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## **EcoFocus: Endangered Species Act changes must be reversed**

By William H. Schlesinger

Like many people, my wife and I experienced some interesting conversation over holiday dinner with relatives - politics, economy and environment. While lingering over our meal, my sister announced in no uncertain terms the seashore belongs to people.

A frequenter of Cape Cod beaches, she is tired of encountering fenced-off areas set aside for the endangered piping plover. In her view, children rule, whether frolicking in the waves or building sandcastles near nesting sites.



Julia Hopson/For the Poughkeepsie Journal

I suppose the same logic could apply to those who believe all freshwater lakes belong to families with Jetskis. Never mind if these areas are also vital habitat for breeding loons. And why not open all forested areas to snow machines? Since Robert Frost died, no one stops by the woods for solitude on a snowy evening.

The reality is, in the face of our growing human population, a lack of protected areas for native species and pristine ecosystems would result in the loss of many North American plants and animals. Already 13 percent of mammals, birds and other vertebrates and 32 percent of invertebrates are imperiled in the United States.

If we lose them, we lose an important part of our natural heritage and key components of the balance of nature. The Endangered Species Act of 1970 established that non-human species have rights, too: The right to exist.

As Rick Ostfeld mentioned in the last installment of this column, the Bush administration is in the process of unraveling this important act. It has already removed one of its most crucial measures: the need for independent scientific review when determining if federal projects threaten protected plants and animals.

Starting this month, activities such as highway building, logging, mining and oil drilling can proceed on federal lands without input from the scientific community. This is a huge setback.

Just as I wouldn't want a bunch of ecologists to design a bridge without the help of engineers, I wouldn't want a bunch of engineers to assess environmental effects on our nation's natural areas without input from ecologists, conservation biologists and other scientific professionals.

The public overwhelmingly agrees with this sentiment. During the public comment period, 200,000 of the 235,000 comments received opposed the changes. We can only hope current setbacks are righted when the Obama administration takes over. Unfortunately, undoing the damage will be slow at best and questionable projects will be pushed through during this window of opportunity.

Species diversity matters. White-tailed deer were once kept in check by native wolves; now we depend on a dwindling number of hunters and the fenders of automobiles to take up the slack.

In their appetite for insects, songbirds keep forest pests under control. When animal diversity plummets, humans living in suburban areas become more vulnerable to infection from things such as Lyme disease and West Nile virus. Beneath your feet, several species of lowly denitrifying bacteria in a local wetland can cleanse the waters following through it and return harmless nitrogen gas to the atmosphere.

Each human bite into nature, which removes a species or a natural area, leaves our planet impoverished of the free services nature provides for the betterment of life on Earth. Each bite may seem inconsequential - we might easily overlook the loss of piping plovers on our next beach trip. And often we see the impact of others as more harmful than our own. But all of us should realize we are part of nature, not above it.

Collectively, the growing human population and our consumption of what is natural leave our planet less able to cleanse the air and water upon which we all depend, to stabilize our climate and to grow the food we eat, without expensive applications of energy and chemicals. When every beach has lost its piping plovers, is overrun with off-road vehicles and littered with flotsam trash from ocean dumping, beaches will cease to have meaning to the human spirit of young and old.

That is not the world I want to leave for future generations, nor is it a world that will ensure their survival.

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