It's been 50 years since the passage of the Endangered Species Act, a federal law that protects American wildlife and plants found to be in danger of extinction.
Early Friday morning, at an urban corner in downtown Bakersfield, artist Brandon Thompson used spray paint and his own creative powers to put the finishing touches on a large mural commemorating the enactment of that law.

At the center of the mural is a Bakersfield cactus, a species once common within its range in the southern San Joaquin Valley, but due to continued habitat loss and other factors, it was listed as an endangered species at the federal level in 1990. Despite the publication of a recovery plan in 1998, the cactus continued to decline.

"In the design, I wanted to show the main focus of the hands around the plant," said Thompson, who designed and painted the mural over about two weeks.

"I love drawing hands, and it's the act of propagating the cactus and caring for it," he said of the image, suggesting that while it was human activity that caused the species' decline, it's now up to humans to protect and aid in the recovery of the small numbers that remain.

Mic Hall is a board member and interim manager of the nonprofit that oversees the Panorama Vista Preserve in northeast Bakersfield, one of the places the Bakersfield cactus grows.

The mural is a reminder to us, he said, that before settlers and immigrants came to the San Joaquin Valley, the now-imperiled plant was widespread on our desert landscape.

"The cactus evolved a relationship with native animals," Hall said. "A biology instructor at Bakersfield College has identified three native bee species that are pollinators when the Bakersfield cactus blooms."

With time, he said, researchers will be better able to define its niche in the environment and relationship with other insects.

"Whether on a mural downtown or at Panorama Vista Preserve in its native habitat," he said, "the Bakersfield cactus brings beauty to our community."

The creation of the nearly 1,000-square-foot mural was funded by the Kern River Parkway Foundation, the Virginia and Alfred Harrell Foundation, the Arts Council of Kern, the California Native Plant Society and Tomás delToro-Diaz, the owner of the building at 19th and Q streets where the mural blossomed.
The Native Plant Society also helped make sure the design was true to the traits of the Bakersfield cactus.

Erin Tennant, an environmental scientist with the California Department of Fish and Wildlife, who helps manage a Bakersfield cactus preserve in the hills and bluffs just southwest of Hart Park, said much of the southern valley, including the natural home of the Bakersfield cactus, is really the San Joaquin Desert.

The new mural is "an educational opportunity," Tennant said, for area residents to learn more about and gain a greater appreciation for the unique environment, species and habitat in this desert valley.

"I'm excited to see the Bakersfield cactus is getting a little love in our city," she said.

Stephen Winters, a board member with the Kern River Parkway Foundation, a primary funder of the mural, said murals like this one communicate in a way that is universal.

"Art is a great way to speak more languages, a way to speak to the heart," he said.

The Bakersfield cactus only exists here, he said. Saving it for future generations is only possible when people here care about it.

On Friday morning, as Thompson put the finishing touches on the mural, he said he joined the U.S. Air Force soon after graduating from Bakersfield High School in 2000.

"Traveling with the military, I always had this box of crayons that I kept with me," he said. "It was an indicator that I always kept room for art and art always kept room for me."

Now he's bringing art to the defense of a lowly cactus named Bakersfield.

Reporter Steven Mayer can be reached at 661-395-7353.