



Melanie R. Thornton

Working Together When Conservation Matters

Those who defend our natural environment fear that we will not act until it is too late. Due to Americans' increasing concern about our environment's health, Congress enacted our country's bedrock environmental laws—the Clean Air Act, the Clean Water Act, the Safe Drinking Water Act, and the Endangered Species Act in the 1960s and 1970s. Today, environmental protection and conservation policy continues to be at the forefront of political discussion. As a GSA-USGS Congressional Science Fellow, I am continuing to work on policies that protect our environment and America's native fish, wildlife, and plant species—an important legacy to pass on to future generations.

Last October, a handful of environmental nongovernmental organizations hosted a discussion with E.O. Wilson in the U.S. Capitol about his book, *The Half Earth*, and how best to protect America's wildlife. This conversation highlighted how habitat loss and threats from a changing climate are the greatest concerns to species extinction, and wildlife corridors and federal policies are important ways in which we can continue to protect fish, wildlife, and plant species. Reflecting on the takeaways from this discussion, Senator Tom Udall (D-NM) asked his natural resources staff to craft a wildlife corridors bill in the Senate.

Many believe that the designation of wildlife corridors needs a systemic approach, best directed by legislation. That approach should expand the science and stewardship of America's most important native fish, wildlife, and plant species and their habitats. However, wildlife corridors legislation is not a new concept. It has been introduced twice in Congress: by Representative Rush Holt (D-NJ-12) in 2010, and again six years later by Representative Donald Beyer (D-VA-8). However, wildlife corridors legislation has not been introduced in the Senate. Introduction of a bill in both the House and the Senate is an important step in moving legislation forward, because bills must pass both chambers of Congress in identical form and be signed by the president to become law.

The purpose of a wildlife corridors bill is to create a framework for establishing a national wildlife corridors program. Specifically, this bill would direct key federal agencies to create a strategy to identify data and research needs for better understanding species' habitats and corridors and to develop a corridor system. This would create a geographical information system database to compile native species habitat and corridors data. And it would grant authority to several federal agencies to designate wildlife corridors on federal lands. The goal is to support states, Indian tribes, and the public and to be used as a tool to inform planning and development decisions.

As part of Senator Udall's natural resources team, I began the process of working on a Senate companion bill of the previously introduced Wildlife Corridors Conservation Act. Legislative staff works to draft measures so that they will accomplish the policy goals set out by members of Congress. Staff considers items such as the timing of introducing the bill, to what committee the bill is likely to be referred, potential bill cosponsors, and constituent and stakeholder support or opposition of the bill. For this specific bill, our goal was to update and revise the previous wildlife corridors bill with cosponsors of each political party. The plan also included collaborating with bipartisan members in the House to encourage bicameral consideration.

Initially, I learned about wildlife corridors by understanding the on-the-ground logistics of implementation and gathering diverse perspectives from stakeholders with a vested interest in the management of native species. I met with experts from the Congressional Research Service, congressional staff that have worked on previous wildlife corridors legislation, and stakeholders from the nongovernmental organization community, state and federal government, scientists and researchers, and with constituents working on wildlife issues in New Mexico.

The next phase of work on this bill included thoroughly vetting the legislation and asking for feedback from stakeholders who support and oppose different provisions of the bill. Some stakeholders were concerned about the process of engaging private landowners. Others provided input on the role and authority of state government, and wanted the legislation to provide more detail about how species would be prioritized for compiling habitat data and designating their corridor. We learned about successful projects with similar goals of this bill, where communities are conducting research and collecting geographical data on certain species to better understand wildlife connectivity. In addition, the Department of the Interior provided technical assistance, reviewing and providing feedback on the wildlife corridors draft bill. Then, I, in coordination with my House counterparts, developed a plan to modify and improve the bill by addressing the differing feedback gathered from stakeholders.

My colleagues and I are still working on making changes to the draft in an effort to address the feedback we have received on the bill, while still meeting Senator Udall's goals. Unlike the scientific method, the process of working on and improving a draft bill is not always simple or straightforward. Legislative staff has to work together and negotiate provisions to settle the differences, often between different stakeholders and offices of different political parties. Throughout this process, I provide updates to Senator Udall to ensure we continue to incorporate his priorities within the bill. In many cases, drafting robust legislation takes time and persistence, as I have learned directly through this process. This has given me the experience of applying my scientific training—mainly my critical thinking and problem solving skills—to the public-policy-making process. And it is just one example of how Congress continues to work on policies that protect species and our environment.

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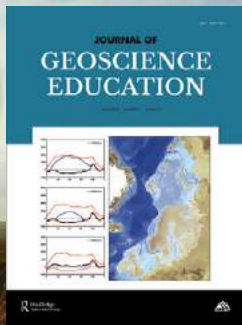
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