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PRESS RELEASE

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Freshwater Ecosystems Have the Most Species At Risk, New National Report on Environment Finds

Arlington, Virginia — Animals that depend on freshwater ecosystems are about twice as likely to be at risk of extinction as those found in other ecosystems, according to a new analysis of NatureServe's data on the condition of U.S. plants and animals. The findings are part of a landmark new report on the condition of America's environment issued by The H. John Heinz III Center for Science, Economics, and the Environment.

The State of the Nation's Ecosystems: Measuring the Lands, Waters, and Living Resources of the United States presents an unbiased and scientifically sound examination of the health of U.S. ecosystems. The report, a five-year collaboration among nearly 150 experts from government, business, environmental organizations, and academia, offers the best available data on conditions and trends for each of six major ecosystem types—coasts and oceans, farmlands, forests, freshwaters, grasslands and shrublands, and urban and suburban areas.

"This study fills an important need in national environmental policy-making," said Mark Schaefer, President and CEO of NatureServe. "We were pleased to contribute to its development, since we share with The Heinz Center a commitment to providing the objective scientific information needed to help guide decisions about the nation's natural resources."

The report draws on the detailed information about the distribution and condition of plants and animals that is developed by NatureServe and its network of state natural heritage programs. The analysis finds that about one-third of the nation's best-studied native species are at risk and of conservation concern. NatureServe further analyzed the levels of risk for animals that depend on various ecosystem types. Of the 1,700 native animal species that depend on forests, 19.4% are at risk, while among animals that depend on grassland or shrubland habitats—also about 1,700 species—16.9% are at risk. For the more than 4000 animals that depend on freshwater habitats, however, the figure is nearly twice as high: 35.3% of these are at risk, revealing that our nation's freshwater habitats are especially threatened.

"Freshwater ecosystems are under threat across the United States," said Bruce Stein, Ph.D., Vice President of Programs for NatureServe. "Nearly every group of animals that depend on freshwater habitat is in trouble—fishes, turtles, frogs, mussels, crayfish." Earlier this year,

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NatureServe produced the report *States of the Union: Ranking America's Biodiversity*, which considered species at risk on a state-by-state basis. "These new figures reinforce one of the key findings in *States of the Union*, which was that Alabama, surprisingly, is a center of species diversity as well as species at risk. This is directly attributable to Alabama's diverse freshwater habitats and the threats they are under."

Since the 1970s, U.S. natural heritage programs have conducted ongoing biological inventories and analyses on thousands of plants and animals. NatureServe now tracks more than a half million occurrences of these at-risk species. Species at risk include those assessed by NatureServe to be presumed extinct or possibly extinct, critically imperiled, imperiled, or vulnerable.

Species at risk is just one of the issues addressed in The Heinz Center report, which identifies major gaps in what is known about the nation's ecosystems, and establishes a set of environmental indicators that should be used to inform national policy-making. For nearly half of these 103 indicators, The Heinz Center found that current data is inadequate. Yet the report finds that the comprehensiveness of NatureServe's data does allow for an accurate national view of the state of terrestrial and freshwater plants and animals.

"The report brings together in one place a wide array of reliable indicator data from environmental monitoring efforts run by both government and private organizations," said William Clark, a professor at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government and chairman of the *State of the Nation's Ecosystems* project. "NatureServe has been a key partner in this effort, and its data on the status of the nation's plants and animals has allowed us to report on this very important aspect of ecosystem condition."

Resources:

- View *The State of the Nation's Ecosystems*, a report from The H. John Heinz III Center for Science, Economics, and the Environment, on the web at <http://www.heinzctr.org/ecosystems/index.htm>.
- See how NatureServe's data is used for the core national indicator on at-risk native species at http://www.heinzctr.org/ecosystems/national/ntv_spec.shtml.
- Check the distribution and conservation status of more than 50,000 plants, animals, and ecosystems of the United States and Canada on NatureServe Explorer at www.natureserve.org/explorer.
- View *States of the Union: Ranking America's Biodiversity*, a report from NatureServe, on the web at <http://www.natureserve.org/publications/biodiversity/summary.htm>.

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NatureServe is a non-profit conservation group dedicated to providing the scientific information and tools that form the basis for effective conservation action. NatureServe represents a network of 76 natural heritage programs and conservation data centers in the United States, Canada, and Latin America that collect and analyze information on plants, animals, and ecosystems. NatureServe is a leading source for detailed scientific information about rare and endangered species and threatened ecosystems. Visit us on the web at www.natureserve.org.