

Health/science

Extinct is forever

ECOLOGY

Several local species make endangered list

By TRACIE WHITE
Sentinel staff writer

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WHILE THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST has been wrangling over the future of its threatened spotted owl, Scotts Valley has been debating the future of its own environmental rarity: the Hartweg spineflower.

The arguments are similar: environmentalists face off against business; the need for jobs or houses are pitted against the need for environmental diversity.

Controversy over endangered species has continued to grow throughout California as the state's population has expanded. At the local level, environmentalists warn, many more are in danger of dying out.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service last month declared the northern spotted owl to be threatened with extinction, legally obligating the government to take steps to preserve the species, and causing an uproar in the logging industry and imperiling thousands of jobs.

Similar controversies have occasionally erupted on a much smaller scale in Santa Cruz County, but never quite so vociferously as the fight over the Hartweg spineflower in Scotts Valley, according to Armand Gonzales, a wildlife biologist with the state Department of Fish and Game.

State Fish and Game officials maintain that a proposal to build a 116-acre Polo Ranch development east of Highway 17 will threaten one of two sites in the world of the tiny plant that "may be the only plant in the world endemic to Scotts Valley."

Hartweg's spineflower, which is related to buckwheat, has also been discovered west of Highway 17 on the proposed Glenwood Estates development.

"It's one of the rarest plants here and Santa Cruz County has the greatest responsibility to protect it," said Randall Morgan, botanist for the Santa Cruz Chapter of the California Native Plant Society.

Fish and Game officials have prepared a petition which will be presented Aug. 2 to the Fish and Game Commission, asking them to list the Hartweg's spineflower as an endangered species.

"It meets the criteria for listing," said Gonzales. Once listed, the flower would receive protection under the Endangered Species Act, which outlaws disruption of the plant's or the animal's habitat without approval from the department of Fish and Game.

"When dealing with endangered species you don't have room for error," said Gonzales. "You make a mistake, and you've doomed it to extinction. You make a mistake with this plant, and it will be gone forever."

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Many endangered species face a bleak future

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The spineflower debate is just one example of a number of local situations in which a plant or animal's habitat has been threatened by development.

Gonzales has worked on several of these controversial projects. He reviewed a proposal at the Pajaro River to clear vegetation in hopes of preventing potential flooding problems.

"It was right smack in middle of the known range of the Santa Cruz long-toed salamander," said Gonzales. The salamander is listed as both a state and federal endangered species.

"I opposed one of the Gray Whale Ranch timber harvest plans because they refused to do a survey to see if the area was a potential habitat for Santa Cruz tar weed (another locally endangered species.) We were just asking that they survey to prevent any impact to the plant if it did exist there. In the end, they did agree to do the survey.

"That's the thing with endangered species. Most of the time you don't know if they're there or not. People get upset when told they might be there, and they can't do the project until they check. They feel it's obstructing them from making a living.

"This is the controversy we're having up north with the spotted owl. Quite often surveys can only be done at specific times of the year. Salamanders in the winter time, owls during nesting season.

"I understand there's an economic impact to people, but as I said before there is very little room for error with an endangered species. We feel better to be safe than be sorry."

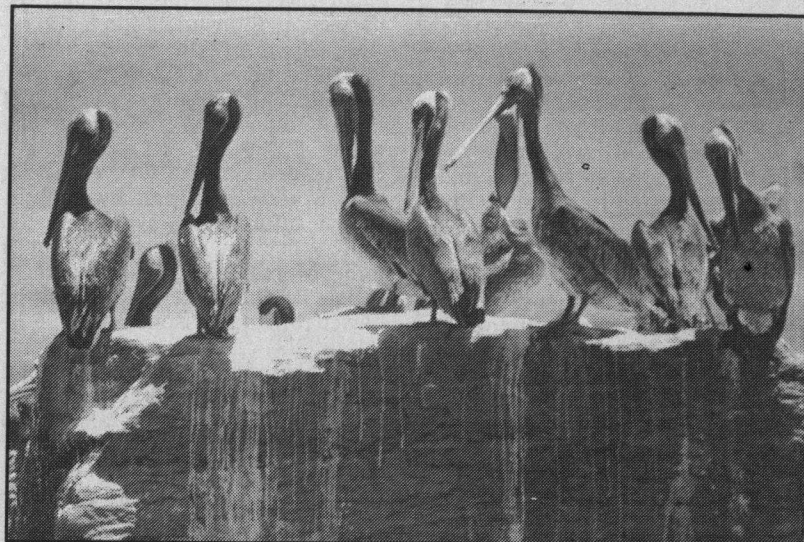
Federal and state agencies have categories for both endangered species and threatened species, said David Suddjian, a biologist with the Habitat Restoration Group.

