



Origins of Endangered Species Protection



Jake Dingel/PGC Photo

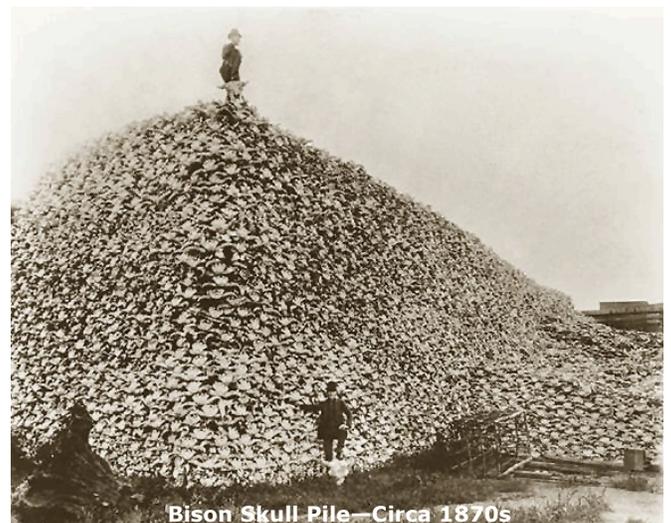
A Lack of Stewardship: Biologists estimate that since colonists arrived in America back in the 1600s, more than 500 animal and plant species and subspecies have become extinct. It is their irreversible loss – and the near-loss of others – that has compelled and propelled America and Pennsylvania to do more for species whose presence is declining rapidly or teetering on the brink of extinction.

The overwhelming majority of the plants and animals that have disappeared in the United States over the past four centuries were swallowed by the advance of civilization and as a consequence of insufficient protection. **There's hardly anything civilized about that. Take the passenger pigeon. It numbered three to five billion strong – 25 to 40 percent of America's total wild bird population –** when European colonists landed on our shores. By 1900, it could no longer be found in the wild. It became extinct in 1914.

Warning Signs: Signs of wildlife exploitation were evident almost everywhere in nineteenth century America, but the species first encountering trouble weren't those that you'd expect. They were bison, elk, beaver, egrets, wolves and mountain lions. But as the plentiful species began to become less common and eventually disappear, the pressure ratcheted up on what was left. Songbirds were shot for spaghetti meat, and their nests and eggs were taken by hobbyists for their personal collections. Deer were pursued with almost complete disregard to existing laws. Bears and birds of prey were shot year-round.

America in 1800 had an estimated 40 million bison. Eight decades later they had been eliminated – or extirpated – from the United States. What was used to repopulate our once Wild West came from several hundred that were saved by a group of committed conservationists who saw what was coming and took correction action, initially independent of government. With protection that spanned decades, the bison would make its comeback. Otherwise they, too, would be extinct. This incredible and largely unheralded rescue, coupled later with the preservation of national park land by President Theodore Roosevelt, served as a **blueprint for the bison's recovery. It was a lesson** America would learn from. But it would take time.

Charting a Course: The need for improved wildlife conservation was a headline-grabber in the early 1900s. But not always for all the right reasons. Even though the Pennsylvania Game Commission, then in its infancy, recognized the need to help all wildlife and to protect wild places, its management focus was largely on species that hunters pursued. **Biodiversity wasn't exactly a "buzz word" during the early days of America's crusade for wildlife. But efforts to help game species and protect habitat still supported the greater good of myriad creatures and organisms.**



Bison Skull Pile—Circa 1870s

Biological diversity, or biodiversity - popularized by entomologist Edward O. Wilson in his 1992 book, *The Diversity of Life* - refers to the totality of our planet's organisms and their interdependencies upon one another and their habitats. It correlates with the term "endangered species," which surfaced about 1964 to describe imperiled wildlife, because the extinction of any species can compromise and will surely modify the biodiversity of the ecosystem from which it came. The loss, like a brick missing from a wall, may be without structural consequence to the ecosystem. But it also could cause irreparable harm to keystone species or the ecosystem's ecology. From that imbalance trouble may brew. We could lose a plant species used to make medicine, organisms that serve as environmental barometers, or important prey species, pollinators or insect predators, to name a few. That's why it's such a big deal to hang on to what we've got, to keep common species common, to help species in decline before they and/or their habitats need emergency room treatment.

Laying Down the Laws: The first major legislation to save imperiled wildlife occurred with the Lacey Act of 1900, which prohibited the interstate and international traffic of wildlife in America. It was a huge needed step forward for egrets, gulls, terns and other colorful birds worldwide protecting them from millineries, which used their feathers or plumes to adorn hats. This important law was followed by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918, which made it illegal to take migratory birds or their eggs and nests in America and Canada.

