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Too Cute to Die

One rodent's struggle against politics and climate change



by Annie Carew

Before you read any further, you should Google pictures of the American Pika. It looks like a fluffy, adorable mix of a rabbit and a mouse. It is arguably the cutest rodent in existence. And it will be in serious danger of extinction as climate change progresses.

The American Pika inhabits high alpine regions in the American West. They can be difficult to detect, as their fur blends in with the rocks, and they are small and reclusive. The American Pika's range—the area in which it is found—includes mountaintops in California, Colorado, Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, and New Mexico, as well as western Canada. Pikas are well-adapted to cold high-altitude climates; their small, round bodies and thick fur conserve heat, and they have fur on their paws to provide traction on snow.

Unfortunately, these adaptations also mean that Pikas can die when exposed to temperatures of 78°F or higher. As the planet emerged from its last Ice Age, the Pikas' range began to shrink upslope because temperatures warmed. The Pikas flee the heat by climbing up the mountains, but populations become isolated and trapped on mountaintops, since they cannot venture into lower elevations in order to migrate to more favorable locations. With the impending threat of climate change, the rate of habitat loss for the Pika is expected to increase. And since they cannot survive warmer temperatures, they have no way of moving from one mountaintop to another in search of more suitable habitat. They are essentially trapped, isolated on islands of cool climate in a rising sea of heat.

The plight of the Pika has not gone unnoted by biologists. Erik Beever published a study in the *Journal of Mammalogy* in 2003 noting shrinking populations of Pikas in the Great Basin, which includes most of Nevada, half of Utah, and smaller areas of Oregon, California, Idaho, and Wyoming. In the Great Basin, Pikas have disappeared from thirty-two percent of mountainous habitats where they were documented in the early 1900s. Most of this loss has occurred at the southern end of the Pikas' range as a result of climate change.

Despite the threats to the American Pikas' habitat and life, it is not considered an endangered species. The International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) does not include the Pika on its infamous Red List of endangered species. In fact, the American Pika is listed as a species of “least concern.” The US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and the California Fish and Game Commission have also ruled not to list the species as threatened. The justification for this is valid; the Pika is doing just fine in the northern parts of its range. The disappearing populations noted in the Great Basin represent a very small fraction of the overall species population. However, if global warming continues on its current trend, the American Pika will be in serious danger of going extinct in the United States. 🐾

