

# We can't solve the climate crisis by causing extinction | Opinion

We have an opportunity to lead the way towards addressing the climate crisis and biodiversity loss



**By Naomi Fraga**

Tiehm's buckwheat, the rare wildflower at the center of controversy for supposedly "standing in the way" of a lithium mine, is teetering on the edge of extinction. Dubious conservation programs, touted loudly by a mining company and its boosters, not only will fail to prevent the plant's extinction in its natural range, but they do damage to the reputation and practice of rare plant conservation.

In 1973 the United States signed a landmark bill into law, the Endangered Species Act, a bipartisan piece of legislation that enshrined our society's commitment to preventing extinction. Importantly, this law not only conserves species, but also the habitats upon which they rely, recognizing the interdependency of a species and its ecosystem. A species without its ecosystem is a relic without a future; like a zoo animal locked in a cage with no home to return to. In the United States we know of 65 kinds of plants presumed extinct and lost forever. We are fortunate that the future is not yet written, and we have every opportunity to ensure that list does not grow.

In December of 2022, Tiehm's buckwheat (*Eriogonum tiehmii*) [was listed under the Endangered Species Act](#). This wildflower is naturally rare, occurring on only 10 acres in a remote and rugged mountain range in Esmeralda County, Nevada. Until recently it was living in obscurity, enjoying an abundance of pollinators each spring, until exploration activities for the Rhyolite Ridge Mine began in 2018. The mine proposed by Loneer Ltd., an Australian company, has been identified as the most severe and existential threat to the buckwheat by the United States Fish and Wildlife Service. The proposed mine would relegate the species to a tiny sliver of land, an island really, with nearly half of the habitat critical to its survival destroyed.

It is unfortunate that Loneer continues to propose scheme after greenwashing scheme in an effort to cast doubt that their proposed mine would bring existential harm to Tiehm's buckwheat. The company's claims that the proposed project can "coexist" with the buckwheat fails the scientific litmus test each time. Their first plan proposed to move the plants away from the mine, but their translocation study resulted in 100% failure. In fact, [a study they funded](#) demonstrated that Tiehm's buckwheat is uniquely adapted to the mineral rich soil in which it grows, providing scientific evidence that attempts to move the plant would be counter to its long-term conservation.

Loneer has since revised its plan and now wants to create a large open pit mine and industrial-scale mining operations mere feet from the buckwheat, creating a constant source of polluting dust, fundamentally altering the habitat upon which the species relies. In a [recent Nevada Current article](#) Loneer announced their newly constructed greenhouse, or so-called "conservation center." However, this program fails to address onsite conservation and threatens to erode the reputation and effectiveness of conservation seed banks and propagation programs which are vital components to enhancing a species persistence in the wild.

The Endangered Species Act states in Section 2(b) that its purpose is, "to provide a means whereby the ecosystems upon which endangered species and threatened species depend may be conserved." While ex-situ or offsite conservation programs such as seed banking and greenhouse propagation are important tools necessary to support in-situ or onsite conservation, they should never be used to replace habitat or as an excuse to destroy habitat.

With each proposal to "conserve" Tiehm's buckwheat, Loneer has only undermined its long-term conservation. Ultimately conserving Tiehm's buckwheat means conserving its habitat and that is the one strategy Loneer has never proposed. Their greenhouse project is only the next phase of propaganda in the company's long list of failed conservation efforts.

Scientists have been sounding the alarm bell that the climate crisis and biodiversity crisis are one and the same. We cannot solve the climate crisis by causing extinction. Instead we need to identify solutions that optimize securing transition minerals like lithium in the least harmful way for nature and people. The Rhyolite Ridge Mine is not the sustainable path we need for our renewable energy future.

We are at a crossroads and Tiehm's buckwheat is hanging in the balance. This species is not just an obscure plant, but it is a beacon of hope and a testimony of resilience. We have an opportunity to lead the way towards addressing the climate crisis and biodiversity loss. Let's not fail ourselves, and the natural world, by putting faith in greenwashing schemes which will only serve to enhance corporate power while facilitating the destruction of biodiversity. We owe it to Tiehm's buckwheat. We owe it to ourselves.

**Naomi Fraga PhD is Director of Conservation Programs at California Botanic Garden and Research Assistant Professor at Claremont Graduate University. This piece [was first published](#) by the Nevada Current, a sibling site of the Pennsylvania Capital-Star.**