

Why Protect Plants?



Eastern Sierra Nevada Photo © Emily Roberson
Cover: Desert wildflowers. Photo courtesy Ray Bransfield.

Native plants are the most visible elements of our landscapes. Up and down our coasts, valleys, deserts and mountains, thousands of wildflowers, trees, shrubs and other native plants perfume the air and delight the eye throughout the year.

Native plants are wildlife habitats. Wild plants and animals have evolved

The Endangered Species Act gives almost NO protection to most federally listed endangered and threatened plants – among the most imperiled American species.



Penstemon dissectus, Georgia
Photo © Hugh and Carol Nourse

together through the millennia. Hummingbirds, salmon, deer, eagles and other wildlife depend on native plants for food, shelter and survival.

Conservation is Good for Our Economy and Society

Native plant communities are economic powerhouses. Beautiful, diverse, healthy native wildlands attract business and tourists. Each year, millions of people take time – and spend billions of dollars – to marvel at the glorious landscapes and astounding variety of native plants and animals in national parks, forests and other wild areas around the nation.

Valuable commodities, including food and medicines, flow from native species. The life-saving cancer drug taxol was developed from the Pacific yew, a native of the moist stream canyons of western ancient forests.

Native plant habitats are economically important in other ways. One third of human food crops are pollinated by wild pollinators that live primarily in native plant communities. In the United States alone, insects and birds that live in native wildlands pollinate \$4-6 billion of crops each year.

Native Plants are Disappearing

Unfortunately, these irreplaceable native species and ecosystems are increasingly at risk.

Uncontrolled sprawl and poor land management are devastating native plant communities.

Between 1960 and 1990, sprawl consumed wildlands the size of a small state as U.S. urbanized area doubled to 51,000 square miles.

Invasive nonnative species, excessive and poorly planned logging, mining, and other activities also besiege native plants. Less than 5 percent of our ancient forests remains intact. More than half of the nation's native wetlands have been destroyed: a loss of more than 100 million acres of wildlife habitat, water purification and storage systems.

These trends are taking their toll.

Extinction of a single plant species may result in the disappearance of up to 30 other species of plants and wildlife – U.S. Forest Service



Clearcut logging
Photo courtesy Klamath Forest Alliance

Unlike other global ecological problems, [extinction] is completely irreversible – Peter Raven, 1993

Plants are full participants in the extinction crisis that has sparked outcry from the world's scientists. The World Conservation Union reports that 33 percent of plant species in the U.S. are either extinct or at risk of extinction.

Plants are Second Class Citizens in Conservation Law and Policy

Few people realize that in almost every area of U.S. law and policy, plants receive inferior protection, attention and funding.

The federal Endangered Species Act is the single most powerful legal tool available to protect imperiled landscapes and species. However, while the Act protects imperiled animals wherever they live, it allows nearly unlimited destruction of most imperiled plants and their habitat outside of federal lands. Without full protection for plants under the federal Act, its promise of a safety net to prevent extinction goes unfulfilled.

Budgeting is just as dire. Funding for rare species conservation is pathetically low, and what little funding exists is heavily weighted toward charismatic animal species.



Coryphantha scheeri var. robustispina, federally endangered Photo © Lorena Babcock Moore

Staffing is also critical. Conservation depends on experts who understand species' needs and can incorporate conservation science into land management. Resource protection agencies such as the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and Forest Service employ pitifully few plant specialists. The BLM administers 245 million acres, but employs fewer than 80 botanists nationwide – one botanist per roughly 3.3 million acres! For example, California's 10-million-acre BLM Desert Conservation Area has for years had not even a single botanist on staff to care for the dozens of rare plants that live there. And a single Forest Service botanist is often responsible for an entire national forest, covering more than 1 million acres and containing dozens of imperiled plants.

Every native species, however humble in appearance ... has its place in the nation's heritage. It is a masterpiece of evolution, an ancient, multifaceted entity that shares the land with us. – E. O. Wilson, 1999

Did you know?

- ✿ According to a 2001 U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service report, 82 million U.S. outdoor recreationists (wildlife watchers, hunters, anglers) generated more than \$108 billion in economic activity. Wildlife watching alone generated \$38.4 billion and supported 1 million jobs nationwide.
- ✿ Nearly 60 percent of the 1,300 U.S. species on the federal endangered species list are plants. However, listed plants receive less than 4 percent of federal recovery funding.
- ✿ More than 70 percent of our imperiled plants live outside federal lands where they receive only limited protection from the federal Endangered Species Act.
- ✿ Despite the staggering economic value of native ecosystems, U.S. taxpayers spend on average less than 48 cents per year on endangered species conservation, only 9 cents more than the price of a postage stamp.
- ✿ Studies show that native species and ecosystems worldwide provide economic goods and services worth \$33 trillion annually!
- ✿ Studies show that most ecosystem restoration efforts fail. Once we lose native wildlands, they are gone forever.
- ✿ Scientists estimate that approximately 33 percent of U.S. plant species are either known to be extinct or are currently vulnerable to extinction.

What Can Be Done?

The Native Plant Conservation Campaign was established in 2002 to fight for effective protection of native plants for this and future generations. Our programs include:
The NPCC Network is a national network of affiliate native plant societies, botanic gardens, arboreta and other native plant science and conservation organizations. We exchange information and create a strong national voice for plants. As of June 2006, the NPPC has 35 affiliate organizations representing more than 75,000 individual scientists and conservationists throughout the U.S.



Urban sprawl into native oak woodland
Photo by John Woodbury

The Local Advocacy Program supplies low- and no-cost brochures, plant-specific guides, and technical reviews of conservation science and environmental law to local advocates. One of our top priorities is to make grassroots native plant conservation easier, more effective and more fun.

The Federal Advocacy Program works for better legal protection for imperiled plants and their habitat, increased funding and staffing of botany programs, and greater scientific input in land and species management. With our support, the Forest Service increased botany staffing 30 percent over three years, and federal agencies have spent more than \$10 million to grow seed from local native plants for projects such as roadside stabilization and stream restoration.

The Equal Protection for Plants Initiative promotes broader awareness of the “second-class” status of native plants in staffing, funding and law. Our Equal Protection Statement has been signed by 62 groups representing hundreds of thousands of individuals, including the Society for Conservation Biology, the Botanical Society of America, the American Society of Plant Taxonomists, and Defenders of Wildlife.



Fringed gentian, Ohio Photo: ©Ami Horowitz

The Conservation Economics Program seeks to counter the widely held belief that protection of the environment must come at the expense of the economy. We develop presentations, literature reviews and fact sheets to publicize the growing body of evidence that ecosystem health and conservation of biological diversity are essential for economic health.

International Initiatives. NPCC worked with PlantaEuropa, a European native plant conservation organization, to secure the 2002 adoption of a Global Strategy for Plant Conservation by the Global Convention on Biological Diversity.



Pollination of native columbine
Photo courtesy John Game

The Native Plant Conservation Campaign

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**Wild plants
and the wild
places they live
— will they be
here for our
children?**