Protection for endangered species sort of got its start in 1940 with the U.S. Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act. It was legislated in response to the nation's declining eagle populations and to augment the protections afforded by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. DDT and other pesticides, PCBs and lead would create even more chaos for eagles and other birds of prey and songbirds in coming years. So much so that it would challenge America's mettle to make way for wildlife in the face of a rapidly expanding population and sprawling industry.



After the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act, very little occurred until America's environmental awakening in the 1960s. With many species teetering on the brink of extinction from pollution and pesticide poisoning, conservationists and environmentalists — many stirred to action by Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* — repeatedly called on Congress for action. At stake was the existence of many wildlife species: birds of prey, songbirds, bats and small mammals, not to mention plants, fish and insects. Congress responded with the U.S. Endangered Species Preservation Act of 1966, which gave broad authority and policy guidance to the Secretary of the Interior to create a comprehensive program for the protection, conservation and propagation of endangered species of fish and wildlife. It also authorized the

Secretary to develop and publish a list of rare and endangered native animals, and to conduct research on those species and buy habitat for them. The list would later become known as the "Red Book."

In 1969, Congress passed the Endangered Species Conservation Act to provide increased protection to threatened species and extended protection to a wider variety of wildlife. The movement was gathering momentum. Rescuing endangered species had become as important to legislators as tax reform.

Nathaniel P. Reed, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service Assistant Secretary eloquently captured the mood in a 1971 speech, when he reported, "I can assure you that I am fully committed to the task of insuring that the United States will assume and maintain a leadership role in preventing the irretrievable loss of any species. We are not so naive as to believe that we can halt evolution – we know, despite our best efforts, that some species will slip over the brink into oblivion. But we are dedicated to the belief that America has matured to the point that we are no longer willing to sacrifice the end product of eons of evolution – a species or subspecies of wildlife – on the alter of the god called Progress without putting up one darned good fight!"



The [Endangered Species Act of 1973](#) furthered the cause of endangered species management. Far more comprehensive than the 1969 legislation, the new act reached all animals, whereas the earlier act addressed only vertebrates, molluscs and crustaceans. It established authority for protection before the danger of extinction becomes grave. It addressed all animal populations, whereas the 1969 Act recognized no category below subspecies. The 1973 Act provided for the listing and conservation of plants, which was absent from previous legislation.

Closer to Home: In Pennsylvania, the General Assembly in 1974 amended the Game Law so that the Game Commission could accept the federal Endangered Species List as its state list, with the power to add or delete any native species. In 1978, the Game Commission and U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service entered into a cooperative agreement to launch a Pennsylvania Endangered Species Program. The result of three years' negotiation, the agreement required the federal government to provide two dollars for each dollar spent by the Game Commission over the next five years to determine the status of and improve conditions for state's threatened and endangered species. Listed species at the time were the bald eagle, peregrine falcon, Indiana bat, Delmarva fox squirrel and Kirtland's warbler.

The Game Commission declared in a 1979 position statement that "...through its threatened and endangered species program, the agency is committed to maintaining the current diversity of birds and mammals native to Pennsylvania."



The statement went on to say the agency also, "is committed to determining the general status of all birds and mammals native to Pennsylvania and to protecting, maintaining, and, where possible, enhancing those species determined to be threatened or endangered in Pennsylvania.

"Priorities for species to be managed will be based on the degree of the threat to the species; the potential for recovery; and public awareness.

"The Pennsylvania Game Commission is committed to cooperating with other state agencies involved in threatened and endangered species work and to cooperating with other states having mutual interests."



Partnering for Wildlife: The Game Commission, with assistance from the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, made tremendous strides to help threatened and endangered species through specialized management and reintroductions in the 1980s. The primary beneficiaries were bald eagles and ospreys, but the Game Commission and Wild Resource Conservation Fund also supported a reintroduction of river otters, a species of special concern. In the 1990s, operations broadened to include peregrine falcons, woodrats, bats, grassland nesting birds and wading birds. Work has continued in that direction through the first decade of the twenty-first century.

In 2000, Congress created the [State Wildlife Grants Program](#) to provide states federal assistance for conservation programs and projects designed to prevent wildlife from becoming endangered. Efforts benefiting species of greatest conservation need – **and their habitats, as defined in Pennsylvania's [Wildlife Action Plan](#)**, receive the highest priority. The state's Wildlife Action Plan was finalized in 2006. With this much needed federal financial assistance, the Game Commission today employs dozen more biologists whose primary responsibilities include monitoring wildlife populations that are not hunted or trapped, and promoting the recovery of listed species through conservation initiatives that focus on protecting critical habitat and making **habitat more hospitable to all wildlife**. Visit the agency's [Private Landowner Assistance Program](#) web-pages if you'd like to do more on your property for wildlife, or to protect [species of greatest conservation need](#) that reside there.

Visit the [U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service's Endangered Species Program](#) pages for additional information.

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Connecting you with wildlife!
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