

# Incentives for change

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Nearly 32 years after it was signed into law, the Endangered Species Act still stands strong as the world's most powerful conservation legislation.

The sight of rare peregrine falcons nesting again along the Manhattan skyline, and gray whales, hunted nearly to extinction a century ago, once more splashing playfully like 40-ton children off the California coast, are testaments to its value. Poll after poll shows it enjoys broad, bipartisan support among American voters.

But the time has come when some changes may be needed—to strengthen, not weaken, the way we administer the act for generations to come.

There is growing appreciation that the cost of achieving this great public good falls disproportionately on the shoulders of a relative few.

That's because most endangered species today are found on private lands. The Endangered Species Act prevents landowners from harming the species or disrupting behaviors essential to their survival. Yet it provides few incentives to encourage owners to view the species' presence as a good thing.

We need to change this culture of negativity.

Nicholas School scientists, economists and policy experts are investigating new ways to align incentives and help landowners realize greater value from endangered species conservation. Among the options we're studying:

- **Find new, cost-effective ways to assist owners financially**, such as the Australian government's reverse auction program, in which landowners compete for biodiversity conservation grants.
- **Put the market to work by assigning real economic value** to biodiversity, clean

water and other essential services ecosystems provide, just as we assign value to tangible resources like timber. Landowners could sell these services in ecosystem markets. If one owner wanted to log land where a threatened species might nest, he could pay another owner to conserve the species elsewhere. A Nicholas School graduate has helped create a functioning ecosystem market for red-cockaded woodpecker conservation in the Southeast that now serves as a model for similar initiatives nationwide.

- **Put more emphasis on endangered species** when allocating funds through existing habitat conservation initiatives, such as the USDA's Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program, which pays farmers to conserve buffer strips along rivers and streams and other critical habitat.



## Seeing the big picture

Using new geospatial technologies, Nicholas School researchers are developing region-wide databases that can help landowners and other stakeholders see endangered species conservation from a broader perspective. When completed, the databases will show critical habitats, ecosystem health and changing land use patterns over the species' entire range, not at just one site. This can help us better identify conservation priorities and get the most bang for the buck from limited dollars.

It is imperative that we strictly enforce the Endangered Species Act, but enforcement only goes so far. It is equally important that we provide incentives and tools to enable and encourage private stewardship.

Landowners are vital allies, not enemies, in endangered species conservation. They need to be part of the solution.

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