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Is the Endangered Species Act Broken? Scientists Say Acting Early Is the Key to Saving Imperiled Species

National Nonprofit Demonstrates How Proactive Conservation Can Prevent Species Crises

UNITED STATES, October 2, 2025 - As debate intensifies over recent proposed changes to the Endangered Species Act (ESA), scientists are emphasizing that waiting until species are in crisis is a losing strategy. A [new study](#) coauthored by Amphibian and Reptile Conservancy (ARC) Executive Director JJ Apodaca (Schwartz et al. 2025) emphasizes that acting early, before populations crash, is a more effective strategy for safeguarding imperiled species than reactive measures.

“Regulations alone can’t recover species,” said Apodaca. “It’s the combination of targeted, on-the-ground actions, science-driven strategies, and partnerships that actually builds resilient populations.”

However, Schwartz et al. (2025) state that the ESA has been effective at preventing extinctions. Hundreds of species have been saved since 1973, but far fewer have fully recovered.

In fact, just over three percent of listed species have been officially delisted due to recovery. Recovery plans often take decades to implement, leaving many species in a long-term limbo, protected but not recovering.

The authors emphasize that reactive conservation is slow, expensive, and often insufficient, particularly when populations are already small or have low genetic diversity. In contrast, early interventions allow populations to adapt to environmental change and maintain the genetic diversity needed.

The paper advances the “3Rs” of conservation (Resiliency, Redundancy, and Representation) as a blueprint for early action. In practice, these principles strengthen populations, ensure populations are spread across multiple habitats, and protect genetic diversity. As a result, species have a better chance to withstand disease, extreme weather, and habitat loss.

ARC has long embraced proactive conservation through its PARCAs (Priority Amphibian and Reptile Conservation Areas), putting the 3Rs into action across the country.

In South Carolina's Francis Marion PARCA, ARC biologists work to protect [spotted turtles](#) and the habitats they need. Despite a recent federal decision not to list the species under the ESA, the turtles face habitat loss, illegal collection, and other threats. ARC is restoring wetlands, reconnecting fragmented sites, and tracking populations before declines become critical.

“Even species that seem common can decline quickly, oftentimes unnoticed,” said Brooke Talley, ARC Turtle Conservation and Policy Director. “Proactive habitat management ensures that populations remain resilient before they become imperiled.”

Similarly, the [southern hognose snake](#), which was recently proposed for ESA listing, is benefiting from early conservation. Once widespread across the Southeast, it now survives in small, fragmented patches of longleaf pine and sandhill habitats. ARC and partners are restoring fire regimes, removing invasive plants, and reconnecting habitats to bolster the snake's populations.

Schwartz et al. (2025) stress that delayed conservation reduces success and is ultimately much more costly. The authors also point out that recovery planning often lags behind listing decisions, leaving species protected but still vulnerable. Even when plans exist, insufficient funding or lack of collaboration can limit their impact.

These findings come at a time when the ESA faces potential changes. A federal rule proposed earlier this year would narrow the definition of “harm” so that habitat loss would no longer qualify as a violation of the ESA.

This serves to underscore what Schwartz et al. (2025) caution: while the ESA has been crucial in preventing extinctions, it cannot alone lead to recovery. On-the-ground conservation, guided by the 3Rs and other actions, will become even more critical if legal protections are weakened.

The lesson is clear. Conservation is most effective when it happens before costly, last-ditch interventions are needed. And ARC's work in PARCAs across the US shows what proactive, science-based conservation looks like in practice.

“Decisions like the spotted turtle ruling highlight why proactive work is so important,” Talley said. “We can't wait until a species is at the point of crisis. We have to protect habitat, manage threats, and ensure populations are resilient before they become imperiled.”

About Amphibian and Reptile Conservancy (ARC)

Amphibian and Reptile Conservancy, or ARC, is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit focused on identifying and conserving the highest priority places for amphibians and reptiles in the United States. We protect endangered amphibians and reptiles through a strategic, scientific, and passionate approach. We believe the conservation of amphibians, reptiles, and the habitats they depend on is vitally important. To learn more, visit ARCProtects.org.

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