



WATER RESOURCES RESEARCH GRANT PROPOSAL

Project ID: 2004IN160B

Title: Norms, public opinion, and preservation of “non-charismatic” aquatic and riparian species

Project Type: Research

Focus Categories: Law, Institutions, and Policy, Management and Planning, Conservation

Keywords: Species, Eastern Massasauga, Fanshell Mussel, public opinion, norms

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Congressional District: 4th

Principal Investigator:

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Abstract

More than half of all endangered species in Indiana rely on waterways, wetlands, and coastal areas for their critical habitat. Managing water resources for the protection of these species is therefore a critical public policy concern. Public attitudes toward species preservation play an important role in the implementation and legitimation of these policies. While public support for large mammals and other so-called “charismatic megafauna” is consistently strong, support for other species, including those like mussels and reptiles common to aquatic systems, are less well understood. This study proposes to investigate the public credibility of various justifications for protecting endangered species common to aquatic systems, rather than their more charismatic mammalian counterparts. Specifically, the project will document public attitudes about protection of two endangered species found in Indiana: a wetland reptile (the Eastern Massasauga) and a freshwater mollusk (the Fanshell Mussel). Both are “non-charismatic” in important ways: one is a poisonous rattlesnake while the other lives buried in river sediment and is largely invisible to Indiana residents. This study proposes a series of focus groups and a large-N mail survey of residents of Tippecanoe County to test what arguments are most or least persuasive in supporting protection of these riparian and aquatic species. In

particular, the study will investigate whether practical arguments based on the species' potential utility to human beings fare better or worse than a more basic, normative argument regarding the species intrinsic right to continued existence. The study hypothesizes that contrary to current agency practice, a more fundamental ethical argument will be most persuasive among the public for species of this "non-charismatic" nature. Better understanding of these public attitudes and norms should aid the implementation and legitimation of further measures to protect aquatic species and the threatened and disappearing water-based habitats upon which they rely for survival.