

The Long View

Why Save the Marbled Murrelet?

By Tanya Sanerib

Some may question why it is important to protect a specific species from extirpation. Take the marbled murrelet, which is dwindling in Oregon's forests but is surviving in British Columbia: why should the marbled murrelet be saved in Oregon? Put simply, the murrelet must be saved for its own sake, wherever it still survives, and because saving the murrelet helps us preserve habitat for other species including ourselves.

Marbled murrelets are small seabirds that are listed as "threatened" under the Endangered Species Act. Even with their protected status, murrelets are losing ground, largely due to habitat loss from the logging of Oregon's coastal old-growth forests that these birds need for nesting. After years of dissatisfaction with the State of Oregon's efforts to protect the murrelet, environmental groups have brought litigation in federal court to enforce the Act and protect marbled murrelets in Oregon. The litigation is necessary to ensure that the murrelet survives in Oregon.

The policy of the United States, as set forth in and as implemented by the ESA, is to protect all species throughout their range. The ESA upholds the intrinsic value of each species. A species becomes endangered or threatened only after a five-step analysis that assesses its characteristics, biological needs, and threats. This analysis is critical from a legal standpoint, but it also shines a spot-

light on the unique role that each species plays in its native ecosystem.

Marbled murrelets must be protected in Oregon's forest because they symbolize the state's majestic coastal, old-growth forests and because they are – like any species – intrinsically valuable, unique, and hold keys to the secrets of evolution and life.

For example, the marbled murrelet is the only tree-nesting sea bird. Murrelets do not build nests. With their large, webbed feet, murrelets need old-growth trees with large branches and a stable platform for landing. A murrelet pair will select such a platform covered in moss on which to lay a single egg. The male and female murrelet take turns incubating the egg and fishing at sea. Under the cover of dawn and dusk, they stealthily fly through the forest with great speed to avoid detection by predators. With luck, the murrelet pair produce an offspring that, in a month's time, becomes a juvenile and flies out to sea. Like any species, the marbled murrelet is uniquely evolved to the habitat on which it depends, and is a symbol of its native home.



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Beyond the intrinsic value of a species like the murrelet, the ESA recognizes the value of the species to humans, as well. The Act's legislative history notes that the cure for cancer or other diseases may reside in nature and that conservation of biological diversity is tantamount to preservation of that cure. Indeed, the notion that the old-growth forests may harbor cures for diseases is not far-fetched: the Pacific yew tree is the source for the cancer drug Taxol. Protecting the old-growth forests of Oregon can save not only the murrelet but the possibility of yet-undiscovered cures as well.

(Continued on page 2)

While the ESA takes a species-by-species approach to conservation, it also recognizes that protecting a species requires preservation of the ecosystem on which it depends. In this way, the ESA can protect many species that depend on a common habitat.

Over 1,000 plants and animals are associated with old-growth forests in the Pacific Northwest, many of which maintain healthy watersheds and preserve water quality. Keeping these forests intact benefits native species as well as people, who take refuge in nature from the screens, commercialism, and fast pace of life we live today.

Many know that Oregon's wild places are being rapidly lost to logging, mining, development, and other uses. They know that saving habitat for species like the murrelet can save these last wild places for ourselves, too. ■

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