De-Extinction:
The Reality Behind the Hype

Some scientists think the passenger pigeon, once the most common bird in North America, is a prime candidate for de-extinction.

At first glance, so-called "de-extinction" sounds enticing. The notion that science can bring back woolly mammoths, passenger pigeons or other extinct animals is certainly alluring to both Hollywood and the general public. But given the profound conservation challenges facing imperiled wildlife today, de-extinction experiments are a woeful diversion of limited conservation resources. De-extinction efforts are no substitute for strong conservation measures to preserve what we still have and could even be a danger to already imperiled wildlife. They also present numerous challenges.

The Danger

Thousands of plants and animals worldwide are facing extinction—at least 1,500 species in the United States alone. Diverting already inadequate public resources to bring back extinct species leaves even less available to help conserve species currently on the brink.

Every day can bring an imperiled plant or animal a step closer to extinction. Focusing vital attention and funds on resurrecting one species from the grave could condemn other species.

The Challenges

To bring back a long-extinct species, the ecosystem it is introduced to must be similar to the one in which it originally lived. Without fully understanding the relationship of the resurrected species to existing wildlife, we must also address many challenging questions about basic needs and potential threats.

Habitat: What sort of habitat would the species need? How much? Consider the disagreements that arise over conserving land for our endangered birds, frogs and other animals. Then just imagine the challenge of securing enough habitat to resurrect a species like the woolly mammoth.

Food: How would a new competitor affect other species and the food chain?

Disease: What diseases was the extinct species vulnerable to? Are these health threats still present? What about new ones?

Breeding: How fast or often would a species brought back from extinction breed? Would it require very specific breeding conditions as some species do? At what rate would its population grow?

The Reality

The reality is that many of the same threats that caused species to go extinct continue to plague plants and animals today. In addition, climate change raises new obstacles to survival.

Unless we tackle these threats first, will any species we revive truly thrive in the wild or will it spend its days on life support, intensively managed at a zoo or other artificial environments? Is bringing a species back under such conditions ethical and appropriate?

We cannot ignore all these challenging questions and let opponents of the Endangered Species Act use the hype of de-extinction as an excuse to weaken the act. We must continue to be effective conservationists in the here and now and leave fanciful "Jurassic Park" measures to Hollywood screenwriters.