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**Pennsylvania critical, rare animals, plants face danger of extinction  
State has no plan to save nature**

By Don Hopey, Post-Gazette Staff Writer

Pennsylvania does not have a plan to protect and conserve biodiversity, and as a result hundreds of critical and rare animals and plants either have disappeared or could soon.

A report released by the Pennsylvania Biodiversity Partnership says habitat loss and fragmentation, along with pollution, are the biggest threats to biodiversity. And public ignorance, insufficient funding, and lack of coordination among government and conservation organizations are exacerbating the problem.

"There are populations of plants and animals and important habitats that are being lost every year, yet we don't know what we've lost because in many cases we don't know what we have," said Sue Thompson, president of the partnership and former assistant curator of botany at the Carnegie.

Based on a yearlong study, the report by the Pittsburgh-based public-private partnership is scheduled for formal release this morning in Harrisburg. The 48-page document marks the first phase of an ambitious \$1.3 million effort to gather information and then craft a statewide biodiversity conservation plan by 2005.

"This report about where we are on species health, conservation law and policy, educational resources and public attitudes will give us a baseline from which to start to piece together a statewide biodiversity plan," Thompson said.

Oregon, Massachusetts, New York and New Jersey all have some type of biodiversity plan in place or under consideration, but most states do not.

Biodiversity is a relatively new scientific concept that encompasses the variety of species -- including humans -- their genetic makeup, the natural communities or habitats in which they live and the processes that sustain life.

Pennsylvania is home to more than 25,000 species of known organisms and probably many thousands more that are unidentified. More than 150 animals and plants have been lost from the state, and more than 800 are classified as rare, threatened or endangered.

According to the report, although records of animal and plant surveys date back to at least 1740 in Pennsylvania, biodiversity records are scattered across many agencies and organizations in many formats, and the information is often incomplete, out-of-date or inaccessible.

The knowledge gaps make it difficult to assess current conditions or future conservation needs.

There is a real need for better species monitoring and conservation strategies and coordination, said John Rawlins, associate curator of invertebrate zoology for the Carnegie and a partnership board member.

"There are a lot of holes in the information and that affects how we react and our practices related to biodiversity," Rawlins said. "We should realize though that expiration is real, extinction is real and a plan to address biodiversity concerns is overdue."

Rawlins' concerns focus not on individual threatened or endangered species, but on what he calls the "landscape level" -- large natural habitats that are becoming increasingly fragmented by road-building and suburban sprawl.

"Those will be among the largest challenges," Rawlins said. "Right now, we're not doing very well. We need to devise policies to get around that problem."

The report says Pennsylvania has lost about 25 percent of its farmland to development since 1970, and more than 500,000 acres of land were developed in the state between 1992 and 1997 -- double the rate for the previous 10 years.

New policies strong enough to effectively address those issues are likely to be very controversial with development and business interests, although those interests are partnership participants.

"Biodiversity is a concern at all levels and the people involved see it as having ecological, economic and aesthetic value," Thompson said. "There are extremists on either end that won't be willing to accept any compromise, but that shouldn't stop the majority of people who want biodiversity protected from moving forward."