

## NEWSBRIEFS

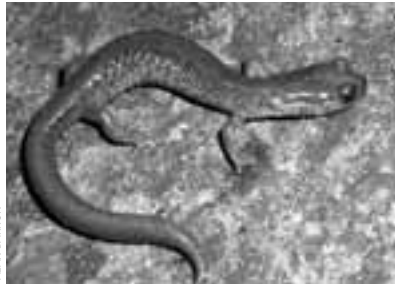
### Pseudoscience Used to Deny Protection for Salamanders

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service determined that Siskiyou Mountains (*Plethodon stormi*) and Scott Bar (*P. asupak*) salamanders do not warrant protection under the Endangered Species Act. The finding relies heavily on studies conducted by Timber Products Company, a major regional landowner who stands to profit from a lack of habitat-based logging restrictions, to argue that the salamanders do not need old-growth forests to survive.

“The decision to deny the Siskiyou Mountains and Scott Bar salamanders protection flies in the face of sound science,” stated Noah Greenwald, conservation biologist with the Center for Biological Diversity. “The Bush administration has become infamous for suppressing science to support resource extraction and this decision is no exception.”

The finding admits that the only peer-reviewed science on the habitat requirements of the salamanders found that they were closely associated with old-growth forests. Indeed, the study conducted by Forest Service researchers concluded: “... mature to late-seral-forest attributes provide optimal habitat for the Siskiyou Mountains Salamander” and “... stands of mature and older forests evenly distributed and interconnected across the geographical range of this species would likely best insure its long-term viability.” Yet in their finding, Fish and Wildlife repeatedly discounted these conclusions by relying on unpublished timber industry studies to conclude that the salamanders “persist in a wide variety of habitat conditions.” They rely on these studies despite acknowledging that they were not based on systematic unbiased sampling, were never peer-reviewed, and were conducted by the timber industry. This kind of selective reliance on science has become all too characteristic of the agency under the Bush administration.

“The Bush administration has slammed the door on protection of endangered species,” said Joseph Vaile, Campaign Director for Klamath-Siskiyou Wildlands Center. “The Siskiyou Mountains and Scott Bar sala-



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manders need the safety net of the Endangered Species Act to survive.”

To date, the Bush Administration has protected just 58 species, which is the fewest number in the history of the Endangered Species Act, and hardly compares to the 522 species protected under the Clinton Administration or 231 protected under Bush Sr.’s Administration. The administration has not listed a single species for 625 days — by far the longest drought in the history of the Act — and has denied or delayed protection for literally hundreds of

imperiled species, including these two salamanders.

Denial of protection for these rare salamanders comes at a time when federal land managers and the state of California are weakening protections. The Forest Service has eliminated the Survey and Manage Program, which required surveys and protection for the salamanders, the Bureau of Land Management is in the process of revising their land management plans for western Oregon to eliminate reserves created by the Northwest Forest Plan, and the California Fish and Wildlife Commission is considering removing protection for the salamanders, which are currently listed as threatened species under the California Endangered Species Act.

“We’re just beginning to understand these unique salamanders that breathe through their skin and primarily live under the cover of old-growth forests,” stated Scott Greacen, Public Lands Coordinator for the Environmental Protection Information Center. “Yet, despite the fact that protections for the salamanders are highly uncertain, Fish and Wildlife has refused to even conduct a status review to determine if federal protection is necessary.”

#### Additional Background Information

The Endangered Species Act is one of America’s most important environmental laws, providing a safety net for wildlife, fish, and plants that are on the brink of extinction. The law requires the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to protect the places these species call home, and to use the most rigorous science available when making management decisions. The Endangered Species Act has prevented the extinction of the American Bald Eagle, Coho Salmon, the Gray Wolf, and hundreds of other animals and plants.

Endangered Species Act protections for the salamanders are necessary, in part, because the Administration has eliminated other environmental safeguards. The salamanders were formerly protected under a provision of the Northwest Forest Plan called the “Survey and Manage” Program, which required the Forest Service and BLM to conduct surveys for the salamander and protect its habitat. The Bush Administration eliminated the Survey and Manage Program on 23 March 2004 to expedite logging of old-growth forest. Hundreds of northwestern wildlife species are threatened by the Administration’s jettisoning of Survey and Manage protections (see [www.endangerearth.org/library/nwfp-saving-the-pieces.pdf](http://www.endangerearth.org/library/nwfp-saving-the-pieces.pdf)). The Survey and Manage Program has been reinstated by court order, but the Bush Administration is in the process of conducting the necessary environmental review to again eliminate the important protections provided by the Program.

