

AFS Policy Statement #27:

Conservation of Imperiled Species and Reauthorization of the Endangered Species Act of 1973
(Abbreviated)

Issue Definition

In 1993 and 1994, the U.S. Congress is debating reauthorization of the Endangered Species Act of 1973 (ESA). The ESA has been and should continue to be an integral part of U.S. policy regarding conservation of natural resources. Protection of ecological integrity, including rare and endangered species, is critical to sustainable resource use. The American Fisheries Society (AFS) supports legislative mandates, including a strengthened ESA, to protect ecological integrity of freshwater and marine systems.

Background

The ESA is one of the most influential environmental laws in existence. Its primary stated purpose is to prevent anthropogenic extinctions of species by conserving the ecosystems "upon which endangered species and threatened species depend." Thus, it is consistent with a primary objective of natural resource management: sustainable use. Sustainability implies that all the biological elements and processes that keep ecosystems productive and resilient must be maintained. These elements and processes operate over a broad range of biological levels, including genetic, species, community, and landscape levels. The summation of all types of elements over all levels represents total biological diversity. Ultimately, conservation efforts should encompass elements and processes at each level. Thus, conserving species is an essential (but not sufficient) component of maintaining biological diversity and integrity.

Recent status assessments conducted by the AFS and its subunits clearly indicate systematic declines in native fish distribution and abundance throughout North America. About one-third of the freshwater fish taxa in North America are endangered, threatened, or of special concern, with membership in each category exhibiting substantial increases during the last decade. At least 106 Pacific coast stocks of anadromous salmon and trout are extinct, and 214 more are at risk of extinction or of special concern status. These trends indicate that the current high rates of freshwater fish extinction will persist into the 21st century.

Other aquatic taxa exhibit even higher rates of endangerment. For example, Master (1990) reported that 36% of the crayfishes and 55% of the mussels in North America are extinct or imperiled. Moreover, endangerment of aquatic animals is greater than that of terrestrial animals, in part, because of (a) social biases against small, cold, and wet species and (b) a lack of information regarding the status of aquatic species.

Widespread declines in aquatic taxa indicate that the integrity of many ecosystems (i.e., their capability to support a balanced, adaptive community of organisms) may be damaged. Erosion of ecosystem integrity (including species endangerment) stems primarily from pervasive anthropogenic impacts. Ineffectiveness of current conservation policy is, in part, due to its inappropriate focus and highly fragmented nature.

Conservation policy should promote management practices that maintain integrity, prevent endangerment, and enhance recovery of species and ecosystems.

As a society of fisheries professionals and a leading proponent of wise and sustainable resource stewardship, the AFS supports enactment of sound endangered species legislation and implementation of comprehensive conservation policy. To that end, the ESA must not be weakened and should be strengthened in numerous ways, as described below. The rationale for strengthening the ESA is based on the objective of sustainable resource use and the larger goal of maintaining ecological integrity, which is fundamental to providing economic stability and social well-being. Perceived or actual land-use restrictions, whether on private or federal lands, this issue will be hard fought.