

Testimony Concerning the Endangered Species Act Presented at a Hearing held by Idaho Senator Dirk Kempthorne in Lewiston, Idaho, June 3, 1995

My name is Ernest D. Ables and I am representing the Idaho Chapter of The Wildlife Society as President of that organization. The Wildlife Society, with national headquarters in Washington, D.C., was founded in 1937 and is a nonprofit, scientific and educational organization of wildlife professionals engaged in research, management, education and administration. It is concerned with the scientific management of the earth's wildlife species and their habitats. The Wildlife Society has more than 8,900 members organized into 113 regional, state and university chapters, mainly in the United States and Canada but with representatives in 61 additional countries.

My objective here today is to address the scientific basis of the Endangered Species Act (ESA). I submit that the ESA is based on sound scientific principles, namely that all species and subspecies of plants and animals possess unique genetic characteristics and that habitats are absolutely crucial to the long-term survival of any such species or subspecies. The decision to save or prevent the extinction of species and subspecies of plants and animals is a societal one, but one that has valid scientific as well as practical merit. I believe that this latter point is often missed or neglected in discussions of endangered species. Let me explain.

Every group of interbreeding organisms in nature contains genetically encoded information that represents thousands or millions of years of adapting to environmental conditions. These conditions include drought and desiccation, excessive moisture, high salinity, temperature extremes, diseases and pathogens, changes in the solar spectrum, nutrient deficiencies and excesses, plus numerous other physical and biological influences. Our domestic plants and animals were developed from wild stocks and these same wild ancestors are sources of genetic materials that, through selective breeding and more recently through genetic engineering, can and have provided valuable improvements and services for humankind. The same statements can be made about medicines. In unscientific language, we can view wild species as solutions awaiting problems. Therefore, from every perspective, it seems that we should not allow any species to become extinct if we have the power of saving it.

The Endangered Species Act is the first piece of legislation anywhere in the world that was designed to prevent widespread extinction of plants and animals, especially of those groups whose scientific, economic or other societal values have not been clearly documented or defined. At present the ESA is under attack and efforts are being made to weaken it. The basis of concerns about the ESA stem from economic impacts on livelihoods, private property rights and the role of government regulations.

I am sensitive and sympathetic to many of these concerns and impacts and wish they were not occurring. However, we all have constraints on personal liberties that arose for the public good and long-term benefits of society.

The ESA, like any piece of legislation, is subject to different interpretations and to improper use. This does not mean that the law is a bad one and should be repealed or weakened. It should be fine tuned and used in a judicious manner for its intended purpose, not as a weapon to achieve other ends.

Therefore, I submit that the ESA should not be changed significantly. Section 7 which prohibits federal actions that jeopardize an endangered species or its critical habitat; and Section 9 on the taking of endangered species are very important components of the ESA. Protection of habitat is crucial to survival of any species and it is mainly habitat modification and loss that has placed so many species in jeopardy. Without providing the necessary habitat components most protective measures are meaningless. During the latter one-half of the 20th Century the extinction rate has become greater than at any other juncture in recorded history and present day extinctions are not related to major physical events (volcanic activities, extraterrestrial bodies colliding with the earth, etc.) but to human actions, mainly habitat alterations.

We have within our capabilities the power to save species and have in place the legislation to accomplish this goal. Let's work together to better administer and apply our conservation laws and regulations, not eliminate them. Perhaps there is a need for more timely designations of species proposed for listing, for removing species that no longer need the ES designation, for more care in designating populations as unique and therefore eligible for listing, and definitely a pressing need for integrating species and ecosystem conservation instead of relying on the case-by-case crisis approach. Until we come up with a better method of preventing species extinctions, there is a need for the Endangered Species Act and I urge you to help maintain the integrity of this important piece of legislation. Thank you for hearing my views.