

Wolves, Jaguars, & Polar Bears – Oh My!

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service Commits to Eradicating the Endangered Species Act

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The year 2008 holds much promise for wildlands and wildlife protection in New Mexico, yet the agenda of special interest groups like coal, oil, and mining will be looking to stake claims for development on our public lands before the clock runs out on the Bush administration.

It is unlikely that many of these underhanded attempts to lock up public land for extractive industry purposes or to dismantle wildlife protections will make front-page news. In fact, it will likely be the strategy of the administration to slip things through at the eleventh hour, thereby alienating the public's voice on critical land decisions.

With little doubt, wildlife protection and ensuring the integrity of the Endangered Species Act will be at the top of the target list.

Currently, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service is directed by a former New Mexican who has in the past done some good work for wildlife conservation, but who has more recently embarked on a self-serving mission to eradicate the existence of wildlife species already in peril.

Director, H. Dale Hall, who has been working at the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS) for three decades, is quietly dismantling wildlife recovery programs that threaten the survival of two New Mexico natives, and one spectacular mammal in the arctic.

Mexican Gray Wolf

As the former Southwest Regional Director for the USFWS, Dale Hall oversaw the agencies management of the Mexican Gray Wolf Reintroduction Program, which includes activity in the Gila Wilderness.

Under his supervision, Mr. Hall was directly responsible for terminating the Mexican Gray Wolf Recovery Plan, which has not been updated since 1982. Mr. Hall had the authority then to implement the recovery plan but refused to and as a result was rewarded with a promotion, and became the Director of the USFWS. In his new role Hall, continues to ignore any efforts to revive the recovery plan for Mexican Gray Wolves. By terminating the recovery effort and displaying an unwillingness to address the issue seriously, Mr. Hall demonstrates his lack of commitment and obligation to uphold the agency's own mission statement, which reads:

“The mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is to work with others to conserve, protect, and enhance fish, wildlife, and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people.”

Back when he was Southwest Regional Director, Mr. Hall also developed a new agency policy that restricted the use of recently discovered scientific data in reviewing the status of endangered species. What this means for the Mexican Gray Wolf is that scientists, wildlife biologists, and decision makers are relying on decades-old data to evaluate the success or lack thereof in the reintroduction program. This type of policy completely contradicts the USFWS commitment to “scientific excellence.”

In an impressive show of solidarity, 163 prominent scientists signed on to a letter of protest in June, 2005. In their letter, the scientists stated, “the Southwest Region's new policy does not reflect the best available science, fails to meet the primary purpose of the endangered species act, and goes against 30 years of Endangered Species Act [ESA] implementation.”

In a response to the scientist's letter, Mr. Hall stated: "I think this will be a good tool from a biological standpoint." This comment and ones similar to it paint a clear portrait of a man completely out-of-touch with the stated mission of his own employer and the will of the American public. But it also speaks to a man nearing retirement and moving up the chain towards a serious retirement package as the National Director of the Agency. But at what cost to our wildlife?

With new numbers out from the USFWS that there are only 23 wild lobos left in New Mexico, it is time to mandate change for the full recovery of the Mexican Gray Wolf. The public needs to make their voices heard inexplicably loud and clear.

Jaguar

In mid-January of this year, the United States Department of Interior, the boss of USFWS, abandoned attempts to craft a recovery plan for the endangered jaguar, whose home range resides in Arizona, New Mexico, and Mexico. The agency issued a press release that stated too few of the rare cats have been spotted along the Southwest region of New Mexico and Arizona to warrant any action on developing a recovery plan. This rationale, or lack of one, could not be more blatant in demonstrating the USFWS utter refusal to secure protection for the jaguar—the largest cat in the Americas.

On January 7, 2008, Fish and Wildlife Director, Dale Hall quietly and with little notice, signed a memorandum approving the decision to halt development of a jaguar recovery plan. This egregious act occurred just weeks after the new director of the Southwest Region for Fish & Wildlife, Benjamin Tuggle, wrote in a memo to Mr. Hall, that the "preparation of a recovery plan will not contribute to the conservation of the jaguar." Tuggle went on to write that despite recent sightings of the jaguar in New Mexico, the Fish & Wildlife Service should essentially abdicate all its power in making any effort to conserve jaguar habitat or the species itself. Instead, Tuggle argues that this is a problem for Mexico and Central and South America to deal with.

There are some voices out there that have argued the jaguar is being sacrificed for the United States border fence, which is going up along many of the same areas where the cat has crossed into the country from Mexico. If the southwest borders of our country were designated critical recovery areas for the jaguar, then in theory it could constrain the Homeland Security Department in building the fence.

Regardless, the primary mission of the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service is to conserve and protect wildlife and their habitat for the benefit of the American people. While the agency is not involved in immigration policies, it should at least encourage the administration to work with the Mexican government and/or its private citizens in coming up with comprehensive solutions for protecting the jaguar.

With no more than 120 of these majestic animals roaming freely, Mr. Tuggle and Mr. Hall not only have a mandate to protect jaguars, but also a moral obligation to ensure that this species does not decline into a downward spiral under their watch.

Polar Bear

Within the past several months, the Department of Interior's Minerals Management Service announced that it will sell oil and gas leases on nearly 30 million acres of prime polar bear habitat in the Chukchi Sea, further stressing a species that is already dealing with climate change and dwindling sea ice.

Meanwhile, USFWS Director Dale Hall approved the postponement of a long-awaited decision on whether to place the iconic polar bear on the list of threatened species.

These two moves are almost certainly, and cynically, related. Listing the polar bear as threatened would trigger a range of protective actions. Delay of that listing gives the Department of Interior just enough time to move ahead with the lease sales without having to deal with the polar bear.

The listing delay was announced on a Sunday night, when few people were paying attention. Mr. Hall said the oil companies would have to comply with any eventual listing

of the polar bear under the Endangered Species Act. But once the companies stake their claims, it would be hard to stop disruptive exploratory drilling. The delays also give political appointees at the Department of Interior — notorious for meddling with science — time to craft a listing decision that magically excludes the oil companies from having to do much of anything to protect the bear.

The United States Geological Survey predicts that two-thirds of the world's polar bears, and all of Alaska's, will be gone by mid-century. These numbers act as a dire warning, and one that the USFWS needs to pay serious attention to now.

Ultimately, the decisions and responsibilities lay squarely in the lap of H. Dale Hall, Director of the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service. Instead of ignoring science, public sentiment, and his agency's mission statement, Mr. Hall should heed the words of American humorist, Will Rogers, "Even if you're on the right track you'll get run over if you just sit there."

Mr. Hall has put his pension before the wildlife he pledged to protect; he has lost his credibility as a scientist and has become little more than a front man for the Bush Administration's final assault on the environment. It is a sad and disgraceful finale for a man that once called New Mexico home, and it is time for him to reaffirm his commitment to wildlife conservation.