

MY WAY OF THINKING

MARK CARWARDINE

The broadcaster and campaigner discusses the recent changes to the Endangered Species Act, and invites your thoughts on the subject.

Until a few months ago, the US had the enviably successful Endangered Species Act, credited with saving the Florida manatee, bald eagle, American alligator, grey wolf and many other species from extinction. Now, instead, it has the 'Trump extinction plan'.

Just a few months ago, the UN reported that the world's wildlife is declining at rates unprecedented in human history, with about one million animal and plant species imminently threatened with extinction. Warning that the crisis will, very soon, put humanity at risk (it doesn't get much more serious than that) it strongly urged all nations to strengthen and accelerate their conservation efforts.

So, what does the Trump administration do? The amendments finalised by the US government in August do the complete opposite, ripping the nation's most powerful piece of environmental legislation apart. The changes reduce protection for endangered and threatened species, while lining the pockets of industrialists who see wildlife as nothing more than a pesky inconvenience. Now it is much more difficult to protect threatened species and much easier for Trump's billionaire buddies to build roads, pipelines, mines and other industrial projects in critical wildlife habitats.

There are many disastrous changes to the act – all made with zero input from wildlife experts – but three stand out as particularly scary.

First, economic costs can now be taken into account when deciding whether or not to give a species protection. So, for example, a logging

company could argue against a species being protected if safeguarding its forest home would result in lost revenue.

Second, the wording has been altered to dismiss potential threats posed by climate change.

A threatened species is defined as one 'likely to become an endangered species within the foreseeable future' – but 'foreseeable future' has now been defined as extending only as far as officials can 'reasonably determine' (ie climate change is too distant and unpredictable). Thank goodness the polar bear has already been designated a threatened species, because nowadays it probably couldn't be listed.

Third, it has been made much more difficult to protect newly declared threatened species. The law automatically used to give them the same protection as endangered species – the next rung on the ladder towards

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extinction – since the whole point was to keep species from becoming endangered in the first place. Now a management plan has to be drafted, over many years, for further consideration before any protection can be given.

When the Endangered Species Act became law in 1973, it was strongly endorsed by President Richard Nixon and approved by huge margins in both chambers of Congress.

At the time, the US Supreme Court found that 'the plain intent of Congress... was to halt and reverse the trend towards species extinction, whatever the cost'.

How things have changed. Environmentally friendly and scientifically astute Republican politicians are themselves an endangered species. In fact, for all practical purposes, they are extinct. Yet the threats are substantially worse than they were in 1973: the US population has mushroomed from 200 million to nearly 330 million, for example, and the threat of climate change has increased exponentially.

The US was already facing the worst assault on its wildlife and environment in living memory. But it just got immeasurably worse. As the Trump administration squeezes the last few bucks out of a dying planet, only one thing is certain. More species will become extinct. 🐾

MARK CARWARDINE is a frustrated and frank conservationist.

WHAT DO YOU THINK? If you want to support Mark in his views or shoot him down in flames, email wildlifeletters@immediate.co.uk

The Florida manatee is among many species to have benefited from the act.

