

**Wildlife Corridor Protection and
implementing the Wildlife Corridors Conservation Act
are crucial steps to promoting habitat connectivity
and safeguarding America's biodiversity**

*Statement for the House Natural Resources Committee,
Subcommittee on Water Oceans and Wildlife*

United States House of Representatives

October 17, 2019

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Introduction

As many as one million species worldwide are now at risk of extinction, according to the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) 2019 report on biodiversity from the United Nations. Within the United States, we also face an extinction crisis—the red wolf, for example, tragically now has fewer than 40 individual animals left in the wild.ⁱ While the crisis in the U.S. is tempered somewhat by our strong Endangered Species Act and our long history of investing in land and water conservation, many species remain on the brink of extinction in this country.

The forces driving extinction in the United States are the same challenges facing species conservation across the rest of the world. Our planet's tremendous biodiversity is under serious threat from habitat loss, habitat fragmentation (breaking what is left of natural habitats into smaller and more isolated pieces), emerging diseases, invasive species, climate change, overharvesting and overfishing, as well as environmental degradation.

One core strategy for preventing further extinctions in the United States is protecting and restoring habitat connectivity.

More than 20 years of published scientific research from 180 scientific studies have shown that maintaining habitat connectivity and wildlife corridors are critical for the survival of many species.ⁱⁱ Corridors increase the movement of species between populations by approximately 50% compared to patches that are not connected.ⁱⁱⁱ Maintaining—or in many cases restoring—habitat connectivity can help stabilize or even reverse the impacts of habitat loss and fragmentation. Connectivity is also essential for allowing species to adapt to climate change. We therefore suggest that improving habitat connectivity should be considered a top priority in this country and across the globe, if we are serious about forestalling the current biodiversity extinction crisis.

How do we enhance connectivity for biodiversity? One common approach is to identify and protect wildlife corridors, which are protected movement pathways that allow animals and plants to migrate or move between two or more specific places. Another way is to protect habitat linkages, which are broader and more generalized areas that provide connectivity at the regional-scale. A third strategy is to mitigate the effects of roads on wildlife movement, since roads and traffic often act as the most significant barriers to terrestrial animals roaming around the landscape. Lastly, connectivity for species that live in water can often be greatly enhanced by removing or modifying dams or other impediments that would otherwise block fish passage.

How does improving habitat connectivity prevent species extinction?

A well-connected natural landscape provides essential opportunities for species to migrate in response to climate change. In fact, improving habitat connectivity is the strategy most often recommended by scientists for allowing species to adapt to changing climate conditions. This makes sense, as based on what we know, migration is how species have survived historical changing climates for millions of years. The current rate of human-generated climate change is

unprecedented. Furthermore, we've broken many landscapes up in such a way that species can no longer move to keep up with their preferred conditions. We need to take immediate steps to reconnect our natural landscapes to enable the massive levels of migration that will be vital to preventing climate-induced extinctions across the United States

Wildlife corridors and habitat linkages serve a vital role in connecting parks and wildlife refuges that are otherwise too small on their own to maintain viable populations of many species. We have realized in the years since the protection of Yellowstone National Park that even our largest natural protected areas are too small to maintain robust populations of certain wide-ranging mammals, including wolves, grizzly bears, elk, bison, and pronghorn antelope. These animals need tremendous amounts of habitat. For example, grizzly bears and other species have been shown to need the entire Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem to survive, and it is therefore essential to maintain connections between Yellowstone National park and the surrounding national forests. Many of these wide-ranging species have been shown to be "keystones" to the ecosystem. For example, gray wolves are now better appreciated for the vital ecological role they play in and around Yellowstone. The presence of such keystone species helps prevent the extinction of countless other organisms, and only by providing large-scale networks of habitat will we be able to keep them around. Of course, many small-to-medium sized protected areas (such as state parks) around the United States are not adequate by themselves to protect even smaller species of wildlife like bobcats, indigo snakes and box turtles. Maintaining and restoring habitat connections between protected areas is essential to warding off extinction events caused by wildlife populations being too small.

