

Steering Species Onto The Road to Recovery

BY MARK WEXLER *Editorial Director*

The first time I saw a green sea turtle, it was basking on a sun-baked beach in an uninhabited Hawaiian atoll where a scientist I was interviewing studied the species. The biologist, George Balazs, began taking annual trips to this far-flung turtle breeding site in 1973—the same year that President Richard Nixon signed the Endangered Species Act (ESA) into law. That year, Balazs counted only 67 of the reptiles nesting there.



By the time of my visit a decade later, federal authorities had officially listed the species as threatened, making it illegal to kill the animals or disturb their habitat, and the number of breeding green turtles in Hawaiian waters had grown to about 200—an increase, the researcher

told me, that he attributed primarily to the ESA.

Last year, nearly 500 of the animals nested in the remote atoll and several more turned up on beaches in the main Hawaiian Islands. “The growth in the number of turtles,” Balazs points out, “is an example of what can happen when the state, federal government and the community work together to protect a species.”

The green turtle, which also nests in Florida and other areas, is one of many species that might now be extinct in the United States if not for the protections afforded by the ESA. You can read about several other survivors in this issue’s feature “Where Would They Be Now?” All were chosen by a coalition of conservation experts to commemorate the 30th anniversary of the law last December. Each, observes NWF Senior Counsel John Kostyack, “is a monument to the effectiveness of the act.” Turn to page 48 to learn more.

In this issue, you’ll also find useful information about sunscreens (page 20), which types of paint are environmentally friendly (page 12), and how to use your yard to teach children about wildlife and nature (page 22). In “Frontal Assault” on page 24, you can read about current threats to one of the Lower 48’s last great wild regions, Montana’s Rocky Mountain Front. And you may be surprised to learn that just 15 species of birds are endemic to the continental United States. See “All-American Birds” on page 39.

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