear. The last remaining population of panthers east of the Mississippi River is now isolated in south Florida, although a few individuals are starting to move north.

The most critical threats to the Florida panther are destruction and fragmentation of habitat. Vehicle collisions—an indirect effect of habitat loss—are the major cause of panther deaths. To reduce the number of panthers killed on roads, the Florida Department of Transportation has installed wildlife crossings and fencing along portions of Interstate 75 and on SR29. Efforts are also underway to protect panther habitat and travel corridors, ensure that roads are safer for panthers and help people and panthers safely coexist.

To combat inbreeding, another threat to this big cat's survival, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission and FWS implemented an emergency genetic restoration program in 1995. The program was labeled a success, showing a marked reduction in the occurrence of inbreeding traits in the panther population. In fact, a recent University of Florida study concluded that without the genetic infusion from other cats, the odds for eventual extinction were high. Instead, the panther population is now slowly growing.

The ESA has been the catalyst for these programs that help ensure the Florida panther's survival. Protecting panthers also benefits many species of plants and animals that share the same habitat and the open space, fresh air and clean water that healthy lands provide.



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