Habitat connectivity at different scales is crucial for allowing animals to make the routine daily, seasonal, annual, and intergenerational migrations that they need to access the resources and conditions that help them survive. For example, pronghorn antelope make an annual migration from the Upper Green River Valley in Wyoming (their low elevation winter range) to Grand Teton National Park (their higher elevation summer range). This "Path of the Pronghorn" is the only federally designated wildlife corridor and perhaps the most famous wildlife corridor in the United States. Protecting the corridor from encroachment by development and roads has become a top priority for ensuring the survival of the antelope into the future. Likewise, monarch butterflies make an incredible multi-generational migration loop around North America, and it is essential to the survival of these beautiful insects that sufficient corridors of appropriate, milkweed-rich vegetation are protected along the way. In the aquatic realm, salmon provide a third well-known example of impressive annual migrations that depend on connectivity. Salmon live in the ocean most of their lives but attempt to return to the upper reaches of rivers to lay their eggs. Dams can block these migrations, devastating salmon populations. However, if fish passage can be restored, healthy salmon runs have returned to many rivers.

Safeguarding habitat connectivity is critical to maintaining healthy levels of genetic exchange in wildlife. Populations that are too small and isolated can suffer tremendous negative impacts from inbreeding. For example, the Florida panther was relegated to a small area of southern Florida. Years of isolation led to serious levels of inbreeding, to the point where it seemed inevitable the panther population would go extinct. Thankfully, the cats were at least temporarily rescued by the addition of a few female mountain lions from Texas. Long term it will be essential to reestablish connections between panther and mountain lion populations to allow healthy levels of genetic exchange. This is true for countless other species as well, including game animals such as deer. Habitat connectivity is key in preventing animal populations become isolated and inbred.

Mitigating the effects of roads on wildlife is an increasingly well-appreciated solution for enhancing habitat connectivity around the United States. For example, wildlife crossing structures (both underpasses and overpasses) have been shown to reduce wildlife mortality by up to 90% when properly sited and installed. This is especially true when wildlife crossings are placed at the critical junctions where wildlife corridors are bisected by major roads. Even if corridors of natural vegetation can be protected and restored across many U.S. landscapes, busy roads will still threaten many species with decline and possibly extinction, unless we greatly increase our efforts to install mitigating solutions across the country.

Protecting wildlife supports the United States economy

Protecting wildlife across the United States is an important component of ensuring a resilient and diversified national economy. Direct economic impacts from various wildlife-related industries are important to overall national GDP and especially important to many rapidly diversifying rural economies across the country. Estimates place the economic contribution of outdoor recreation at \$412 billion per year (or 2.2 percent of GDP)^{iv}, including hunting and angling at over \$200 billion per year^v; bird watching at \$41 billion per year.^{vi} The economic value of ecosystem services related to wildlife habitat and behavior are hard to quantify, but similarly important to both national economic productivity and quality of life. Protection of wildlife, on an individual, population-level and habitat basis, is necessary to preserve dependent economic and business opportunities and associated standards of living across communities within the United States.

A national approach is needed to protect wildlife corridors.

The IPBES report recognizes the central role that national governments play in conservation and specifically recommends that governments prioritize, “planning ecologically representative **networks of interconnected protected areas** to cover key biodiversity areas.”^{vii} Landmark federal legislation to protect wildlife corridors, the **Wildlife Corridor Conservation Act**, was introduced in the United States House and the Senate on May 16, 2019. The Act grants authority to key federal agencies to create a National Wildlife Corridor system to on federal public land and creates a Wildlife Movement Grant Program to incentivize the protection of wildlife corridors by states and tribal agencies—as well as private landowners—on non-federal lands. It provides funds for tribes to protect wildlife corridors and creates a scientific database to share wildlife movement information. Passing this bill will provide a critical tool in our national effort to protect biodiversity and stem extinctions. **Renowned Harvard Biologist Dr. E. O. Wilson recently stated, “The Wildlife Corridor Conservation Act would provide the most important step of any single piece of legislation at the present time in enlarging the nations protected areas and thereby saving large swarths of America’s wildlife** and other fauna and flora, especially in the critical time of climate change...”^{viii}

