

30 YEARS OF THE ENDANGERED SPECIES ACT

SEABEACH AMARANTH

For many plants, Endangered Species Act listing can mean the difference between slipping unnoticed into extinction and receiving the attention necessary to spur conservation efforts. Such is the case with the seabeach amaranth, which is now found in relatively secure numbers only in North Carolina.

HISTORY OF ENDANGERMENT

The seabeach amaranth occupies a very limited niche on barrier island beaches. As such, it is vulnerable to natural events such as hurricanes and to human alteration of its habitat.



Bill Adams/FWS

Like most imperiled plants, the seabeach amaranth is threatened primarily by continued habitat loss, particularly beach stabilization by bulkheads, seawalls, or artificial dune construction. On Assateague Island National Seashore, in Maryland and Virginia, the amaranth disappeared soon after the park service built sand dunes in the mid-1960s to block storm surges from crossing the island.

Once development limited suitable habitat, the remaining populations of seabeach amaranth became highly vulnerable to natural catastrophes. Beginning with Hurricane Hugo in 1989, a series of strong storms caused substantial storm-related erosion that threatened the heart of the amaranth's last large populations in the Carolinas.

ROAD TO RECOVERY

As early as 1983, seabeach amaranth was recognized as a candidate for En-

dangered Species Act protection, but it was not listed because of insufficient information to support a proposed rule. By time the amaranth was listed as threatened in 1993, the plant was believed to have been eliminated from six of the states in its range.

An Endangered Species Act listing drew attention from scientists and land managers to the special needs of the species and encouraged conservation actions from federal, state, and private agencies, conservation groups, and individuals. At the time of listing, almost half of the known populations occurred on federal land. Therefore, federal agencies had to consult with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) to ensure that any activities authorized, funded or carried out on the land did not jeopardize the species or adversely modify its habitat.

In 1996, the FWS approved a recovery plan for the seabeach amaranth that set goals, defined its habitat needs, and provided measures to protect existing populations and essential habitat from destructive alterations.

CONSERVATION TODAY

Recently, the plant has naturally re-established itself in Maryland and Delaware where it had not been seen for 100 years. The amaranth's seeds can survive for decades. When dispersed by the wind or ocean currents, its seeds can colonize areas far from existing populations. Efforts are now underway to restore the plant on barrier islands throughout the mid-Atlantic and to supplement pioneer populations in areas where the plant has re-established itself.

ECOLOGICAL VALUE

Seabeach amaranth has been described as a dune builder because it grows closer to the high tide line than any other coastal plant. Once established, it binds sand within its roots. One large plant can create a sand mound of two to three cubic yards, helping to stabilize beaches.

OUTLOOK FOR THE FUTURE

The seabeach amaranth continues to be threatened by construction of sea walls and dune fencing, development, fragmentation of habitat, heavy recreational use, and off-road vehicle use.

The seabeach amaranth's recovery plan calls for more research into the plant's ecology. Increased knowledge about the plant will better equip wildlife managers to monitor the plant, search for new populations, and re-establish populations within suitable habitats in its historic range.



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