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Ending protection of endangered animals is good politics, not science

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Back when some of us were in elementary school, the teachers would show films about food production around the world.

At some point in the movie, the narrator would conclude that in the future, as the global population rose, people would turn increasingly to the sea as a primary food source.

The future has arrived, and what do you know? In the last 50 years, we've depleted 90 percent of each of the major large ocean fish species, from cod to marlin to halibut, according to a recently released Canadian study.

A May 15 Washington Post article about the study noted, "The new research found that fishing has become so efficient that it typically takes just 15 years to remove 80 percent or more of any species unlucky enough to become the focus of a fleet's attention."

The regulators, those in charge of protecting our natural resources, have another story.

A National Marine Fisheries Service study, released in mid-May and covered in the same article, reported that American fisheries have shown "steady, incremental improvement."

Some species, once in trouble, are "fully rebuilt;" others are "recovering," the fisheries service concluded.

With the scientific assessment in hand, it's a little difficult to view the regulator's conclusions as anything more than wishful thinking or political posturing.

To be more charitable, we could attribute the fisheries service's optimism to a reliance on what's called a "shifting baseline."

Fisheries biologist Daniel Pauly coined the term, and it's an important one to understand nowadays, especially in its environmental context.

A baseline provides a reference point against which change can be measured. Presumably, in assessing the health of a species or an ecosystem, we try to document how it functioned before extensive interaction with humans.

“But if the baseline shifted before we really had a chance to chart it, then we can end up accepting a degraded state as normal, or even as an improvement,” says Randy Olson, a University of Southern California faculty member in marine biology.

So, let's say the population of a certain fish has dropped 90 percent from 1950, but its population has doubled over the past 10 years. If the fisheries service sets 1993 as its baseline, then, voila! the species has miraculously recovered.

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission must have used some creative baselines in proposing that manatees, black bear, red-cockaded woodpeckers, and a host of other species no longer need the degree of protection they've enjoyed in the past.

Florida is one of the fastest growing states. It loses hundreds of acres a day to development. The greatest threat to wildlife is loss of habitat. And now the regulators want us to believe that these animals are in better shape than they used to be?

The agency estimates the Florida panther population at 80 adults for the entire state. Sure, that's better than the 30 or so that reportedly lived here in the mid-'80s. But it's hardly a resurgence to guarantee the survival of the species.

Let's not kid ourselves. Wild animals are getting in the way of people who want to make money building houses, building docks, and building malls.

Lifting their protection is good politics if not sound science.

If the wildlife commissioners succumb to the pressure, they can add something else to the endangered list: their own credibility.

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