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957 species at risk in Puget Sound area

Six-year effort tallies creatures and plants dying from habitat loss

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From the Olympic Peninsula's verdant rain forests to the depths of Puget Sound, this region is unusually rich in its variety of plants and animals. But many of those species are at risk of vanishing or are already gone, according to a sweeping report card released today by environmental groups.

Scores of imperiled creatures "are getting so little attention," said Stephanie Buffum Field, executive director of Friends of the San Juans, a conservation group that worked on the assessment with the national Center for Biological Diversity.

The report recognizes the need to save species through complete ecosystem conservation. To protect rare Western gray squirrels, for example, the focus is on saving the oak woodlands and prairies where they live -- benefiting other fragile species at the same time.

Some of the conservation measures recommended in the report are already in the works. A "biodiversity" council, formed quietly last year, is developing a 30-year strategy aimed at helping protect the Puget Sound area's diverse ecosystems. The 23-member council, charged with issuing recommendations by 2007, includes representatives from government agencies, industry, tribes and environmental groups.

"We've lost a lot of the habitat already," said Elizabeth Rodrick, land conservation manager for the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife. "We need to protect most of what is left to retain the species that are here," she said.

The report by the environmental groups identifies the loss of wild places where imperiled species live as the No. 1 cause of their decline. Pollution, climate change and invasions by non-native species are also blamed for shrinking populations of rare plants and animals.

"We have pre-empted the environment in which they live either by paving it over or making it a subdivision, or we've changed it in ways that make it unsuitable for them," said Gordon Orians, a University of Washington ecologist.

The report identifies more than 7,000 species of fungi, lichens, plants, seaweed, bugs, fish, amphibians, birds and mammals in the Puget Sound region extending from the Cascades to the Olympic Peninsula.

Of those, 957 -- or 14 percent -- were deemed imperiled. Up to 19 species have already disappeared from the region, according to the report.

Among the vulnerable species is the black oystercatcher, a seabird that nests on Puget Sound shorelines. The birds sport bright-orange beaks and rings around their eyes, and dine mostly on shellfish. They're sensitive to human disturbance and at risk in oil spills, experts say.

Another is the island marble butterfly, a splotchy green-and-white insect believed extinct for decades until it was found in 1998 on San Juan Island. Agriculture, development, fire suppression and invasive species are blamed for swatting the population down to as few as 10 butterflies at last count.

The research was led by the Center for Biological Diversity, a non-profit that has spearheaded efforts -- often through lawsuits -- to get plants and creatures better protections under the federal Endangered Species Act.

Orians applauded the effort to focus more attention on the plight of struggling species, but the bird expert said he was "puzzled" by flaws in the report.

Some of the bird species listed as vulnerable, he said, actually have sizable populations in this region. Others nest elsewhere and spend limited time here, according to the biology professor emeritus.

Authors of the study agreed that fine-tuning was needed.

"We appreciate Dr. Orians' feedback and consider the report to be something of a work in progress," said Noah Greenwald, a conservation biologist with the Center for Biological Diversity's Portland office. "We can continue to narrow the focus to species of most concern in Puget Sound."

The study spanned six years and cost approximately \$150,000 to complete. It relied on searches of databases maintained by state and federal agencies and conservation groups, academic research, species guides and other literature.

A species qualified as "imperiled" under multiple criteria, including designations as threatened or endangered under state, federal or Canadian guidelines, and analysis by environmental groups and university researchers.

The report, which does not attach cost estimates to its recommendations, also called for creating maps to prioritize areas for protection and then safeguarding those areas.

Doug Zimmer, a spokesman with the U.S. Department of Fish and Wildlife, agreed with the need for regional conservation but declined to comment on the 36-page report, saying staff weren't available to evaluate it.

Others urged action, not research.

"While there's always a need for better data and better focus on habitat, we're rich in plans," said Elliot Marks, natural resources policy adviser for Gov. Christine Gregoire. "We're short on resources for implementation of plans."

The governor is working on a strategy for restoring the Sound and supports efforts already under way with the biodiversity council, he said.

About five years ago, a companion biodiversity project was launched that carved the Northwest into nine ecological regions, such as the Columbia River plateau and the Puget Sound region stretching from Oregon's Willamette Valley to British Columbia's Georgia Basin.

The Nature Conservancy and other partners are leading the effort. About four regions have been analyzed to determine the most important areas to save. The remainder will be finished by next year. Related conservation projects have started to preserve and restore key habitat.

"I'm encouraged," said Rodrick, of state Fish and Wildlife. "Because even though we've lost a large amount of habitat, we're getting smarter about protecting what's left."

IMPERILED SPECIES

Over a six-year period, two non-profit groups compiled a list of the region's species totaling more than 7,000 lichens, plants, bugs, fish, birds, mammals and other creatures. Nearly 1,000 of the species are at risk of disappearing. As many as 19 are already gone.

Protected species

Seventeen Puget Sound-area species currently receive protection under the federal Endangered Species Act:

Endangered:

- Sei whale
- Finback whale
- Gray wolf
- Brown pelican
- Marsh sandwort (plant)

Threatened:

- Marbled murrelet
- Canada lynx
- Steller sea lion
- Bald eagle
- Chum salmon (Hood Canal)
- Chinook salmon
- Orcas (southern resident)
- Grizzly bear
- Bull trout
- Spotted owl

- Golden paintbrush (plant)
- Water howellia (plant)
- Kincaid's lupine (plant)

Unprotected species that are "critically imperiled"

- **Sea otter:** Weasel relative that was nearly hunted to extinction for its pelts. One of the few non-primates known to use tools.
- **Pallid bat:** Large, pale bat with doglike face. Feeds at night on large insects. Emits a skunklike odor when disturbed.
- **Oregon spotted frog:** Green-, brown- or magenta-colored, with black blotches on its head and back. Now absent from 90 percent of former range.
- **American peregrine falcon:** Removed from federal endangered list in 1999, but still endangered in Northwest. Cliffs were preferred nesting sites, but today many nest on high-rises.
- **Yellow-billed cuckoo:** Adults are a foot long, with an exceptionally long tail marked with three large black spots. Only breeds in riparian forests and wetlands.
- **Green sturgeon:** Olive-green fish grows to 7 feet in length, 350 pounds and 70 years in age. First appeared more than 200 million years ago.
- **Walleye pollock:** Member of the cod family. Annual catch in Alaskan waters is nearly 2 million metric tons. Important prey for marine mammals.
- **Sea cucumber:** Relative of starfish and sea lilies; popular in Asian cuisine. Fourteen species found in Northwest waters.
- **Pacific giant earthworm:** Grows to 3 feet in length. Emits peculiar, flowerlike aroma. Oregon giant earthworms live in moist soils of riparian forests.
- **Marsh shrew:** Insect-seating aquatic shrew with fringe of hairs on toes to aid swimming. Can run on top of the water for several seconds.

Sources: National Wildlife Federation, Burke Museum of Natural History and Culture, Center for Biological Diversity, state and federal Web sites.

ON THE WEB

To read the report, "The Puget Sound Basin: A Biodiversity Assessment," visit: www.biologicaldiversity.org.

For information on Washington's biodiversity council, go to: www.iac.wa.gov/biodiversity.

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