

Federal changes could spell trouble for condors

Trump wants to ease protections

By **MIRANDA DAVIDUK**
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Most people probably aren't thinking about vultures. "We don't notice they're there, but we would notice if they weren't," said Travis Koons, animal curator at the Oregon Zoo.

Known for their scavenging tendencies and bald, fleshy heads, vulture species such as California condors are much more than ugly birds, Koons said.

Vultures are like the friend who finishes off that last bit of food you're too full to eat. They're akin to street-sweepers, cleaning up remnant animal carcasses that others leave behind. Without them, there would be higher rates of disease, bugs and other undesirables, according to Koons.

California condors have made a remarkable comeback from the brink of extinction, thanks in part to efforts at the Oregon Zoo. But recently proposed changes to the Endangered Species Act could have dire consequences for nature's master recyclers.

Originally created to protect threatened and endangered plants, animals and their habitats, the Endangered Species Act has been recognized as the nation's strongest conservation law. In July, the Trump administration proposed changes to the act that would make it harder to protect new species and easier to remove protections — or delist — species that are currently protected, like condors.

"One thing we hear over and over again was that ESA implementation was not consistent and often times very confusing to navigate," said U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Principal Deputy Director Greg Sheehan. "We are proposing these improvements to produce the best conservation results for the species while reducing the regulatory burden on the American people."

Proposed changes would allow potential economic consequences into the equation when determining protections for plants and animals. Currently, the decision is based solely on scientific research. Threatened species would no longer be automatically granted the same protections as endangered species and critical habitats could shrink, among other things.



Photos by Miranda Daviduk/Oregon Public Broadcasting
California condors have bald, fleshy heads to stay clean when they eat.

"The proposed changes would reduce regulatory protections and our influence over endangered species management," said Dr. Donald Moore, director of the Oregon Zoo. "It might significantly decrease the condor's survival as a species."

The California condors' range once extended from British Columbia, all along the Pacific Coast and down to Baja California.

According to Fish and Wildlife records, only 23 condors remained in the world by 1982. By 1987, all remaining wild condors were placed in a captive breeding program as a last-ditch recovery effort.

It worked. The first birds were reintroduced into the wild in 1992. As of 2017, global California condor counts were up to more than 460 birds, both wild and captive. That was a 6.4 percent increase from 2016.

The Oregon Zoo boasts the second-largest condor program in the country, housing one-tenth of the world's California condor population, according to Moore.

He credits the species' recovery to protections from the Endangered Species Act.

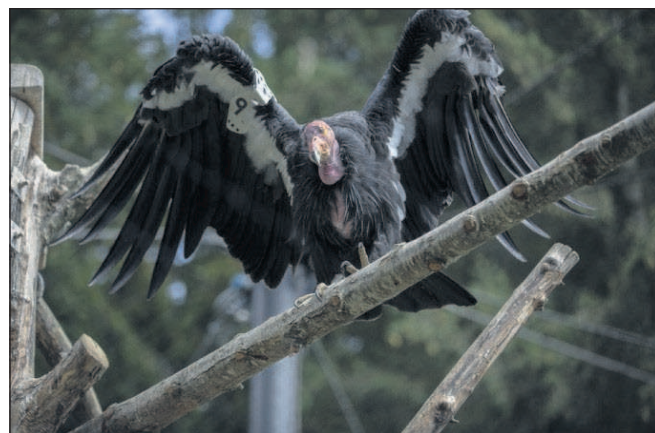
"We've been working really hard on producing condors and reintroducing them," Moore said. "Any proposed changes that would weaken the act would weaken our ability to keep animals from going extinct."

One big threat to condor recovery: lead poisoning. When the current head of the Interior Department, Ryan Zinke, took office, one of his first acts in office was to rescind an Obama administration regulation that banned lead ammunition.

Lead has been the greatest cause of wild population mortality, resulting in approximately 50 percent of known

causes of death since 1992, according to a Fish and Wildlife Service report. To remedy this, educational programs such as the Hunting With Non-Lead initiative have been created to educate the public, particularly hunters, on the lethal effects on wildlife from lead ammunition.

"Lead exposure has been identified as the leading cause in mortality in free-flying juvenile and adult condors," said Leland Brown the non-lead hunting education coordinator for the Oregon Zoo. "It's not



The Oregon Zoo is home to one-tenth of the world's population of California condors. This one is named Kaweah.

visible to hunters — so they're unaware that it's happening."

When a lead bullet enters an animal, toxic fragments spread through the wound channel — leaving fragments of lead in the carcass. Scavengers ingest lead when feasting on the animal remnants leading to lead poisoning.

Although polls show that 90 percent of Americans support the Endangered Species Act, its efficacy is debated. According to the Center for Biological Diversity, between 1973 to 2013, the act prevented extinction for 99 percent of species under its protection. But critics argue inefficiency, saying only 1 percent of species protected by the act have recovered enough for delisting.

California condors were one of the very first animals listed under the Endangered Species Act.

"Condors are one of the most successful species of that program and it's a direct result of that attention and awareness," Koons said. "It's pretty critical that we reverse this way we're headed."

Since 2004, 51 condors have been reared at the Oregon Zoo and released into the wild, according to Koons. Six more will be released Sept. 22 in Arizona. But without protections and funding, condors would likely cease to exist.

"They'd be a doomed species," Koons said.

Koons' goal is to see condors flying over Oregon skies within the next five to 10 years.

"In my lifetime, I want to go all the way up to Astoria and see condors flying where they used to be."

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I'd like you to join me in welcoming **Eric J. Anderson**, who is a new addition to our community. Eric is no stranger to the area or to the Hughes-Ransom Mortuaries, and has on occasion temporarily filled in to help at both the Seaside and Astoria Mortuaries. Some may recall that Eric was one of the funeral directors involved in the 2016 funeral services for fallen Seaside Police Officer, Jason Gooding, when he was tragically killed in the line of duty. When a full time vacancy became available at Hughes-Ransom, Eric moved back to Oregon from Park Rapids, MN. His arrival this spring has been a most welcome and much appreciated addition by the professional staff to manage both Hughes-Ransom locations.
Eric was born and raised in Fosston, Minnesota the youngest of seven children. Being 100% Norwegian, Eric is very familiar with our local Scandinavian heritage. Eric attended Concordia College in Moorhead, Minnesota before graduating from the University of Minnesota with a Bachelor's Science Degree in Mortuary Science. Soon after graduating from college, Eric moved to Eugene, OR and worked in the funeral business 18 years.
Eric is the proud father of three children, a son Drew who is in the Marines, currently stationed in Twenty Nine Palms, Ca and two daughters, Isabella is a freshman in college in Wyoming and Olivia is a Jr in High School in Minnesota. Eric enjoys the outdoors, golfing, fishing, hunting and camping. Eric's experience with midwestern traditions and west coast experience is a great addition to the community.
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