

# The March 2017 Conservation Column

By Pepper Trail

This first conservation column of the Trump Administration is all bad news—and I'm sorry to say that we're going to have to get used to that. With anti-environmental forces in full control of Congress and the Presidency, it is going to be a very long four years of playing defense. But poll after poll shows that a majority of Americans are in favor of environmental protection and are concerned about climate change. So, we have to mobilize our fellow citizens and hold our elected officials accountable—and work to replace them when necessary.

And speaking of elected officials, our own Rep. Greg Walden was one of the vast majority of Republican Congressman who recently voted to pass HJ 69, an almost unbelievable bill that removes virtually all controls on the killing of bears and wolves in federal national wildlife refuges in Alaska, even when they are in their dens. Here is a report on the bill from the respected website Snopes.com:

U.S. House Votes to Lift Ban on 'Predator Control' Hunting Practices in Alaska

H.J. Res. 69 nullifies federal protections for hibernating bears, denning wolves, and other predators on national preserves in Alaska.

In a party-line vote overriding the objections of the Sierra Club, the Humane Society, and Alaska wildlife protection groups, the U.S. House of Representatives passed a resolution on 16 February 2017 nullifying Obama-era Department of Interior regulations that prohibit the use of such tactics as baiting, spotlighting, and aerial spotting to hunt predatory animals on national preserve lands in Alaska.

If passed by the Senate and signed by President Trump, H.J. Res. 69 will hand jurisdiction over the hunting of bears, wolves, and coyotes on Alaska's 20 million acres of federally-protected national preserves back to the state, which, since 1994, has had "predator control" laws on the books aimed at maximizing wild game populations for recreational hunting.

After years of disputing the legality of some of these practices, the National Park Service and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service implemented new rules in 2015 and

2016 permanently banning them in national preserves. The rules, which do not apply to subsistence hunting nor to lands not under the protection of the federal government, prohibit the following:

- Taking black or brown bear cubs or sows with cubs (exception allowed for resident hunters to take black bear cubs or sows with cubs under customary and traditional use activities at a den site October 15 – April 30 in specific game management units in accordance with State law);

- Taking brown bears over bait;

- Taking of bears using traps or snares;

- Taking wolves and coyotes during the denning season (May 1 – August 9); and

- Taking bears from an aircraft or on the same day as air travel has occurred. The take of wolves or wolverines from an aircraft or on the same day as air travel has occurred is already prohibited under current refuge regulations.

Despite support from scientific, environmental, and animal welfare advocacy groups, the regulations have been unpopular with many Alaskans. In January 2017, Alaska officials filed a lawsuit contending that the regulations amount to federal overreach and will have an adverse impact on the ecosystem and citizens of the state. In February 2017, with the support of the National Rifle Association (NRA) and Safari Club International, Rep. Don Young (R-Alaska) introduced H.J. Res. 69 to redress what he termed a “wrongful seizure of authority” by the federal government:

From the beginning, I said I would do everything in my power to overturn this illegal jurisdictional power grab by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Today, we’re one step closer to delivering on that commitment and eliminating a wrongful seizure of Alaska’s fish and wildlife management authority. I’m thankful to all those that played a role in moving this important resolution of disapproval,

including that countless state and local stakeholders that worked with me to fight a very serious and alarming overreach by the Executive Branch. I look forward to seeing the swift consideration of H.J. Res. 69 in the Senate.

The Humane Society of the United States took exception in a 16 February 2017 statement arguing that passage of the bill should “shock the conscience of every animal lover in America”:

The U.S. House of Representatives overturned a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service rule that stopped a set of appalling and unsporting predator control methods on national wildlife refuges in Alaska. These egregious practices include shooting or trapping wolves while at their dens with cubs, using airplanes to scout for grizzly bears to shoot, trapping bears with cruel steel-jawed leghold traps and wire snares and luring grizzly bears with food to get a point blank kill. Republicans, with only a few dissents, provided the votes for the measure, which passed by a vote of 225 to 193.

H.J. Res. 69 is now before the Senate, where it must be passed and sent to President Trump for signature before it can take effect.

Next up, an editorial from the February 21 edition of the Los Angeles Times about Republican plans to dismantle the Endangered Species Act:

With this Congress, the Endangered Species Act itself might be endangered

Elections have consequences, as the saying goes, and here’s another one arising

from conservative Republicans taking complete control of the federal government: The Endangered Species Act, which played a significant role in saving the bald eagle and the California condor from extinction, is now itself endangered. Were Congress and President Trump to accede to the demands of anti-regulatory zealots and gut the nature-protecting act, it would be calamitous for hundreds of plant and animal species, local ecosystems, and the complex interconnections that sustain the natural world.

The usual argument against the act is roughly that it is not used to protect species, but to stifle development. “States, counties, wildlife managers, home builders, construction companies, farmers, ranchers, and other stakeholders are

all making it clear that the Endangered Species Act is not working today,” Sen. John Barrasso (R-Wyo.), said at a recent Senate Environment and Public

Works Committee hearing he chaired. How is the act not working? According to its detractors, only 47 of 1,652 species to receive protection since the act was passed in 1973 have recovered enough to get promoted off the endangered species list.

What that argument misses, according to the Center for Biological Diversity, is that the act has helped keep nearly every species added to the list from fading into extinction. Success here should be measured by saves, and by that yardstick, the Endangered Species Act has been a clear success – only 30 species have disappeared after being placed on the list. Some scientists argue that adding species to the list earlier, before they reach a crucial state, would add to that success. So if Barrasso and his colleagues want to “modernize” the act, as they claim, they would work to make it more robust.

But no. Their goal isn’t to nurture species to recovered status, but to make it easier to develop wilderness areas and encroach on crucial habitats. Barrasso is among the western Republicans who want to turn federal land over to state control under the spurious argument that states know best how to care for it. They’re really trying to open public land for private exploitation, the environmental costs be damned.

The act does have its shortcomings. The focus is on habitat preservation, which is important, but scientists now believe there need to be more adaptive solutions, such as public-private partnerships to integrate wildlife habitats with development, and more efficient use of the act as the nation adapts to changing habitats. That should be the road map for revising the act, and conservationists from the left and right need to pressure Congress to ensure pro-development forces don’t destroy the act under the guise of fixing it.

Well, enough bad news for one column. Let’s not forget that there are still amazing wildlands and beautiful wildlife all around—and take the time to get out there and enjoy them. And, yes, I’m mostly reminding myself!