

30 YEARS OF THE ENDANGERED SPECIES ACT

BALD EAGLE

Our national symbol, the bald eagle, is making a spectacular comeback from near-extinction thanks to the Endangered Species Act.

HISTORY OF ENDANGERMENT

Bald eagles suffered declines before the 1940s, beginning in the mid-to late 1800s. Biologists estimate that there may have been as many as 100,000 bald eagles in the lower 48 states before Europeans first arrived. Early population declines coincided with European settlement. Large-scale clear cutting operations and development in Canada and the United States destroyed bald eagle nesting habitat. Trophy and feather collection and shooting extirpated some eagle populations, and hunting of game reduced the amount of carrion available to wintering bald eagles. Persecution and reductions in prey availability caused population declines through the mid-1900s. The passage of the Bald Eagle Protection Act in 1940 slowed the rate of decline of bald eagles in most areas.

The most drastic decline occurred from the 1950s to the 1970s. The widespread use of DDT and other organochlorine chemicals caused wholesale reproductive failure, and by the early 1960s, fewer than 100 bald eagles were nesting in the northeastern United States.

ROAD TO RECOVERY

The bald eagle first received federal protection under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918. It was subsequently listed under the first federal endangered species law in 1967. But it was not until the Endangered Species Act of 1973 was passed, under which the eagle was listed as endangered in most of the lower 48 states, that agencies began to implement conservation measures to protect the bird.

Under the Endangered Species Act, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) ini-

tiated a captive breeding program that produced birds for release into the wild.

Habitat protection goals were included in federal bald eagle recovery plans. Under these plans, eagle populations were not considered recovered until a certain amount of breeding and wintering habitat was secured.



John & Karen Hollingsworth/FWS

Also, the plans designated buffers around nest sites. These habitat protection measures, which were only possible because of the Endangered Species Act, allowed rein-

troduction and monitoring programs to be successful.

CONSERVATION TODAY

Bald eagles are now found throughout the United States. The species was downlisted from endangered to threatened in the lower 48 states in 1995. In 1999 there were approximately 5,800 nesting pairs of bald eagles in the continental United States, indicating that populations of this magnificent raptor may be secure enough to remove it from the endangered species list altogether in the near future. Eagles in Alaska and Canada are already recovered.

ECOLOGICAL VALUE

Bald eagles are keystone predators in an ecosystem. They help to keep other bird populations, particularly cormorants and gulls, at bay in order to maintain the ecosystem's balance.

OUTLOOK FOR THE FUTURE

The bald eagle has now recovered to the point that it is proposed for delisting. However, the proposal has not been adopted because when the eagle's Endangered Species Act protections are lifted, there is no federal law that protects habitat. The Fish and Wildlife Service is revising the Bald and Golden Eagle Act to include better habitat protections, but eagles will remain a threatened species until the Act is amended.

The ongoing problems facing the species are habitat loss and toxic contamination of the environment. As development moves forward into the eagle's prime habitat, federal, state, and local governments will need to maintain their commitment to acquiring and managing vitally important lands.

The major sources of contamination, particularly DDT, have been controlled. However, chemical pollution still poses a threat to the species.



John & Karen Hollingsworth/FWS