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Petition Aims to Protect Famed Ghost Orchids Under Endangered Species Act

Rare Florida Flower Threatened by Poaching, Development

ST. PETERSBURG, Fla.— Conservation organizations submitted a [petition](#) to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service today requesting protection of the ghost orchid under the Endangered Species Act. The ghost orchid, one of the most famous and imperiled flowers in Florida, has declined by more than 90% globally.

The petition — submitted by The Institute for Regional Conservation (in Delray Beach, FL), Center for Biological Diversity and National Parks Conservation Association — also asks the Service to designate critical habitat essential to the survival and recovery of the orchid.

“The ghost orchid is an icon of beauty and nature’s abundance,” said George Gann, executive director at The Institute for Regional Conservation. “Its long demise in southern Florida and Cuba, in part due to its immense popularity, is a bellwether of things to come. We can do nothing and watch another species go extinct in the wild, or we can act now to protect and restore this flagship orchid and its wild habitats. The Florida we envision includes a restored Greater Everglades ecosystem with all of its biological diversity, including the ghost orchid.”

The ghost orchid (*Dendrophylax lindenii*), made popular by Susan Orlean’s book *The Orchid Thief* and the movie *Adaptation* starring Meryl Streep and Nicholas Cage, is found only in Florida and Cuba.

There are only an estimated 1,500 ghost orchid plants left in Florida, and less than half are known to be reproductively mature. The Florida populations of ghost orchid have experienced a 30% to 50% decline. Chief threats to the flower include poaching, habitat degradation and the climate emergency.

“The ghost orchid is emblematic of wild, beautiful Florida, and this flower’s future depends on our ability to protect it from poaching and habitat loss,” said Jaclyn Lopez, Florida director at the Center for Biological Diversity. “The steady decline of ghost orchid populations coupled with the threats of the climate crisis puts this enigmatic plant at risk of extinction.”

“The ghost orchid is the rare plant species that captivates just as much attention as some charismatic megafauna in the state of Florida. This mysterious, beautiful plant captivates Floridians, reminding them of our state’s unique, wild heritage,” said Melissa Abdo, Ph.D., regional director at the National Parks Conservation Association. “While the ghost orchid has always been rare, threats to its existence have become dire in recent years. Poaching, climate change, loss and modification of habitat and direct threats to the ecosystem — even in protected areas like Big Cypress National Preserve — could spell disaster for the species. That is why it is imperative that the ghost orchid be afforded protections under the Endangered Species Act.”

Abdo has longstanding experience with the ghost orchid, having helped discover new subpopulations of the plant in Big Cypress National Preserve in the early 2000s.

The orchid is long-lived and may take 15 years or more to reach reproductive maturity. Its current range includes the Big Cypress National Preserve, Florida Panther National Wildlife Refuge, Fakahatchee Strand Preserve State Park, Audubon’s Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary and additional conservation and tribal areas in Collier, Hendry and possibly Lee counties.

A private non-profit organization, The Institute for Regional Conservation (IRC), in DELRAY BEACH, FL, is dedicated to the protection, restoration, and long-term management of biodiversity on a regional basis, and to the prevention of local extinctions of rare plants, animals and ecosystems. Based in Florida, USA, IRC works on conservation research and action throughout South Florida, the Caribbean and beyond. Its vision is to unite people and nature to restore our world.

The Center for Biological Diversity is a national, nonprofit conservation organization with more than 1.7 million members and online activists dedicated to the protection of endangered species and wild places.

Since 1919, the nonpartisan National Parks Conservation Association has been the leading voice in safeguarding our national parks. NPCA and its nearly 1.6 million members and supporters work together to protect and preserve our nation’s most iconic and inspirational places for future generations. For more information, visit www.npca.org.