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Endangered Listing for Dunes Sagebrush Lizard Is Critical First Step; What Happens Next Is Even More Important

Recent Listing Decision Highlights the Key Issue for Threatened and Endangered Species

TEXAS AND NEW MEXICO, May 28, 2024 - The recent decision to list the dunes sagebrush lizard as Endangered highlights the difficulties of implementing the single most impactful solution for imperiled species: habitat protection. On June 20, the species will officially receive protection under the Endangered Species Act (ESA), a crucial milestone in its journey to recovery. The success of its continued survival, however, will hinge on whether we can overcome the challenges it's facing to ensure that it has suitable habitat.

The Amphibian and Reptile Conservancy (ARC), a national nonprofit to conserve imperiled wildlife, is working to recover at-risk species across the US and centers habitat protection and restoration in its approach. Now that it's listed, a focus on healthy habitat is exactly what the dunes sagebrush lizard needs.

"We applaud the US Fish and Wildlife Service for making the right decision for the dunes sagebrush lizard," said ARC Executive Director JJ Apodaca. "However, like so many other Threatened and Endangered species, listing them for protection under the Act is only part of the solution."

Efforts have been underway for decades to protect these small, cryptic lizards and their habitats, but much of this work hasn't found the consistent footing needed to ensure the survival of the species. For example, plans for habitat protection and restoration have been developed but then not implemented.

Given the significant population declines they've experienced, dunes sagebrush lizards don't have time for more setbacks. While ESA listing is a critical first step, ultimately, their successful conservation will be largely up to the people and groups working on this species' survival.

As Apodaca explained, "The ESA provides an effective framework and last-resort protection, but if we want to achieve recovery, we as a conservation community must create innovative ways to implement it."

The crux of the matter for dunes sagebrush lizards is that, like many other reptiles, they have more restricted geographic ranges and narrower niche requirements than most other vertebrates.

The dunes sagebrush lizard, in fact, has a very tiny range, one of the smallest of any lizard in the US. Only eight counties in southeast New Mexico and west Texas hold the very specialized habitats it requires, sand dunes dotted with small shinnery oak trees.

"For microendemics like this, threats like habitat loss, degradation, and fragmentation are too often more than they can withstand," said Apodaca. Due to extractive uses, namely oil development and sand mining, only 6% of the remaining habitat in their range is classified as high condition; almost half is in low condition.

Within this range, ARC has identified three PARCAs, or Priority Amphibian and Reptile Conservation Areas. The organization's national strategy is implemented locally in PARCAs throughout the country, which were selected because they contain either high densities of amphibians and reptiles or large numbers of imperiled species - or in many cases, both.

In dozens of PARCAs across the US, ARC's Biologists are carrying out targeted, on-the-ground habitat restoration efforts for at-risk species, including invasive species removal, planting native plants, and more.

In order to implement strategic habitat improvements like this for the dunes sagebrush lizard, however, continued and expanded collaboration and partnerships with landowners and other stakeholders are vital.

"When we have imperiled species on lands with high levels of extractive uses, what we've seen at ARC is that only when we start to form a network around the recovery of the species—including industry, ranchers, conservation nonprofits, and agencies—do conservation efforts blossom," said Apodaca. "And the stakes are high here. If the community doesn't come together quickly, there's a very real possibility that we could lose these lizards forever. They have nowhere else to go."

About Amphibian and Reptile Conservancy (ARC)
Amphibian and Reptile Conservancy, or ARC, is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit focused on identifying and conserving the highest priority places for amphibians and reptiles in the United States. We protect endangered amphibians and reptiles through a strategic, scientific, and passionate approach. We believe the conservation of amphibians, reptiles, and the habitats they depend on is vitally important. To learn more, visit ARCProtects.org.

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