

# The Washington Post

March 31, 2007

## Extinct Sense

### A troubling report from the Interior Department

p. A16

IT LOOKS LIKE another story of endangered ethics on the Bush administration's environmental staff. Last week the Interior Department's inspector general submitted the results of an investigation of Julie A. MacDonald, the deputy assistant secretary for fish and wildlife and parks, to congressional overseers.

According to numerous accounts collected in the inquiry, Ms. MacDonald has terrorized low-level biologists and other employees for years, often yelling and even swearing at them. One official characterized her as an "attack dog." Much of this bullying, the report suggests, was aimed at diluting the scientific conclusions and recommendations of government biologists and at favoring industry and land interests. Ms. MacDonald's subordinates said she has trenchantly resisted both designating new species as endangered and protecting imperiled animals' habitats. She defended her interventions in an interview with the inspector general's staff, saying that she kept Interior's scientists accountable, according to the report. But the evidence available suggests she was at the least too aggressive.

H. Dale Hall, director of the Fish and Wildlife Service, recounted a battle he had with Ms. MacDonald over the Southwest willow flycatcher, an endangered bird. Biologists in the field concluded that the bird's nesting range, which determines how much land the government should protect as habitat for the species, was 2.1 miles. Mr. Hall claims that Ms. MacDonald insisted on lowering that to 1.8 miles so that the nesting range would not extend into California, where her husband maintained a family ranch. The inspector general noted that she has no formal training in biology.

The inspector general's review of Ms. MacDonald's e-mail account also showed that she had close ties to lobbying organizations that have challenged endangered-species listings and that she had "misused her position" to give them information not available to the public on Interior Department policy.

Reports of Ms. MacDonald's alleged sins have emerged soon after revelations of other ethical lapses by Bush environmental appointees. J. Steven Griles, the former second in command at Interior, pleaded guilty to charges stemming from the Jack Abramoff scandal. And Sue Ellen Wooldridge, formerly the government's top environmental lawyer, jointly purchased a vacation home with Mr. Griles and a lobbyist for ConocoPhillips. These are troubling incidents.

Ms. MacDonald works for an agency tasked with making determinations based on scientific fact, not on her, or her lobbyist friends', inclinations. She appears to have betrayed that vital principle. The inspector general has sent his report to top officials at the Interior Department. They should investigate for themselves the document's troubling descriptions and take action to ensure that Ms. MacDonald and other managers at Interior make policy fit the science, not the other way around.