The Endangered Species Act (ESA) of 1973 is comprehensive federal legislation designed to protect all species in the United States designated as endangered by protecting habitats critical to their survival. Congress passed the ESA with near unanimity in both the House (390–12) and Senate (95–0), and the bill was signed into law by President Richard Nixon on December 28, 1973. The ESA was part of an unprecedented period in U.S. environmental policy characterized by a flurry of major legislation. Of the dozens of laws enacted during this period—including the National Environmental Policy Act (1969), Clean Air Act (1970), and Clean Water Act (1972)—the Endangered Species Act proved to be one of the most controversial. Opponents have claimed that ESA is a tool unjustly used to bar commercial access to public lands and deprive private property owners of their rights. Ironically, the legislation is also controversial among some environmentalists, who claim that ESA is ineffective at protecting species, for several reasons: the length of time necessary to get a species added to the endangered list, inadequate protection of habitats once the species is listed, and perverse incentives for private landowners to destroy endangered species’ habitats.

Under ESA, a species may be listed as either endangered or threatened, for the purpose of assisting in the recovery of its natural population. The ESA defines an endangered species as one “in danger of extinction throughout all or a significant portion of its range.” A threatened species is any deemed “likely to become an endangered species through all or a significant portion of its range.” The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) administers the ESA for all terrestrial and freshwater species, the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) for all marine species. Once a species is listed, the secretary of the USFWS or NMFS must designate critical habitats—the terrestrial or aquatic area necessary for the existence of the species—and develop a suitable recovery plan.

Under the terms of the ESA, the decision to list a species must be based entirely on science; economic factors may not be taken into account. This stipulation has been a major focal point of conflict from the outset. Opponents of the measure have argued that the economic consequences of listing a species as endangered or threatened deserve consideration. Proponents insist that economic concerns should not be taken into account during the listing process—which may determine the survival or extinction of a particular species—but that the development of critical habitat and recovery plans take economic factors into account by allowing the incidental harm of an endangered or threatened species.

Two of the most controversial cases involving the listing of a species and the conflict over economic considerations involved the snail darter in Tennessee and the spotted owl in the Pacific Northwest. In 1973,
Ecologist Michael Johnson discovered the snail darter, a small brown-gray fish, upstream of the Tennessee Valley Authority’s development project for the Tellico Dam on the Little Tennessee River. The species was quickly listed as endangered, resulting in the issuance of an injunction to halt construction of the nearly complete $160 million dam. The U.S. Supreme Court affirmed the injunction to halt construction on the grounds that economic concerns should not be taken into account, but Congress eventually passed an exception in this case to allow completion of the dam. In the end, the snail darter was transplanted to the nearby Hiwassee River (and later, as it turned out, the fish was found existing in other waterways; in 1984 it was downgraded from endangered to threatened). The case of the spotted owl presented a similar controversy. The northern spotted owl is dependent on old-growth forest, which is highly coveted by the timber industry. The owl was listed as a threatened species in 1990, which promptly halted logging of critical habitat in national forestland. Many timber workers were left without work, causing opponents of the ESA to cite this case as an example of the far-reaching—and, for some, devastating—economic implications of the law.

As of the spring 2007, 1,880 species in the United States had been officially listed as threatened or endangered. In the ESA’s thirty-four-year history, only twenty-three species had been dropped from the list. With the recovery of species being the paramount goal of the legislation, some environmentalist critics cite this as evidence that the ESA has failed to live up to its purpose. Moreover, some environmentalists fear that the designation of critical habitats leads certain landowners to destroy habitat on private land prior to the listing of a species, so as to avoid government regulation. At the same time, however, only nine listed species have been removed from the endangered species list due to extinction—which proponents of the ESA point to as evidence of legislative success. One success story is that of the bald eagle, which was removed from the endangered species list in 2007 after four decades of protection, growing in number from about 400 to 10,000. Regardless of one’s perspective, the Endangered Species Act is likely to remain a contentious issue in U.S. environmental policy as long as it remains in effect.

David N. Chernow

See also Arnold, Ron; Environmental Movement; Forests, Parklands, and Federal Wilderness; Nixon, Richard; Watt, James.

Further Reading

English as the Official Language
Since the 1980s, a movement referred to as “official English” by proponents—and “English-only” by critics—has actively pushed for codifying English as the national language of the United States. Neither the U.S. Constitution nor any federal statutes mandate an official language. In 1983, Senator James Inhofe (R-OK) founded the advocacy group U.S. English, Inc., based in Washington, D.C., to lobby for passage of such a measure. Another prominent group in the movement is called ProEnglish, founded in 1994 and based in Arlington, Virginia.

The first attempt to legislate English as the national language began in 1981, when U.S. Senator S.I. Hayakawa (R-CA) introduced a constitutional amendment. “Official English” bills and constitutional amendments have been introduced in every subsequent session of Congress, but none has come close to final enactment. In 1996, the House of Representatives approved such a bill, but it was never voted on by the Senate. Federal reluctance to make English the official language contrasts with sentiment in thirty states and a number of municipalities that have enacted such measures, including Hawaii’s designation of both English and Hawaiian as the state’s official languages. In 2002, the Superior Court of Alaska struck down that state’s English initiative, which had been passed by 68 percent of voters, ruling in favor of Yupik Eskimos, the plaintiffs in the case.

Activists for “official English” emphasize the cause of national unity, asserting that the country could split into diverse linguistic communities without an official national language. In support of their argument, they point to countries such as Belgium and Canada, where language diversity has contributed to civil unrest, independence movements, and other forms of societal instability. Not having an official language, they contend, creates little incentive for immigrants to learn English, making assimilation more difficult. They further argue that an informed citizenry depends on command of the English language.

The cost of disseminating information in other languages is another focus of “official English” proponents. Taxpayers’ money is wasted, they argue, if matters of society have to be translated and posted in different languages. While proponents concede that materials should be published in other languages for the promotion of public health, safety, tourism, and foreign language...