

30 YEARS OF THE ENDANGERED SPECIES ACT

UTAH PRAIRIE DOG

The Utah prairie dog, located in southwestern Utah, exists today largely because of protection provided by the Endangered Species Act.

HISTORY OF ENDANGERMENT

The U.S. Bureau of Biological Survey decreed in 1902 that prairie dogs rob cattle of 50 to 75 percent of their forage. Thus ensued a tremendous extermination effort, largely implemented by the federal government, which featured as many as 120,000 people employed to poison prairie dogs in some years in the 1930s. This eradication effort was quite successful, with prairie dog acreage dwindling by 98 to 99 percent in the first half of the 20th century.

With the smallest range of the four prairie dogs inhabiting the U.S., the Utah prairie dog was especially harmed by this poisoning campaign, shooting, and the threat of sylvatic plague, which first appeared within the range of the Utah prairie dog in 1936. As a result, the Utah prairie dog dwindled from occupying 448,000 acres to only 6,977 acres by 1995. Population numbers dove from 95,000 individuals before the eradication programs to only 3,300 by 1972.



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ROAD TO RECOVERY

Endangered Species Act protections in 1973 prohibited the take of the prairie dog, helping the population to nearly triple by 1981 to 9,300 individuals. Subsequent years saw declines in prairie dog

numbers, yet the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) downlisted the species to threatened in 1984, in response to steady pressure from the state of Utah.

Had it not been for the Endangered Species Act's slowing down of the eradication program aimed at the Utah prairie dog, this species would likely have vanished altogether.

CONSERVATION TODAY

The Utah prairie dog colony in Bryce Canyon National Park is one of the most robust populations left, and it has been intensively studied. Research has found that prairie dogs reproduce slowly relative to other rodents, thus underscoring the need to increase protections for this small mammal.

Other researchers are trying to devise ways to confront the threat of plague, which is suspected to be a significant limiting factor in Utah prairie dog recovery. Prairie dogs have no immunity to this exotic disease.

Efforts are also underway by conservation organizations to upgrade the Utah prairie dog's status to endangered and to enhance private landowner incentives to conserve the species on private land.

ECOLOGICAL VALUE

Research on prairie dogs indicates that they have the most complex communication system of any non-human animal. The Utah prairie dog, like other types of prairie dogs, plays a keystone role in its ecosystem by creating habitat and serving as a prey base for as many as 140 other wildlife species, including raptors, grassland songbirds, small mammals, herptiles, and a variety of predators.



National Park Service

OUTLOOK FOR THE FUTURE

While saved from extinction by the Endangered Species Act, we must address certain problems in order to ensure that the Utah prairie dog will persist and recover.

The primary obstacle to recovering the Utah prairie dog may be the recovery program itself. The recovery strategy is to move the species from private land to habitat on federal lands. Unfortunately, due to poor translocation protocol and continued habitat destruction on public lands, the relocation program has been unsuccessful. More than 19,000 prairie dogs have been moved to public lands, yet populations are lower on public lands now than they were in the 1980s and 1990s. Private land populations are also declining.

The New York Times Magazine cited the Utah prairie dog as one of six species that likely won't survive the 21st century. Utah prairie dogs should be returned to endangered status instead of their current threatened status under the Endangered Species Act. This will ensure full protection of the species and the ecosystems of which it is a part.



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