

I GOT A LETTER from the United States Fish and Wildlife Service the other day. It was in response to a petition I had filed, a year or two ago, about the status of Snowy Plovers. At the time it had seemed to me, along with Gary Page at Point Reyes Bird Observatory, Mary Walter, at Oregon's Department of Fish and Wildlife, and several other folks who truly know that graceful little bird, that its future is rather clear. Snowy Plovers face extirpation as a breeding bird on the United States Pacific Coast.

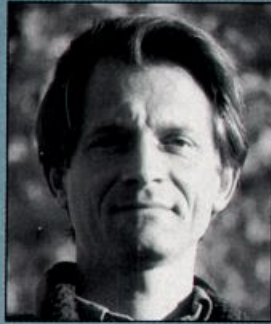
Please, don't read any ambivalence into that statement. None is there. Chart the course of Snowy Plover populations. Project the growth in beach abuse by folks intent on building large complexes along the shore. Note the unseverable link between plovers and wide berms above the high tide line, habitat needed for nesting. Count the dogs and people. Watch the crows and ravens pounce after a plover is displaced off its nest.

It doesn't take an economist to know what is going to happen. The coastal population of Snowy Plovers that has bred in these habitats between southern California and the Pacific Northwest will no longer be. It will go extinct.

We had written the Service to alert them to this problem, petitioning for this population of the Snowy Plover to be listed under the Endangered

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## FACTS, INFERENCES, AND SHAMELESS SPECULATIONS



### The Endangered Species Charade



*that might be biologically real gets what it deserves....*

Masefield, once poet laureate of England, appears to have lost it in those last few phrases, but the essence of how humans treat beaches is there.

So you can imagine how excited I was when the letter arrived. After all, the United States Fish and Wildlife Service has the mandate from Congress, under the Endangered Species Act, to **Do Something**. And some of the things they have done in pursuit of that mandate have been quite constructive, even creative. True, to date it

Species Act. Page's work, along with years of effort by the Snowy Plover Project coordinated by Frances Bidstrup for Point Reyes Bird Observatory, provided much of the crucial information. Nothing novel about that. No new legal theory. And indeed the plover's problems have probably been all but inevitable ever since John Masefield penned those fateful lines:

*I must go down to the  
seas again,  
to the lonely sea and  
the sky,  
where the birds bunch  
and the eggs crunch,  
and the natural  
world awaits my  
absolute domination,  
not to mention this  
wonderful machine I  
can use to rake the  
beach every morning  
to make sure that people  
don't have to look  
at the trash they left  
there the day before  
and anything attempt-  
ing to use the beach*

**Protecting  
the plover  
will not be easy.  
It will require  
changes in  
human behavior  
in a setting—  
the Coppertone  
Beach—where  
almost anything  
goes, where  
'wild and crazy'  
is practically  
sedate, and  
where land prices  
make even  
Congress blink.**



There are still numerous questions about federal government funding for endangered species, but no one in Congress seemed to bat an eye when \$500,000 was appropriated to restore Lawrence Welk's birthplace in Strasburg, North Dakota—seen here before restoration. Photograph/Welk Heritage, Inc.

has been beyond the authority of the United States Fish and Wildlife Service Director John Turner to take what might be the single most important step for saving endangered life on the planet, removing John Say-no-no from office (he'd be great at bear control in Yellowstone, or perhaps studying radioactive lizards around the Hanford Nuclear Facility), but that day may come, and in the meantime there is much Turner and the Service can do.

The letter, however, read that while the biological facts clearly suggested listing was warranted, the United States Fish and Wildlife Service simply didn't have the resources to carry the process forward... "precluded by other pending proposals of higher priority." Suddenly it dawned on me that the credo *Neither rain nor snow nor dead of night* ...didn't have anything to do with all federal employees. Silly me. Here we have a federal government capable of saving Lawrence Welk's birthplace, of putting a Hubble Space Telescope in orbit, and of ensuring that Andean Condors are flying over Ventura, California, but unable to put together a recovery plan for the Snowy Plover.

A little digging revealed the Snowy Plover was not alone. First, the good news (ignoring for the moment that species are listed for protection only when driven close to extinction by humankind): Today 588 animal species enjoy protection under the Endangered Species Act, 440 listed as endangered, another 148 as threatened. Not bad for 500 years of occupation since 1492 (add that number to your list of points to celebrate in 1992). Putting aside the rhetorical question of what it means to enjoy protection that has loggers frying owls, recovery plans have been drawn up for 320 of those that have been listed, and a handful of the plans have not only been implemented but have brought species

back from the brink.

Beyond these favored few, however, exists the bureaucratic limbo in which Snowy Plovers now reside, resembling, more or less, a pocket veto. Sixty-three animal species fall into that purgatory, with their fate described dryly as: "taxa for which the Service currently has substantial info on hand to support the biological appropriateness of proposing to list as endangered or threatened. Proposed rules have not yet been issued because they have been precluded at present by other listing activity." The Inspector General of



**Snowy Plover (*Charadrius alexandrinus*), not currently listed as endangered or threatened. Photograph/S.C. Fried**

the Interior Department reports that "Currently, 600 candidate species considered by the Service to merit immediate protection under the act have not been officially listed." Another 3,000 lie a bit further out: for them, the information is suggestive but more data are needed before the Service is forced to acknowledge something might be awry.

I don't yet have a list of these species-in-waiting, but I am curious about how choices are made, particularly for species like the Snowy Plover. Protecting the plover will not be easy. It will require changes in human behavior in a setting — the Coppertone Beach — where almost anything goes, where 'wild and crazy' is practically sedate, and where land prices make even Con-

gress blink. Given the heat that the Service has taken over Spotted Owls, perhaps ducking this one through an administrative ruse makes sense to the powers that be. Ask your Congressman about this one.

In fact there is a deeper problem than just what Snowy Plovers face. The Endangered Species Act, for all the good it has done, is not enough. In case after case, the Fish and Wildlife Service lacks the resources to get their job done, sometimes even to begin it. Estimates now suggest that it will take \$4.6 billion to implement the recovery plans of presently known endangered species. Compare that figure to the Service's annual budget for such stuff: \$8.4 million. That would be bad enough, but the problem goes deeper. The man charged by Congress with the statutory responsibility for reinforcing the Act, the Secretary of the Interior Manuel Lujan demonstrates almost daily that he does not understand his duty to the nation on this one, much less his obligation to the earth's biological diversity. With leadership like that, who needs bulldozers and chain-saws?

All of this, of course, before the biological impacts of climate change begin to march across the landscape. Once global warming begins to work its way with natural ecosystems, the pace of extinction will increase dramatically (see the 1989-1990 Audubon Wildlife Report, published by Academic Press, pp177 to 221), and it is already off the scale.

The bottom line is this: our Endangered Species Act is too little and usually too late. It needs strengthening, it needs more financial muscle, it demands political support, and it must be broadened to protect ecosystems before the species within suffer that last, irreversible fall to extinction. ■

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