Once a plant or animal receives one of these listing, there is usually a recovery plan proposed to help bring the population back.

"Usually the habitat that they live in is protected. In some cases some active work is being done," said Suddjian.

California has an additional list which includes "species of special concern," said Suddjian. According to the state's definition, species on this list "may become vulnerable in the future."

"We have lots of species that are species of special concern," said Suddjian, who is an expert on local bird populations. "Basically the situation is that either they are not in dire straits yet, or we don't have enough information."



Dan Coyro/Sentinel file

The endangered California brown pelican is an adaptive bird that has shown a comeback in recent years.

Michael Marangio, a biologist with Habitat Restoration Group in Scotts Valley, complains that it is so difficult for a plant or animal to make it to the state or federal endangered species list, that once there, it's usually too late.

"One of my concerns relates to the statistic I saw that for federally endangered species, only 5 percent are ever taken off the list," he said.

Most of the rare plants in Santa Cruz County are found in open habitats, prime land for development, said Randall Morgan, a local botanist with the Native Plant Society.

"Plenty are visibly disappearing," said Morgan. "I'd say about 20 have disappeared from Santa Cruz County. We haven't had any plants go extinct. The spineflower could be a good candidate for that."

Most of the plants that have disappeared from the area have died out because of development, said Morgan. A few fell victim to a general drying trend.

Only the Santa Cruz cypress is listed by both the state and the federal government as an endangered species, according to Gonzales. The Ben Lomond wallflower — also known as the Santa Cruz wallflower — and the Santa Cruz tar plant, are both listed by the state as endangered species.

The Santa Cruz tar plant is not only a beautiful flower, it's also very restricted in where it grows, said Morgan. One native colony exists outside Santa Cruz County. The owner of that land, in Monterey County intends to develop the site.

"That's how it has been lost in the (San Francisco) Bay Area," said Morgan. "It's habitat has been favored by urban development."

In Santa Cruz County a few colo-

nies still exist from the Watsonville area to Graham Hill Road. Most of them are threatened by housing developments, said Morgan.

"We've fought a number of tar weed battles," said Morgan. "Of course, the city council didn't want to hear about rare plants, especially about something called tar weed."

In addition, there are a number of rare plants that don't have actual listings, said Morgan. Only about five or six local plants are officially listed by either the state or federal government on the endangered species list.

The Native Plant Society has been active in protecting habitats in the county where rare species are often found, said Morgan. First on the group's list are the sand hills in the Zayante-Ben Lomond area.

"There's a whole community there of plants and animals endemic to the county," said Morgan. A great majority of rare species are concentrated into these small areas of habitats. These areas include sand deposits and grasslands.

The plant diversity is greatest in the open habitats, said Morgan. The forested habitats are the least diverse as far as plant life is concerned.

"It's kind of ironic that state parks tend to concentrate on preserving forested areas."

Another discouraging trend involves birds that have either abandoned the county or stopped nesting here since the turn of the century, according to Suddjian.

The nearly extinct California condor was once common in Santa Cruz County.

"It was common when there were grizzlies here. They can't survive where people are around.



The Ben Lomond wallflower, endemic to the Zayante Sands, has been reduced to about 6,000 plants, most of which are found at the Quail Hollow Quarry.

They need wide ranges and wild country. There were still scattered sightings through the 1960s but most of the population in this area died out in the early part of the century."

The use of the pesticide DDT during the '40s and '50s contributed to the decline of the bald eagle and the peregrine falcon in Santa Cruz County.

One of the few species to show a

comeback in recent years is the California brown pelican, which is listed by the federal government as an endangered species, said Suddjian.

"Their population in the 1970s was really low, close to crashing permanently, due to DDT," said Suddjian. "They've been doing quite well in recent years. They're adaptive. The feeding can be pretty good in the Monterey Bay."

In addition to the condor, bird species which have become extinct in the county are: the greater roadrunner and the yellow rail. In addition to the peregrine falcon, bird species which formerly nested in the county but no longer do so and which currently occur only rarely during migration or winter are: the yellow-billed cuckoo, the willow flycatcher, the least tern, the osprey and the yellow-breasted chat.