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Testimony
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Hearing on "Lessons Learned Protecting and Restoring Wildlife in the Southern United States under the Endangered Species Act"

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I have worked for the Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries, and Parks for the past 27 years. I served as an educator in the Museum of Natural Science for ten years, and as director of the Museum for the past seventeen years. In the course of this work I have dealt with the Endangered Species Act (ESA) during much of that time.

The ESA has been good for Mississippi.

- Two species, the American alligator and peregrine falcon, have been fully recovered.
- The status of the bald eagle and brown pelican have significantly improved to the point where they may soon be proposed for delisting.
- Species such as the Mississippi sandhill crane, ringed sawback, gopher tortoise, red-cockaded woodpecker, least tern, piping plover, gulf sturgeon, and pallid sturgeon have seen their populations stabilize or have increased.
- These and other species such as Mississippi gopher frog, gopher tortoise, oranogenacre mucket, southern combsnell and pondberry would likely be extinct or at the least, extirpated from Mississippi if not for the ESA.

The people of Mississippi are close to the land and their environment, and the species listed under the ESA are highly valued as indicators of our way of life, our quality of life and our success at stewardship. Many are also important in ecotourism, a significant and growing industry in our State.

The Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries and Parks is proud of our role in these success stories, and equally proud of other successes that are less well known. For example, our biologists have conducted or assisted in research efforts and negotiations which led to management actions that removed the need to list two endemic species, the Camp Shelby burrowing crayfish and Jackson Prairie crayfish, under the ESA. Biologists employed by the Department have also recently discovered two previously unknown breeding ponds for the highly endangered Mississippi gopher frog, and have facilitated the establishment of five captive populations in zoo facilities. We believe information equals alternatives, and our Museum biologists, collections and Natural Heritage database have proven this time and again.

Conflicts with the ESA have been few and far in between in Mississippi, and they are usually resolved by Federal inter-agency consultations. With few exceptions, most private actions requiring ESA approval or permits are also able to proceed with little conflict or attention. Although we see the occasional headline that this or that listed species or critical habitat will change the world as we know it, such issues quietly fade away, usually with little actual impact.

The application of the ESA in Mississippi, however, can be improved.

There is a need for greater consistency and reliability in funding. It is imperative to have a standard allocation mechanism based on the number of listed species within a state.

Over the past ten years, Mississippi's allocation has declined from a high of \$160,000 in 1999, fluctuated as low as \$73,000 and is presently at \$95,536. Recovery of endangered species usually requires much research over several years so inconsistent funding is problematic. Consistent funding was available for several years of research efforts on the Gulf Sturgeon, Yellow Blotched and Ringed Sawback turtles and the information gleaned from those years has been crucial to the recovery efforts of these animals.

Many of the species protected under the ESA in Mississippi are rare and very poorly known. Management and protection of these species will require knowledge of their life histories and habitats. We need more research and recovery efforts for poorly known endangered or threatened species in Mississippi and neighboring States, including those species that might need protection in the future.

Most ESA success stories in Mississippi result from cooperative efforts between Federal and State agencies, and private

or corporate landowners. Guidance and assistance from the local and regional U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service personnel has been essential to our work on behalf of endangered species. USF&WS has the capacity to work regionally and has the expertise to advise states on recovery actions for both endemic and wider ranging species. Mississippi has relied on this expertise often in developing section 6 projects.

Conducting basic research, implementing needed recovery actions, and assisting private cooperators are currently hampered by low funding levels. Even the highest levels of funding ever received under ESA were never enough to address recovery of more than a handful of species. We are concerned about the possibility of an unfunded federal mandate to recover species without the proper resources if more responsibility is shifted from the federal government to the states.

Increasing ESA funding to the states through Section 6 cooperative agreements would only partially satisfy our funding problems because matching requirements already strain our resources. With state revenues declining, meeting the required 25% match is often very difficult. We would like to see an overall reduction in the matching percentage required or see the match requirement indexed to the relative wealth of the states. Finding alternative funding sources through existing grant avenues requires substantial financial and time commitments, and may also have matching requirements. These grants are often competitive and prone to go to more charismatic species or to states which have better means to attract the grants.

We believe a Federal funding source dedicated to State ESA research and recovery would lead to more successes and fewer conflicts. Traditional wildlife and fisheries funding sources, such as Pittman/Roberson and Wallop/Breaux, were instrumental in the restoration of southeastern game and fishes during the past century. A similar commitment is required to recovery threatened and endangered species, and to prevent other rare species from becoming eligible for protection under the ESA.

Some newer federal programs such as the Land Owner Incentive Program (LIP) have the potential to aid in species recovery if funded adequately. Mississippi received a tier 1 LIP grant of \$180,000 to plan and initiate a program but now must compete for very limited funding before the program can be fully implemented.

Many of Mississippi's listed species are aquatic and draw attention to ecosystems in need of management. If we are to recover our aquatic species, we need to manage and protect their river and stream ecosystems. This may require improving water quality, preserving habitat through conservation easements, or re-introductions of species into formerly occupied habitats. These recovery actions will require cooperation between federal, state, and local governments and will require much greater commitment of funding from the federal government than has hitherto been available.

Much has been learned during the past 32 years of the ESA. One major lesson learned is that it is usually easier and cheaper to prevent the decline of a species and its ecosystem than to attempt to restore them after drastic decline. Hopefully, during the decades to come, we can better apply what we have learned.

Another lesson learned is the need to ensure open communication with all stakeholders and to be proactive about identifying and resolving potential conflicts. The MDWFP is dedicated to continuing and improving this approach.