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The Endangered Species Act was put into place over three decades ago to protect imperiled fish, wildlife and plants from becoming extinct. There are over 1,200 plant and animal species in the United States now listed as threatened or endangered, so agencies tasked with helping these species recover have their work cut out for them. An "endangered" species is one that is in danger of extinction. A "threatened" species is one likely to become endangered. Both receive the same protection, but there is more management flexibility and an allowance for permitting regulated "taking" of threatened species.

Critics of the Endangered Species Act point to the fact that only a handful of species have been delisted since the program has been put into place. There are many factors to consider when removing a species from the endangered or threatened list, and the checks in place are as rigorous to remove a species as they are to add one. Some of the factors taken into account to delist a species are population size, breeding success, a stable habitat, and control or elimination of threats to the population. After a species is delisted, it is monitored by experts to be sure the population is stable.

One species in our neck of the woods that has recovered and been delisted from the Endangered Species Act is the American Alligator. The alligator was put on the endangered species list in 1967, and taken off twenty years later in 1987. The reasons for their decline were overhunting for their meat and hides, destruction of suitable habitat, and a high mortality rate of young alligators. Once on the brink of extinction, now well over a million alligators can be found in the wild today in the Southeast.

Another Endangered Species Act success story is the peregrine falcon, a favorite of birders nationwide. The species was almost wiped out in North America by the use of pesticides containing DDT, which resulted in eggshells being too thin and breaking before the young birds could fully

develop. In 1975 there were only 324 known nesting pairs of peregrine falcons in the U.S., and now there are an estimated 2,000 pairs.

While the ultimate goal of the Endangered Species Act is the full recovery of endangered or threatened species and the ecosystems on which they depend, success of the entire program shouldn't be measured simply by the number of species that are delisted. Recovery of a depleted species takes a substantial amount of time, and success can also be measured by improvement of a species situation. The whooping crane, for example, is still on the list, but since the Act was passed, the population has grown ten-fold from roughly 48 individuals to 468 birds. This is success, even though the species is still endangered, and most certainly will be for years to come. There are many more examples of species that, like the whooping crane, are on their way to a significant recovery, but have not been delisted.

For more information on the Endangered Species Act, or about individual listed species, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is an excellent resource at <http://www.fws.gov/angered/>. As always, feel free to contact me at (251) 438-5690 or by email at bordesm@auburn.edu for more information.