

Coalition declares Sierra, Delta habitats threatened by climate change

Matt Weiser, Sacramento Bee, 1-6-11

Both the Sierra Nevada and the San Francisco Bay-Delta have been named by environmental groups to a new list of 10 American habitats threatened by climate change.

The list was released Wednesday by the Endangered Species Coalition, a network of hundreds of conservation groups in the United States.

The 10 threatened habitats – deemed most important for endangered species in a warming world – were selected by a panel of 10 scientists from across the country representing academia and the conservation community. They relied on existing data rather than new research.

It is a first by the coalition, which previously generated annual lists focused on individual species rather than whole habitats.

"Our hope is to bring some attention to what we feel are key places to offset some of the impacts that are going to come over the next several years," said Mark Rockwell, the coalition's California representative.

Rockwell said the Delta, as included on the list, includes upstream river environments that flow toward the ocean. Thus, it encompasses a huge range of habitats and species, from Sacramento River salmon to upland areas that make the region America's largest winter range for raptors as well as vital habitat for amphibians and wildflowers.

Much of this environment, Rockwell said, is threatened by reduced runoff and warmer water linked to climate change, as well as increasing human demand for water that may be a related consequence.

The Sierra Nevada made the list, in part, because its diversity of habitats creates a home for many species found nowhere else, such as the mountain yellow-legged frog and Sierra bighorn sheep.

A warmer climate threatens to further shrink habitats already diminished by population growth and changing land uses.

Other habitats on the list include the Everglades, the Hawaiian Islands and the Snake River basin.