

THE RECORDER, 9/24/15

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What's worth protecting?

Aside from its adorable, doe-eyed face, what's the value of a rare, little salamander?

Currently, the proposed Atlantic Coast Pipeline's route goes right through highly protected salamander habitat on the George Washington National Forest. If built there, construction and the forest's fragmentation would wipe out scores of them and perhaps decimate the population of two species that aren't found anywhere else.

The formal filing for a certificate to construct the enormous natural gas transmission line was submitted late last week. A day earlier, the U.S. Forest Service wrote to federal regulators again about the Cheat Mountain and Cow Knob salamanders, as explained in this week's Recorder. USFS stressed that project plans must be rewritten to either change the route of the pipeline, or bore under the mountain with it.

Those who strongly support the pipeline might well ask: Why should we care about these salamanders, especially if they stand in the way of progress?

That question has been asked endlessly over the years about many of the species our nation strives to protect from extinction. Our human needs require increasingly more infrastructure and resources. Is it worth spending millions of dollars annually to protect species and habitats that people feel the need to exploit for financial gain or industry?

Congress thought so.

When it passed the Endangered Species Act in 1973, Congress explained that threatened wildlife and plants "are of aesthetic, ecological, educational, historical, recreational, and scientific value to the nation and its people." And, protecting species isn't enough; we must also protect habitats that support them.

That's precisely what the GWNF did when it set aside thousands of acres within its boundaries to protect the Cow Knob salamander, and other flora and fauna in the region. In the entire world, the area atop Shenandoah Mountain along the Augusta-Highland county line is the only place these salamanders live. USFS made it clear to the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission there is no way to mitigate the loss of this amphibian. Either the route for the pipeline must go around the area, or go well beneath the surface — and even if the mountain were drilled, there would still be some damage to the habitat.

Both options would be costly for the ACP's stakeholders, and so far, Dominion has appeared to ignore forest service officials on this issue. We were surprised to find the route had not already been moved when the filing was submitted. Does Dominion understand why it's important to protect our forests? Perhaps not. It's tough to talk to folks with dollar signs in their eyes, especially about the intrinsic value of our natural world.

But let's remind ACP proponents there are numerous reasons to protect species: They can be sources of life-saving medicines; they can be significant to other species' survival; they can sustain our agricultural industry by ridding crops of pests more safely than chemicals; they can be good indicators of environmental health; and they have economic value in our recreational activities like bird watching.

For its part, the Cow Knob salamander is an indicator species, like brook trout, which means it defines an environmental condition, and serves as an early warning sign for biologists looking for problems like disease, pollution or climate change. These salamanders are hypersensitive to environmental conditions, so if their populations dwindle, there's a problem. In addition, populations like this can have critical genetic attributes that are important to preserve for other species and future generations.

State herpetologist John Kleopfer with the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries says salamanders are an excellent indicator of forest health and management activities. "They function as both predator and prey within these ecosystems," he says. Virginia has 56 salamander species, and of those, three are found nowhere else in the world — the Cow Knob salamander is one of them. "Although the impacts of losing this salamander may not be as apparent as the disappearance of other species, we could say the same thing about bald eagles, sea turtles, dolphins, and many other species. We don't know what the effects would be until it's gone, and then it's too late."

Right. Too late.

A report by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife notes, “If imperiled plants and animals lack a known benefit to mankind, should we care if they disappear? If a species evolves over millennia or is created by divine intent, do we have a right to cause its extinction?”

It’s tough to convince some folks that every creature or plant has a value we can’t always quantify, and we shouldn’t further exploit habitats that support them. As USFWS puts it, “Eliminating entire species has been compared to ripping pages out of books that have not yet been read.” We don’t know what we’re killing off, and we don’t know what we stand to lose when we do.

We urge FERC to heed the warnings from the forest service, and gets the ACP re-routed around this protected habitat, but the issue goes beyond a couple of salamander species.

The project would disturb thousands of acres, most of which is only protected by private landowners, and in this region, most are good stewards of their own properties. That’s why our area is in pretty good environmental shape compared to others. But we cannot justify disturbing that much earth in places where the federally protected wild forests are all we’ve got left.

Here in the Highlands, we sometimes take our clean air and water for granted. We don’t often stop to consider that we have a relatively unpolluted environment precisely because we haven’t exploited it. We are privileged to live in a region that has such a diverse ecosystem, much that has not been scarred by mankind — yet.

Make no mistake: The Atlantic Coast Pipeline would be a threat to these delicate forests, and the species that thrive here — both on private property and state and federal lands. Every single possible way to avoid damage should be used. Dominion has stated it wants this project to be environmentally sound. Sadly, we’re not seeing much evidence of that in play at this point.

In the wider picture, it’s only been in relatively recent years that we, as a nation, have come to understand exploiting Mother Nature for personal (and financial) gain has serious consequences if we don’t do it right. Running roughshod over this

area's salamander habitat would likely mean the obliteration of that species, and perhaps others.

It's true that extinction occurs naturally, but it's the much higher rate of extinction that's troubling in today's world, and it's driven primarily by habitat loss. "Over-exploitation of wildlife for commercial purposes, the introduction of harmful exotic (non-native) organisms, environmental pollution, and the spread of diseases also pose serious threats to our world's biological heritage," USFWS notes.

Conservation efforts in this country under the Endangered Species Act, according to USFWS, have been hugely successful, preventing the extinction of 99 percent of the species listed as endangered or threatened. Biologists estimate that since 1620, more than 500 species of U.S. plants and animals have become extinct. "The situation in Earth's most biologically rich ecosystems is even worse ... Uncounted species are lost as these habitats are destroyed. In short, there is nothing natural about today's rate of extinction."

We can't afford to allow this pipeline project to contribute to that unnatural rate.

Remind FERC that we've spent a ton of taxpayer dollars keeping these salamanders in existence, and thanks to those efforts and good USFS management, they're still with us. Get Dominion to move the route. Better yet, get Dominion to move the route away from any square inch of our sensitive forests to avoid fragmenting the habitats they provide.

We'd like to have them with us, too. Our kids and grandkids will thank us.