

## **The Patriot-News, December 15, 2002**

### **State's Diversity of Species Shrinking, Report Warns**

By Garry Lenton, Of The Patriot-News

Pennsylvania's broad foundation of native plants, animals and fish is shrinking, taking with it elements that could affect the quality of life of future generations unless steps are taken now to stop the erosion, according to a new report.

The report, "Snapshot 2002: Biodiversity in Pennsylvania," said the state's variation of species is in peril because of pollution, and because habitat is being lost or fragmented. What's more, the state has no coordinated plan to preserve diversity, particularly its largest category -- invertebrates and insects.

The report, a 12-month effort prepared by the Pennsylvania Biodiversity Partnership, a public-private group based in Pittsburgh, is the first of three steps the state is taking to develop a statewide conservation plan by 2005.

The first goal is to inventory the more than 25,000 life forms native to the state, from the tiniest invertebrate to the black bear. In the process, the state will identify regions where natural diversity is threatened and try to find ways to protect it.

At stake, officials said, is about \$7 billion in revenue from logging, hunting and fishing, and eco-tourism; and health benefits. It was estimated that 40 percent of pharmaceuticals were derived from native plants.

The partnership was created because of a recommendation from Gov. Tom Ridge's 21st Century Environment Commission.

"This is a great day for conservation. It's a plan whose time has come," said John Oliver, secretary of the state Department of Conservation and Natural Resources and a principal member of the partnership.

Oliver, who was director of the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy before becoming the state's first DCNR secretary, has been involved in inventorying species since the 1970s. In the past, those efforts have focused on the state's higher visibility animals -- deer, bear, falcons.

Now, Oliver said, more attention needs to be focused on all species.

The report estimates that 150 species of plants and animals have been lost from Pennsylvania, and another 130 are considered rare or endangered globally.

Animals, plants and their habits are lost each year to natural forces, human activities, neglect and lack of coordination, the report says.

Among the biggest threats facing the state:

\* Overgrazing by deer. White tails eat the undergrowth, taking away shelter for species of ground nesting birds; and limiting the diversity of plants and trees.

\* Lack of coordination between state agencies responsible for protecting and conserving wildlife.

\* Information about state species, some dating to the 1740s, is scattered among colleges, universities, museums and state agencies. Much of it is incomplete, out of date or inaccessible.

"We're past the point of raising a casual caution on this issue," said John Rawlins, head of the invertebrate zoology section of the Carnegie Museum of Natural History in Pittsburgh and a member of the partnership. He said the state should focus its attention on preserving the landscapes that support native species.

But to do that, the partnership will need money beyond what it has received from private grants and state sources.

Partnership President Sue A. Thompson, of the Carnegie Museum of Natural History, estimated it will take \$30 million a year to complete the inventory and more for monitoring.

Partnership members also were reluctant to predict the form a statewide conservation plan would take. Thompson and Oliver suggested that changes needed to protect sensitive habitats could be voluntary, rather than through regulation.

But other members of the partnership said new regulations that could affect land development, forest management, and other activities will likely be needed.

"Regulation will have to play a role in it," said Richard Whiteford, a writer and member of the partnership from Downingtown. "I see environmental protection as part of our cost of living."

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