

Title: Can Protecting Become Harming?

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Nests of endangered turtles are surprisingly found in a secluded site; a protected species of bird settles in to breed at a never-before-located area; a rarely seen and unique plant is discovered growing in an unusual place.

What are we supposed to do next? What is the “best” thing to do?

These are questions every conservation commission and association deals with, or at the least will eventually contemplate and discuss because at some point it is very likely to occur.

The topic of “what is the best thing to do” often results in two different behaviors. Once word gets out amongst friends and the general public, a predictable response is to want to go and see it since the animal or plant is endangered, or rare. There exists in many of us a hunger to add such a sighting to our experiences. Who wouldn't want to see an extremely rare plant or animal which may not even exist years from now?

For other people, the desire to protect the plant or animal can become a priority. But really, can we do both? Can an organization or person actually create an environment that allows the animal the privacy and safety it needs to exist, as well as allow the public access for viewing?

This is not easy to answer. It depends upon the animal/plant, of course. In many cases it is not possible to do both. As habitat encroachment affects more and more species, we know this can cause population decline and extinctions. The simple act of building paths through the brush where turtles nest creates a change in nesting appeal. Paths for walkers, bike and dog traffic provide easier access to nests and turtles by predators, any of which can result in turtle death. Although saving a specific environment for specific bird, lizard, grass or tree seems pretty straightforward, once protected, habitat often changes because the public wants access to the novel plant or animal. The walking, talking, biking public change the protected environment. Can the public be encouraged to come and safely view active nesting and hatching? How much intrusion can the turtle/bird/salamander etc. handle, or really should there be any intrusion at all?

By visiting the very habitat we are trying to protect, we must be aware that we create a scenario where we can drive the animal further into danger. Have we helped this creature propagate and thrive through our protection, or have we hastened their demise as a result of added environmental stress? What is a good balance, and how do we judge it?

There are no hard and fast, or easy, answers to questions such as these. There is a lot to discuss and much information and research to use in planning for protection of various species. We cannot always help by opening up chosen living spaces to curious and loving admirers. Should we, and can we, as species protectors, ever simply leave the animal totally alone and ignore it as much as possible so that it can survive and produce viable offspring? Do you, your organization or mine, have the self-control to not visit, not organize viewing days, photography platforms and the like? More importantly, will the general public

allow hands-off behavior once information has been shared and an area put into do-not-visit status? Is it acceptable to simply keep the information about location and species a well-kept secret and hope that benign neglect will do the trick?

Most of us believe that education and information serve as driving forces for our behaviors. There are no absolute right or wrong answers regarding protection of certain species. Most of us, however, truly believe the animals have a right to be here. Let's work to keep it that way.