

# Endangered Wildlife: Oversight Prods Underactivity

"This reminds me of a G.I. inspection," drawled Sen. Wendell Ford (D.-Ky.) as he conducted a recent hearing to review progress by the Department of Interior's sluggish endangered species program. "It seems whenever an oversight hearing occurs, regulations start popping out of the departments right and left."

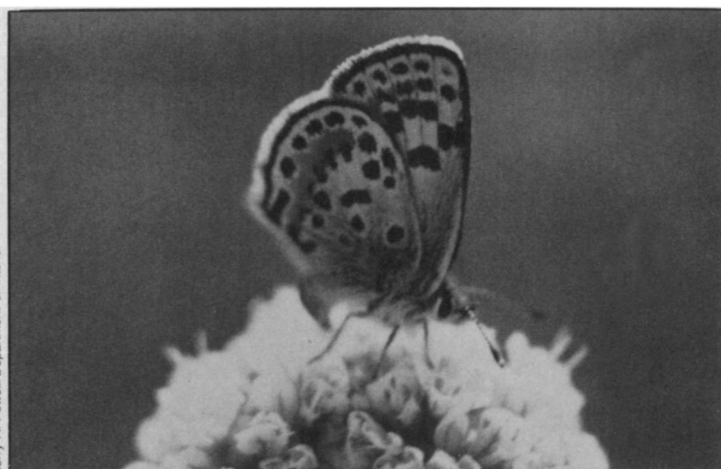
Such has been the case once more, this time prior to Ford's latest Senate Commerce subcommittee hearing: The endangered species office, during the last two weeks in April, proposed 63 species for listing on the official endangered and threatened species list after, for some of the animals, three-year-long delays. While such upswings do serve in the end to protect vanishing species, they tend also to precipitate charges that the delays are both bureaucratic and purposeful.

Bursts of activity immediately before endangered species oversight hearings are starting to form a recognizable pattern. Before hearings were announced by Rep. Robert L. Leggett (D.-Calif.) last fall, only 11 species had been placed on the endangered or threatened lists in more than two years (SN: 10/11/75, p. 230). Between the announcement and the hearing itself, the endangered species office proposed almost 400 species for listing.

This time, a week before the Senate subcommittee hearing, which was held May 6, that office proposed 32 U.S. snails for inclusion on the endangered or threatened lists, and officially listed two swallowtail butterflies, the gray bat and the Mexican wolf. A week before that, the office proposed inclusion of 27 primate species (under study for more than two years) including the chimpanzee, the squirrel monkey and the stump-tail macaque.

Until an animal is officially "listed," it does not qualify for the extensive protection afforded by the Endangered Species Act. The 63 latest inclusions will therefore soon receive necessary protection from habitat destruction, hunting and uncontrolled importation (of foreign species). "But I can't jump up and down about these listings," says one government scientist and close observer of the endangered species program, "because in many cases they are unconscionably overdue and the delays were purely bureaucratic."

Endangered species program head Keith Schreiner defends the long time period required for listing even a single plant or animal: The office is short on manpower and funds, he says, and is overloaded by the careful scientific documentation, status reports, rulemakings and impact statements required by law. But



Henry A. Powell/Department of Interior

*California's "El Segundo Blue" swallowtail will be one of two insects protected by the Endangered Species Act. It was listed just before the latest legislative oversight hearing.*

the record, at least on some of the newly listed animals, shows something quite different.

Department of Interior documents show that at least six of the species proposed within the past three weeks were ready for final signature by the director of the Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife early in 1973. The Mexican wolf, just officially listed as endangered, was also ready for listing early in 1973. Spencer Smith, then director, is reported to have said he had "no time for this sort of thing." Neither, it seems, has anyone else until now.

The legal documentation for listing the chimpanzee as threatened, moreover, was completed in May 1975, and sent to the Fish and Wildlife Service's law enforcement division for signing and final action. Final action after a proposal leaves the endangered species office, one bureaucrat told SCIENCE NEWS, "should have taken about six weeks, not 10 months."

Why, one must wonder, would government officials charged with administering the Endangered Species Act delay protecting endangered species? One scientist working in that program says he still can't tell, even from within the bureaucratic machinery, whether most delays are "bureaucratic gimmicks or necessary and true." Another government scientist lays the blame on the "old fashioned belief structure among Fish and Wildlife administrators that the service's real purpose is to produce a surplus of ducks and deer for hunters." A third observer, a conservation lobbyist, says "The Act is administered by small offices within the Department of Commerce and the Department of the Interior. Their main interests at this point are big business and energy production, not protecting obscure snails, and especially not animals with commercial potential."

Last week's Senate subcommittee

meeting was officially an appropriations hearing on three funding bills awaiting Commerce committee action. But Sen. Ford directed a good deal of attention to "streamlining" the species listing process, particularly in light of the upcoming reorganization within the endangered species office. The reorganization plan is complicated—28 pages worth, in fact—and will establish three separate offices for handling endangered species in place of one. Perhaps the most significant change, however, is that several scientists currently involved in both research and decision-making will be relieved of their administrative duties and assigned to research full time. Rather than determine listing priorities themselves, for example, they will now feed technical information to managers in another office.

This move, one government observer told SCIENCE NEWS, will mainly affect the "dissenters," the scientists who have grown increasingly dissatisfied and vocal about the delays. "From his point of view, I think Schreiner wants a more cooperative atmosphere and sincerely believes this will help the program. But," he says, "this is also the perfect way for Schreiner to increase the number of people involved and thus diffuse responsibility and delay things more, to get the troublemakers out and stick them in the bowels of the department and to stop leaks and outside sniping."

Sen. Ford, in a move roundly applauded by the conservation community, has ordered Schreiner to report monthly on progress toward listing species, rule-making and designating critical habitats. Under such scrutiny, perhaps the graph of activity will look more like an ascending line rather than a flat curve with occasional peaks, says Anne Wickham of Friends of the Earth. "If not," she says, "we'll have to ask for an oversight hearing every three months." □