September XX, 2023

The President

The White House

1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.

Washington, D.C. 20500

**Re: Meeting the Challenges of the Biodiversity and Extinction Crisis Over the Next 50 Years**

Dear Mr. President:

The Endangered Species Act (“the Act”) is one of the most successful conservation laws ever enacted by any nation. It has prevented the extinction of the overwhelming majority of wildlife and plant species under its protection. As our country, the Departments of the Interior and Commerce, and our organizations all commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Act and its extraordinary achievements, we must recognize that our planet faces an existential crisis with more and more species facing extinction in the coming decades.

Thus, as we reflect and celebrate the Act’s achievements, we ask that you initiate bold action that mobilizes the entirety of the federal government to stem the loss of biodiversity and halt the global extinction crisis. Importantly, this includes consulting with Tribal governments and honoring federal trust obligations to Tribal communities, which has too often been overlooked and under prioritized. To truly be a success, a whole-of-government approach must also recognize and incorporate indigenous knowledge and practices to support conservation and biodiversity, safeguard the rights and needs of indigenous peoples, and ensure social equity and justice in decision-making.

The unraveling of the natural world remains a fundamental threat to the well-being of all humanity, which depends on millions of species and the countless services that the web of life provides. Each extinction brings closer the collapse of these planetary life-support systems, including carbon sequestration, pollination, water purification, oxygen production and disease regulation. To regain the United States’ position as a global leader in conservation and prevent mass extinctions, we all must take swift action that matches the extent and scale of the problem. Accordingly, we ask you to take the following bold actions so that national policies to prevent extinction, recover species, and address the biodiversity crisis are even more successful during the next 50 years than they have been in the previous 50 years.

1. **Implement Whole of Government Approaches to Saving Biodiversity and Endangered Species**

A national biodiversity strategy is needed to articulate the nation’s commitment to stemming the biodiversity and extinction crises at home and abroad. The strategy would serve as a blueprint for a whole-of-government response to tackling species extinction and addressing the primary threats to biodiversity, ecosystem services and ultimately, humanity. The strategy should address the five drivers of biodiversity loss — habitat degradation and fragmentation, climate change, wildlife exploitation, invasive species, and pollution; secure and restore critical ecosystem services; and reestablish the nation as a global leader in biodiversity conservation.

This approach would mobilize a stronger, more coordinated national response to the existential challenge we are facing. The strategy would direct federal agencies to pursue actions within existing laws and policies and promote innovation for developing new tools to protect biodiversity. It would also provide governments, corporations, and non-profits with a roadmap for actions needed to address the crisis’ major drivers.

1. **Boost Recovery of Endangered Species Through Robust Funding and Engaging Agencies Across Government**

The Endangered Species Act has been fiscally starved for decades and, as a result, has been severely compromised from realizing its full potential. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service currently receives less than half of the funding required to fully implement the Act’s mandate to recover listed species. The Department of the Interior should support, and the Congress should fund, an increase to well over $800 million for the Service’s endangered species conservation. Significant increases also should be provided for the National Marine Fisheries Service Protected Resources Science and Management program.

In addition, the Endangered Species Act contains a long-neglected requirement found in Section 7(a)(1) that requires all federal agencies to prioritize the conservation and recovery of endangered species. Unfortunately, most federal agencies have not fully embraced their obligation, and some have patently ignored their obligation to conserve listed animals and plants. Thus, the Departments of the Interior and Commerce should:

* Direct all federal agencies — in consultation with Tribal and Indigenous communities — to finalize proactive conservation programs that advance the conservation of endangered species and help to restore declining wildlife and plants.
* Direct the Secretary of the Interior, through the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the Secretary of Commerce, through the National Marine Fisheries Service, to establish minimum requirements for what a conservation program shall include. The goal and guiding principle of any such program must ultimately be the proactive, landscape-level conservation and recovery of the species.

1. **Adopt an Ambitious Ecosystem-based Framework to Recover Endangered Species and Rebuild America’s Wildlife Populations**

Globally, one million animal and plant species face extinction within the coming decades and millions more are declining as habitat loss, climate change, wildlife exploitation, pollution, and other human activities continue to threaten their survival. In North America alone, we have lost nearly three billion birds since 1970.[[1]](#footnote-1) That is more than one in four birds that have disappeared from our landscape in a mere half a century. In that same time frame, global wildlife populations have declined by an average of 69%.[[2]](#footnote-2) Here in the United States, nearly half of all ecosystems are at risk of range-wide collapse.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Conserving threatened and endangered species is not limited to merely preventing their extinction. Under the Endangered Species Act, the conservation of listed species includes the much more ambitious goal of ensuring “listed species *and their ecosystems* are restored and their future is safeguarded to the point that protections under the ESA are no longer needed.” Yet despite the paramount importance of recovery in the Endangered Species Act, the concept of what “recovery” means remains poorly defined. In addition, recovery criteria are often inconsistently applied across species and lack a clear biological rationale. The current approach too often focuses exclusively on biological extinction risk to gauge recovery and fails to consider the important roles myriad species play in the ecosystems they live in. For example, when a keystone species disappears, the entire ecosystem is disrupted, causing cascading changes that can have harmful, far-ranging consequences.

Thus, confronting the widespread loss of biodiversity will require the Biden administration to implement a more ambitious, ecosystem-based framework that not only repairs what has been harmed but rebuilds populations of wildlife and plant species so that our natural heritage can be preserved for generations and centuries to come. Perhaps the best example of what recovery should look like is the Bald Eagle, which achieved healthy and increasing populations in nearly all 50 states and is now a meaningful part of a diverse spectrum of habitats and ecosystems.

Therefore, we urge the Biden administration to rapidly adopt a more holistic approach to recovery that considers not only minimum viable populations, but also a species’ role in the ecosystems it inhabits, as the Act originally envisioned. In doing so, the administration should prioritize the protection of key areas that will increase ecosystem resiliency and preserve biodiversity hotspots in the United States, the habitat of critically endangered species, and the diversity of habitats found across the nation.

Combating the global wildlife extinction crisis, stemming the loss of biodiversity, and restoring our natural heritage will require the Biden administration to be bolder and more visionary than any other administration in history. There is no time to waste. The actions we take today will affect whether future generations live in a world where Polar Bears and Monarch Butterflies still exist, or one where they can only be found in zoos. Thus, we urge the Biden administration to take these bold steps to ensure that the Endangered Species Act and much-needed, new initiatives to conserve biodiversity continue to save and restore the natural world around us for another 50 years and beyond.

Sincerely,

Center for Biological Diversity

Defenders of Wildlife  
Endangered Species Coalition

Sierra Club

Western Watersheds Project

WildEarth Guardians

1. Rosenberg, L. V. et al. *Decline of the North American avifauna*. Science (2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. WWF (2022) Living Planet Report 2022 – Building a naturepositive society. Almond, R.E.A., Grooten, M., Juffe Bignoli, D. & Petersen, T. (Eds). WWF, Gland, Switzerland. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. NatureServe, Biodiversity in Focus: United States Edition (2023). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)