



NATIONAL AQUARIUM®

Date: February 17, 2026

Bill: SB 431 Fish and Wildlife - Endangered and Threatened Species and Migratory Birds - Regulations, Lists, Petitions, Essential Habitats, and Takings

Position: Support

Chair Feldman and Members of the Committee:

The National Aquarium respectfully requests a favorable report on **SB 431**. This legislation would strengthen the Department of Natural Resource's authority to manage and protect Maryland's threatened and endangered (TE) species.

One of the National Aquarium's three overarching conservation goals is to save wildlife and habitats. We do this through a holistic, solutions-focused approach, which includes habitat restoration, engaging the community in field conservation projects, and in-building education about the importance of threatened and endangered species. Every year, the National Aquarium's 1.2 million guests have the chance to connect with one of many ambassadors of TE species, such as Kai (green sea turtle), Odie (Kemp's ridley sea turtle), Zoe and Zuri (zebra sharks), largemouth sawfish, sturgeon, and more. All these species depend on state and federal protections or are listed on the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List. Many other animals cared for by the Aquarium, including diamondback terrapins, are considered vulnerable and depend on effective state protections to ensure they do not become endangered. The National Aquarium also works with partners locally and nationwide to rescue endangered sea turtles that are injured or stranded; we are currently rehabilitating 39 cold-stunned green and Kemp's ridley sea turtles to return them to their ocean home. Despite limited funding, stranding network partners help state and federal agencies meet Endangered Species Act (ESA) responsibilities to rescue, treat, and release these animals, ultimately defraying millions of dollars in annual government costs.

Threatened and endangered species are often keystone species, performing vital ecological services like pollination or food web regulation, and serve as indicators of overall ecosystem health. We all depend on natural resources and the ecosystem services they provide and biodiversity, on scales from local to global, is in crisis. Approximately 8% of the 15,000 plant and animal species that live throughout Maryland are considered rare, uncommon, or declining.¹ Across the U.S., 34% of plants and 40% of animals are at risk of extinction.² We are proud to work with the Maryland Department of Natural Resources and other state partners to restore critical habits and protect Maryland's rare, threatened and endangered species, including blackbanded sunfish, eastern hellbenders, bog turtles, saltmarsh sparrows, piping plovers, and more.

Unfortunately, federal protections for TE species are being weakened despite the fact that the ESA has broad public support and has been incredibly effective at achieving its primary aim to prevent species from becoming extinct. SB 431 takes a precautionary approach to codify important, science-based practices for TE species while many of the same science-based practices are being eroded at the federal level. Specifically, this bill codifies many existing effective practices in Maryland along with several important definitions and provisions that would clarify what constitutes "harm" to protected species and the conditions under which they can be considered for delisting. Habitat loss is the main driver of species extinction and the bill appropriately authorizes designation of essential habitats for TE species.

¹ Maryland State Wildlife Action Plan 2015-2025.

https://dnr.maryland.gov/wildlife/Pages/plants_wildlife/SWAP_Submission.aspx

² NatureServe 2023. Biodiversity in Focus: United States Edition. <https://www.natureserve.org/bif>

Now more than ever, TE species require the support of policies rooted in consistency and grounded in decades of scientific research. While the federal government continues to pursue actions that weaken protections for TE species, the state must enact safeguards to protect TE species in Maryland. **We urge the Committee to issue a favorable report on SB 431.**

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