### St. Catherine's Island Sea Turtle Program

The St. Catherine's Island Sea Turtle Program (SCISTP) is dedicated to the study of the interactions of coastal geology, biology, and human development on the nesting ecology of Loggerhead Sea Turtles (*Caretta caretta*). The website (created in 1995, revised in 2007) presents an overview of marine turtle nesting habitat and ecology, classification, and reading of Georgia Loggerhead nests, morphology of sea turtle nests deposited in Georgia, protocols used in nest conservation by the SCISTP, a summary of traces and trace fossils left by nesting Loggerhead Sea Turtles, including a description of the World's only described fossilized sea turtle nest from the Cretaceous of Colorado, and models, activities, and downloadable products for science education based on sea turtle conservation. Created in 1990, the program contributes to better understanding and management of Loggerhead Sea Turtle nests in Georgia through "Conservation, Research, and Education." For more information, visit the web site at [www.scistp.org](http://www.scistp.org).



SCISTP

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### Natural Areas Protected in the British Virgin Islands

The System Plan for the BVI has passed Cabinet review and will be approved at the next convenient sitting of the House of Assembly. A formal announcement will be made by the government in the near future. The document provides the context and sets aside a number of natural areas for protection throughout the BVI. All areas as proposed in the document (marine and terrestrial) were approved. Its ultimate passage in the House of Assembly will allow for the expansion of the network of protected areas for the natural and economic benefit of Virgin Islanders.

The National Trust congratulates and expresses a heartfelt thanks to all

who in some way aided in assessing areas and subsequently mapping them, collaborating in various meetings with government and the public, who drafted or revised the multiple versions of the document, who lobbied for its passage and met with various officials, and who provided support for the 27 years it took to pass the system plan. This is a major achievement of which we should be proud and which we should celebrate.

### Rare Victory for Madagascar Tortoises

The Ploughshare Tortoise (*Geochelone yniphora*) is the rarest tortoise in the world. Conservationists are celebrating a double victory over tortoise smugglers in Madagascar. Earlier this month, a Nigerian man was arrested with 300 tortoises and another 20 have been returned to their habitat after being seized on a neighboring island. But campaigners' relief might not last long. The live animal trade, particularly in reptiles, is big business.

The island's unique wildlife also attracts financial interest. The haul of 300 seized from a house after a tip-off may be the largest in the world, conservationists say. Collectors could have netted as much as \$200,000 (£100,000) for them in exotic pet markets.

Eight of the tortoises saved were of the rarest species in the world. Conservationists believe that only about 1,000 Ploughshare Tortoises (*Geochelone yniphora*) remain. They live in a small area of northwestern Madagascar, and the loss of even a small number would be devastating. According to the Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust, the Ploughshare will

be extinct within 10 years if they continue to disappear at the current rate.

It is a global trade. The Nigerian man, who faces up to 10 years if convicted, was found with three passports with three different names from three different countries. The reptiles could have been bound for rare animal markets in Bangkok, Thailand. Although tortoises are protected, some species are still eaten in parts of the country, but the real risk is from international collectors. To buy a tortoise to eat might cost \$10 (£5). To buy one as a pet might cost you \$10,000 (£5,000). "Why do people do it? If you're talking about Malagasy people, they are poor, so they can easily be attracted by big bucks from the smugglers," says Hasina Randriamanampisoa of the Durrell Wildlife Trust. "As far as foreigners are concerned, well I can imagine, some people are so rich they just want something rare in their possession."

Felicitee Rejo Fienena, who works for the government in southern Madagascar, wants more to be done to protect wildlife. "If buyers continue to exist on the international market, then collectors will continue to exist in Madagascar," she says.

The game of cat-and-mouse between collectors and the authorities continues. People trying to protect the tortoises here are wary of advertising the sheer value of the trade for fear of attracting even more fortune hunters to the island. On the other hand, if they do not draw attention to the threat, the desirability of certain species may lead to their extinction.

Jonny Hogg

BBC News, Antananarivo



MICHAEL OGLE

Ploughshare Tortoises (*Geochelone yniphora*) are among the rarest tortoises in the world, with an estimated 1,000 remaining.