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Virgin River makes top 10 list of threatened U.S. ecosystems

Development • Endangered Species Coalition says humans must share water.

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Thirsty Washington County has put the Virgin River and the animals that depend upon it in peril, according to a report from the Endangered Species Coalition.

The document, "Water Woes: How Dams, Diversions, Dirty Water and Drought Put America's Wildlife at Risk," highlights how diminished water resources threaten wildlife in 10 ecosystems across the country.

An endangered fish found only in the Virgin River, the woundfin, is "threatened by freshwater depletion," according to the report.

"The problem is pretty simple: People aren't leaving enough water in the Virgin River, and so the endangered fish that depend on that water are struggling to survive," said Tierra Curry, a biologist at the Center for Biological Diversity.

"The situation in the Virgin is so dire that the woundfin went extinct in the wild," she said Wednesday. "This report is a wake-up call that we have got to do a better job caring for our freshwater environment."

The woundfin is being bred in hatcheries and stocked in the river by the Virgin River Recovery Program, a cooperative effort by the Washington County Water Conservancy District, the Utah Department of Natural Resources and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Steve Meisner, coordinator for the Virgin River Recovery Program, said the agency's goals are to "enhance and protect native species" while providing "water development for human needs."

The Virgin River Chub is another endangered fish that depends on the river, as is a bird called the southwestern willow flycatcher.

"I think the riparian zone (ecosystem) is doing fairly well," Meisner said Wednesday, noting that the Virgin had huge floods in 2005 and 2010. "When you get floods, it does a lot of damage to the riparian area. We're working with communities to repair the riparian areas."

But Paul Holden, a retired fisheries biologist who helped draft the original Virgin River Recovery Plan in 1976, believes the waterway is in dire straits.

"The Virgin has been pretty well lost," he said. "They've sucked everything out of the Virgin they can."

In the late 1970s, there were 1 million to 2 million woundfins in the Virgin, Holden said.

Now the flows are so low in the river that water quality is poor, Holden said. The woundfin are stocked every year because they cannot survive in the river.

"The [Virgin River] recovery program watched as the population disappeared," Holden said.

The Endangered Species Coalition is comprised of hundreds of conservation, scientific, business and community organizations. Its membership includes the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance, Glen Canyon Institute, Sierra Club, Wilderness Society, National Audubon Society and Natural Resources Defense Council. To read the coalition's report, go to <http://waterwoes.org>.

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Endangered ecosystems

Ecosystems listed as endangered in the report are the:

California Coastal Sagebrush

Colorado River

Edwards Aquifer and San Marcos River

Everglades

Ozark rivers and eastern U.S. rivers

Pacific Rim

Sierra Nevada Mountains

Sonoran Desert

Tennessee River Watershed

