Selling the Endangered Species Act

On June 22, 1990, the northern spotted owl was the winner in its fight to be listed as a threatened species, although the corollary to save its critical habitat, the ancient forests of the Pacific Northwest, is still being waged.

The decision to list the owl by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service was based on the provisions of the Endangered Species Act (ESA), the noblest expression of our reverence for all life yet embodied in federal law.

Under this powerful and important law, any animal or plant that is determined to be endangered-facing extinction—or threatened—likely to become endangered—is entitled to protection.

The eventual amount of acreage protected is still being debated. The Bush administration has voiced concerns about the impact on jobs and has proposed a preliminary plan that falls short of giving full protection to these ancient forests, which were here before our country was founded.

While the administration is making its decision, there are bills in Congress to expand the protection of these ancient forests, which are being logged at a percentage rate faster than the current decimation of the rain forests of the Amazon.

Some federal officials have suggested that the ESA needs to be weakened in the interests of jobs and development projects. However, we cannot allow the ESA to be overridden whenever it is convenient or, inexorably, we will impoverish our biological communities one by one until the ecosystem collapses.

Presently, there are at least 4,000 qualified candidates waiting to be "listed." Given the hostility to the ESA during the tenure of former Secretary of the Interior James Watt, there are those who believe that endangered species are not listed as such because the consequent protection plans would interfere with development projects. If a species scientifically qualifies, it should be listed despite the political consequences.

Even with the Act, we have already lost seven listed species. Although some species, such as the American bald eagle and the alligator, have made recoveries, nearly half of the 577 species that are listed lack a recovery plan.

The law's purposes are to preserve species that are "of aesthetic, ecological, educational, historical, recreational, and scientific value to the nation and its people." Beyond these utilitarian reasons to preserve species, we must educate people to understand that these unique varieties of Creation have a right to exist for their own sake. As I said more than a decade ago, "All life has intrinsic value and is, therefore, deserving of those same considerations we generally reserve for mankind."

Pablo Picasso painted "Guernica" to convey the unforgettable human suffering of the Spanish people during their civil war. I have wondered, where is the Picasso who could paint the "Guernica for the Animals"? As people outraged and angered by animal suffering, we intuitively feel the horror of forcing off the face of the Earth the last animal of a particular kind.

It has been observed that the English would not sell the Crown Jewels to provide societal benefits to their people, how much more priceless than the Crown Jewels is the living foundation of life itself? Because extinction deprives animals of the right to reach their coevolutionary destiny, it is cruelty in the first degree. Being an accomplice to extinction is more than irreversible wrongdoing; it is a sin against life itself.

We cannot ask other countries to make economic sacrifices to save species if we do not set an example here in America. The threat of extinction should be accorded the same priority as a military threat to our national security. In the end, it involves our survival. Being intelligent enough to keep the whole intact. In the final analysis, no person can be truly human if he is cut off from his total ecological self, his communion with nature, and his relationship to the world of animals.

You can count on The HSUS to continue to fight to strengthen the ESA and to help formulate an effective national and global strategy for biodiversity.