Bi-partisan support for wildlife corridor protection is growing

Across the United States, we are seeing a groundswell of support for protecting wildlife corridors. In 2013, the Western Governors’ Association passed the resolution, “Protecting Wildlife Migration Corridors and Crucial Wildlife Habitat in the West.” In 2016 the Conference of New England

Governors and Eastern Canadian Premiers' passed a resolution recognizing the importance of ecological connectivity for the adaptability and resilience of their region's ecosystems, biodiversity, and human communities.

This year, 11 states including Wyoming, Washington, Maine and Mississippi have introduced bills to protect wildlife corridors and New Mexico, Oregon and New Hampshire passed wildlife corridor protection legislation. In the U.S. Senate, America's Transportation and Infrastructure Act (S. 2302) includes \$50 million per year for wildlife crossings. The Trump administration is also prioritizing wildlife corridor protection. Under Secretarial Order 2018, the Dept of Interior is protecting the migration routes of game species in 11 Western states. Finally, a 2019 poll showed over whelming support for the protection of wildlife migration. More than 84% of respondents in Colorado and New Mexico said that they would like to see increased efforts to safe guard wildlife corridors and 87% support building more overpasses and underpasses for wildlife^{ix}

A public consensus to protect wildlife corridors is now echoing the scientific consensus. Despite the IPBES report's dire predictions, the protection of wildlife corridors and passage of the **Wildlife Corridors Conservation Act** presents a solution to reversing many of these trends and provides hope that we can safeguard our treasured wildlife for generations to come.

Since 1991, Wildlands Network has been committed to reconnecting, restoring and rewilding North America for the benefit of all species. Our work is founded in science, driven by fieldwork and furthered through strategic policy and partnerships. We envision a North America where nature is undivided, and where people coexist in harmony with our native plants and animals. To learn more, visit wildlandsnetwork.org.

Resources for more information:

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Conservation Corridor. A comprehensive website on the science of habitat connectivity maintained by the lab of Dr. Nick Haddad at Michigan State University. <https://conservationcorridor.org/>

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Wildlife Conservation Society 2014. Path of the Pronghorn. Award-winning video about this crucial wildlife corridor. <https://vimeo.com/78590437>

Wildlands Network - a conservation nonprofit dedicated to reconnecting nature in North America.
www.wildlandsnetwork.org

ⁱ <https://www.fws.gov/southeast/wildlife/mammals/red-wolf/>

ⁱⁱ Dr. EO Wilson, Harvard University, letter to Congress, May 15, 2019

ⁱⁱⁱ Gilbert-Norton L, Wilson R, Stevens J.R. Beard K H 2010. A Meta analytic review of corridor effectiveness, Conservation Biology 24:660-668

^{iv} <https://www.bea.gov/news/2018/outdoor-recreation-satellite-account-updated-statistics-20122016>

^v <https://www.nwf.org/~media/PDFs/Water/WOTUS%20Econ%20fact%20sheet%203252014.pdf>

^{vi} <https://digitalmedia.fws.gov/digital/collection/document/id/1874>

^{vii} Summary of policymakers of the global assessment report on biodiversity and ecosystem services of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services, May 2019, p. 29

^{viii} <https://wildlandsnetwork.org/blog/wildlife-corridors-conservation-act-press-release-2019/>

^{ix} <https://www.nwf.org/Latest-News/Press-Releases/2019/04-22-19-Wildlife-Migration-Poll>