The inter-connectivity of our ecosystem has been underscored by new and alarming scientific findings. Recently, the National Marine Fisheries Service has reported that the dramatic, well-documented declines in Pacific salmon fisheries may lead to the extinction of Pacific killer (Orca) whales. This killer whale population, a unique species, is already endangered under federal law, and currently numbers only 84 animals; they normally inhabit ocean waters off the Pacific Northwest coast, but have been seen as far south as the ocean waters off the Central California coast.

Salmon, as it happens, are the Orcas' primary source of food. And Pacific Coast salmon populations–especially those that rely on the California Delta and its waterways for spawning–are themselves crashing due to a convergence of adverse impacts: dams, water pollution, the operation of water diversion facilities, rising river ocean temperatures, etc.

So we're seeing killer whales, which never venture into fresh water, nonetheless imperiled by the human demands placed on those freshwater resources, which in turn threaten the salmon runs upon which the whales depend for survival.

This leads to another thought about threatened and endangered species generally. For years, the key "indicator species" gauging the ecological health of the California Delta was the Delta smelt, a tiny fish of little interest to anyone other than wildlife biologists and environmentalists. The crash of California-based salmon fisheries has resonated somewhat more broadly with the general public. But it's interesting that while salmon are venerated in the Pacific Northwest, in Alaska and among many foreign cultures, the passion for salmon fisheries in other parts of the U.S. seems largely limited to commercial and recreational fishing interests (along with at least some environmental groups).

Orca whales, on the other hand, are considered an iconic species by most Americans–along with the bald eagle, polar bears, sea otter and a few other critters. The potential extinction of the Pacific killer whales is a concern that, hopefully, will galvanize public attention and lead to meaningful, restorative action. And that, perhaps, will simultaneously inure to the benefit of salmon and Delta smelt fisheries that are similarly under siege, as we struggle to restore critically-impaired ecosystems such as the California Delta.