

Prairie dogs deserve to live

On Friday, The Spectrum's editorial staff told us "Mind your own business" when it comes to Utah prairie dogs, citing that we are based in New Mexico. Just to set the record straight: we are a southwest regional conservation group, with offices in Arizona, Colorado, and New Mexico, and we won't be abandoning the Utah prairie dog any time soon.

It would be a different story if you used xenophobic arguments to celebrate your state's namesake prairie dog, but instead your stance is based on the type of thinking that is hurdling this species to extinction: intolerance for native wildlife. Utah prairie dogs number only 9,000 adults, are disappearing at a rapid rate from both private and public lands, and biologically warrant federal endangered status.

Yet, the Utah prairie dog continues to be treated as a "nuisance" animal, even by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which is supposed to be pulling this small mammal back from the brink. The Spectrum's reference to this imperiled species as a plague-carrying "pesky rodent" proves our point. If you want to argue against saving rodents because they are rodents, consider that more than half of the mammal species in North America are rodents. Note also that many rodents, including the Utah prairie dog, are keystone species. Like the keystone in an archway, although the prairie dog is small, it creates and sustains an ecological structure which benefits many other types of wildlife.

Regarding the threat to humans from plague, prairie dogs are too busy dying from plague to transmit it. You have a much higher chance of getting struck by lightning than contracting plague from a prairie dog (you can reduce your chances further if you don't skin or handle one, as that's how most of the few cases that exist occurred). In humans, plague is easily treated with standard antibiotics. Plague is exotic, introduced by sailors in 1899 in San Francisco, and prairie dogs have no immunity to it. The devastating impact of plague to prairie dogs is one of the reasons other threats - such as shooting, removal, and habitat destruction - should be reined in.

But here's a new one: The Spectrum's complaint about prairie dogs' "incessant barking." Research by Dr. Con Slobodchikoff over the past two decades in Arizona has shown that prairie dogs (he's analyzing the Utah prairie dog's cousin, the Gunnison's prairie dog) have the most complex language of any non-human ever studied. Pretty good for a humble rodent. They can tell the difference between people wearing different colored clothes, and those acting in a threatening manner versus those being peaceful. Rather than being perturbed by their chit-chat, appreciate that, to the astonishment of the scientific community, prairie dogs have all the elements of a true language.

The notion that the Cedar Ridge Golf Course and Paiute Tribal Land trapping and killing plan has somehow struck a balance neglects the fact that the Iron County plan already

allows for translocation of up to 300 prairie dogs per year. If prudent planning for wildlife and natural ecosystems slows down development, perhaps that's best. Arguing for every conflict with Utah prairie dogs to be accommodated through translocation and killing is a recipe for their extinction.

Few benefit from rubber-stamped development. It's not good for human communities, as thoughtless sprawl can lead to water shortages, traffic congestion, inadequate service infrastructure, and disconnects us from nature. And it's certainly not good for the Utah prairie dog, which is stuck between a rock and a hard place with few places left to burrow.

Dr. Nicole Rosmarino is the Conservation Director of Forest Guardians, Santa Fe, N.M.

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