

■ CASE STUDY

Trying to Save the California Condor

In the early 1980s, the California condor (Figure 9-2c), North America's largest bird, was nearly extinct, with only 22 birds remaining in the wild. To help save this highly endangered vulture species, scientists captured the remaining birds and bred them in captivity at zoos for eventual return to the wild.

The captured birds were isolated from human contact as much as possible, and to reduce genetic defects, closely related individuals were prevented from breeding. As of 2009, there were 348 living condors. About 180 of them live in the wild throughout the southwestern United States and the rest live in zoos and bird sanctuaries.

A major threat to these birds is lead poisoning, which they can get when they ingest lead pellets from ammunition in the carcasses of animals such as coyotes and rabbits killed by farmers and ranchers and left in the field. They can also get these pellets from the internal organs of animals left by hunters who have field-cleaned their kills. A lead-poisoned condor quickly becomes weak and mentally impaired, and dies of starvation or is killed by predators.

A coalition of conservationist and health organizations is lobbying state game commissions and legislatures to ban the use of lead in ammunition and to require the use of less harmful substitutes. Such a ban has been enacted in California but it is difficult to enforce. Conservationists also urge people who hunt in condor ranges to remove all killed animals and to bury the animals' internal organs after they have field-cleaned their kills or to cover the remains with brush or rocks or put them in inaccessible areas.

Protecting the California condor from almost certain extinction has been expensive and controversial. So far, this program has cost about \$35 million, with \$25 million coming from federal and state funding. This makes it the most expensive conservation project in U.S. history. Some conservationists contend that this money could have been better spent on protecting a number of other endangered species.