

## 50 years after the Endangered Species Act, our fight against extinctions is only beginning

*By: Robin Ganzert and Jon Paul Rodríguez*

It has been 50 years since the Endangered Species Act became law, undoubtedly changing the trajectory of species throughout the United States. Conservationists are documenting tremendous progress, but much work remains.

NPR recently reported that Florida's wood stork "may soon fly off the endangered species list." Following habitat restoration, the bird's population has more than doubled since the 1980s. Similarly, Fender's blue butterfly — a gorgeous critter once thought to be extinct — has fluttered off the endangered species list after the insect's population has nearly quadrupled since 2000.

While these successes should be celebrated, it is not an indication that we should take our foot off the pedal. Much work remains; not only to protect the gains we have made but also to ensure we save the thousands of other species that are at risk of extinction.

Earth is tragically in the midst of its sixth mass extinction. More than three-quarters of Earth's species could disappear within the next 300 years. And while the previous five extinctions were the result of natural changes, humanity is playing a starring role in this one.

Alarmingly, roughly 1,000 species have been declared extinct — which may have triggered food chain domino effects that are difficult to stop. Every other species that relied on their existence will struggle because of the disappearance. In fact, a recent Reuters headline read, "Extinction crisis puts 1 million species on the brink."

Very few places left on Earth are still truly "wild" habitats. Civilization has forced entire ecosystems into smaller and smaller geographic areas. If we are not cautious about the balance within Earth's populations, we could create irrevocable alterations to the global ecosystem.

These extinctions are not limited in their devastation to the animal kingdom — plants and fungi are also in decline. Our food supplies depend on many at-risk species for pollination, healthy soil and other nature-based processes. Indeed, global food security relies upon biodiversity.

Fortunately, many brilliant people have dedicated their lives to protecting endangered species and ecosystems. And in the same way that biodiversity sustains the quality of the water we drink and the air that we breathe, targeting extinction requires a diverse pool of resources.

Today, conservationists receive support from policymakers through grants and legislation, from philanthropies through foundation contributions, as well as from the public through individual donations. Universities fund important research and educate the next generation of conservationists. Zoos, aquariums and botanical gardens lead important conservation efforts in the wild while also exposing the public to animals, fungi and plants they would never typically encounter — opening up hearts and minds to the wonders of the living world and reinforcing the value of sustaining it.

Conservation is some of the most important work done on this planet, but much of it goes unnoticed. And with all the immediate problems our world faces — from wars to earthquakes — it can be difficult to turn the spotlight on this issue. But extinctions are not a future problem; they're happening around us every day.

Our world sits in fragile balance and every extinction tilts the scales closer to catastrophe. Conservation must not take a back seat to whatever short-term headline is attracting clicks.

The Endangered Species Act may have been on the books for 50 years, but our fight against extinctions is only beginning. Lawmakers must start asking themselves what more can be done to ensure humanity is part of balanced ecosystems for centuries to come.

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