Comments on Endangered Species Act at 50 Anniversary

Thank you all so much for coming– on this absolutely gorgeous Fall Day to celebrate the 50th Anniversary of the Endangered Species Act. My name is Susan Holmes, and I am the Executive Director of the Endangered Species Coalition – a coalition of over 400 groups working to protect biodiversity and endangered species around the United States.

Fifty years ago, in December of 1973 our country passed the Endangered Species Act and made a commitment to preserving all species and the habitats on which they depend. This extraordinary and visionary bill passed unanimously in the Senate (President Biden is the last living Senator to have voted for the Bill) and by a vote of 355-4 in the House and was signed by President Nixon who said at the time, “Nothing is more priceless and more worthy of preservation than the rich array of animal life with which our country has been blessed. It is a many-faceted treasure, of value to scholars, scientists, and nature lovers alike, and it forms a vital part of the heritage we all share as Americans.”

It is because of the Endangered Species Act that today humpback whales swim along our coasts, wolves are once again howling in Yellowstone National Park and bald eagles soar over the Occoquan River. My daughter is a rower and I have been lucky to seeing the eagles overhead during a regatta. An amazing sight that would not have been possible without the Endangered Species Act.

In fact, ESA has successfully prevented the extinction of more than 99 percent of species designated as threatened or endangered, including the critically imperiled red wolf in North Carolina, and whooping crane; and here in Virginia dozens of species including the red-cockaded woodpecker, the Virginia sneeze weed, northern long-eared bat. Today there are more than 1600 species protected under the ESA and the Act has also protected millions of acres of forests, mountains, rivers, deserts, beaches, oceans and other [habitat](https://www.biologicaldiversity.org/programs/biodiversity/endangered_species_act/protecting_critical_habitat/index.html). It has also been an inspiration for countless similar laws adopted by countries around the world.

But the ESA is not just about wildlife, it is also about people. For every animal protected, recovering, and recovered there is an army of scientists, administrators, policymakers, advocates, and citizen scientists who have worked countless hours and, in many cases dedicated their lives to the conservation of these species. You are going to hear more about some of these local efforts, including the extraordinary work of Elizabeth Hartwell– wow – I wish I had met her -- to the fascinating and inspiring work going around Occoquan Bay to protect rare, threatened and endangered bats.

And, the law’s work is far from over.

Scientists in America and around the world tell us that this is a pivotal time for wildlife. Recently, the United Nations released a groundbreaking report warning that about one million species are now threatened with extinction. In North America alone, we have lost nearly 70% of our wildlife in the last few decades and nearly 3 billion birds have disappeared since 1970. Many once-common species have drastically declined, including monarch butterflies and bumblebees. Scientists estimate that we are losing species faster than ever before in human history -- at a hundred of times faster than the normal extinction rate.

That is why the Endangered Species Act and events like the one here today are more important than ever. Nature is resilient if we give it half a chance. The ESA shows that we can save species and that citizens care deeply about our wildlife.

Over the last 50 years, the ESA has been one of our nation’s most beloved laws with consistently over 85% public support. Why is the ESA so popular? I believed that it is because it is a law – that at its heart -- is about love and hope.

Americans love our wildlife – from millions of birdwatchers to hundreds of people turning up to a remote beach to rescue a whale, to the kids raising monarch butterflies or sending around petitions on Instagram. We are passionate about caring for native plants and animals.

And the ESA also gives us hope, even in dark times, for the future of biodiversity. The California Condor – once reduced to 22 individuals in captivity is now up to 200 condors in the wild. Black-footed ferrets declared extinct in 1981 are up to over 300. Because of the Endangered Species Act we have hope that our children and grandchildren will live in a world with wildlife, that they will thrill at the sight of a grizzly bear, hear the call of the whooping crane, and continue to revel in the eagles soaring over the Occoquan River.