

Preserving Endangered Species: Why Should We Care?

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When construction of the Tellico dam was temporarily halted because the project posed a threat to the endangered Tennessee snail darter, environmentalists were triumphant, economists relieved (the dam was an economic disaster in its own right). The general public seemed cheered by the triumph of such an improbable underdog, but uncertain that a lowly three-inch minnow was really worth the trouble of saving.

Surveys taken by Stephen Kellert of Yale University reflect this ambivalence in public attitudes toward species preservation. In a questionnaire modeled on the Tellico dam controversy, pitting an obscure fish species against various development projects, the fish species won out handily over recreational projects, tied with projects to divert water for industrial development, but was soundly defeated by projects to produce hydroelectric, agricultural, or drinking water improvements. As codified in the law of the land, the will of the people is expressed more strongly in favor of species preservation. The Endangered Species Act mandates stringent standards for protecting any plant or animal species that has been listed as threatened or endangered. However, the list of protected species is a short one, so the effect of the Act is considerably weakened.

How much *should* we care about endangered species? Why, indeed, should we care at all? A first answer is that extinction is forever. It is irrevocable, the flung stone that cannot be called back. Still, we do irrevocable things all the time, sometimes half a dozen before breakfast. But our knowledge of the considerable