

Editorials are the institutional voice of The Free Press and independent of the newsroom reporting staff

## OUR VIEW

# Reckless plan to gut Endangered Species Act

The Endangered Species Act, signed into law by President Nixon in 1973, is arguably one of the least controversial laws on the books.

A series of polls in recent years has shown incredible bipartisan support at least 85% of Americans in favor of it. Yet there has been growing attempts by Republicans to gut the act, and President Trump administration last week made a reckless attack on it.

### Why it matters:

The Endangered Species Act has the clear support of Americans and attempts to gut it are dangerous.

More than 1,200 species that are endangered and near extinction are protected, as are nearly 400 species listed as threatened.

If Trump's plan to rewrite how the act is administered survives court challenges, it will make it harder to protect threatened species and to protect habitat that endangered and threatened animals need.

The Endangered Species Act is the reason Minnesotans and other Americans can now see bald eagles in plentiful numbers.

It helped restore the number of grizzly bears, which are still on the threatened list. The Minnesota state bee — the rusty patched bumblebee — also benefits from its threatened listing.

The act requires that decisions to list an endangered or threatened species must be based on science with no reference to potential economic effects if an animal is listed.

Trump's new rules would direct that a cost-benefit analysis be done during the listing process. The administration says the economic information would be informational only, but it is undoubtedly aimed at giving corporations and developers more ammunition to oppose protections.

The Endangered Species Act also prohibits anyone from killing or harming endangered species. Threatened species have always had that same protection unless the Fish and Wildlife Service made special allowances to the contrary. Trump's rules would allow the killing of threatened species unless Fish and Wildlife specifically writes rules protecting some of the animals listed.

That is a foolish change in policy that would only increase the risk that animals listed as threatened would soon become endangered.

The Center for Biological Diversity, which supports protections for endangered species, found that in the 1990s and early 2000s there were only a few bills introduced in Congress each year aimed at chipping away at the Endangered Species Act.

But in the first two years of the Trump presidency, Republicans have introduced well over 100 changes to try and gut protections.

The courts may halt the administration's attempt to weaken the act, but Congress can and should use its oversight powers to stop the rule changes. GOP lawmakers from many states that have seen the benefits of the act and who listen to their constituents should help form a bipartisan coalition to stop the Endangered Species Act from being eviscerated.

## OTHER VIEW

# No constitutional right to spread disease

New York Daily News

Acting like members of some cult blind to science and public health, a mob of anti-vaccine kooks packed an Albany courtroom Wednesday to watch lawyers argue their ludicrous case that parents have a constitutional right to spread communicable diseases and endanger the lives of others. Their deluded leader, Robert Kennedy Jr., was there supporting the spectacle.

After America's worst measles outbreak in more than a quarter century, which centered in heavily ultra-Orthodox Jewish areas of Brooklyn and Rockland County, the Legislature had the guts to finally end the easy way

out of the shots. Only a medical waiver, on a case-by-case basis, can excuse youngsters from getting their vaccines.

The anti-vaxxers claim it violates the First Amendment, showing they know very little about both vaccines and the First Amendment.

New Yorkers who don't want to vaccinate their kids are still free to do so; they'll just have to homeschool their kids, or keep them out of day camp or any other similar public gathering place. Parents claiming religious exemption to avoid vaccinating their children aren't expressing religious liberty — they're violating the social contract that binds us all.

TIM COWBELL  
Illustrated by Washington Post News Service & Spinelli



FASTER THAN A SPEEDING BULLET

# A dynamic sign coming to your neighborhood?

It appears that the North Mankato City Council has chosen to not defend in court its decision to grant a variance that would allow Holy Rosary Church to place a dynamic display sign in a residential area. In my opinion, that is a wise decision because granting that variance violated Minnesota law and the city's own code. (A dynamic display sign is one that can be remotely programmed and which can rotate, flash, blink, display pictures, etc. with LED lighting.)

Instead, the council is proposing to change city code so that dynamic display signs will be allowed in all residential areas, with some restrictions. The restrictions basically reflect those that were included in the variance granted to Holy Rosary Church. Because changing city code will affect all residential areas in North Mankato, careful consideration should be given to the consequences of this change.

One restriction is that dynamic display signs in residential areas would

only be allowed for non-commercial institutional use. However, there is no definition as to what constitutes a non-commercial institutional use. It has been suggested that it could include schools, churches, parks, playgrounds, and government buildings. A definition should absolutely be provided in city code before any vote is taken on this change, to ensure a clear understanding of what types of facilities may install dynamic display signs in residential areas.

As proposed, another restriction would allow signs up to 50 square feet, a size that seems excessive for a lit, changeable sign in residential areas. By comparison, in Neighborhood Business Districts, signs of any type are limited to 40 square feet for single occupant buildings.

The proposed amendment also has a restriction limiting the amount of time the signs can be lit each day, and how often their message can be changed. These features appear to indicate that the dynamic display signs

will be used for advertising, which the applicant for the variance seemed to indicate was needed. Is advertising appropriate in residential areas?

Residents should carefully consider the consequences of allowing dynamic display signs in all residential areas, as schools, churches, parks, playgrounds, and government buildings exist in many residential areas in North Mankato.

The council will consider changing city code to allow dynamic display signs in all residential areas in a public hearing at their meeting Monday. The meeting will be 7 p.m. in City Hall. Residents must contact council members and/or attend the public hearing to voice the concerns they may have about this proposed change to city code. If there is no public input, this change will most likely be approved, and dynamic display signs will be allowed in all residential areas.

Could a dynamic display sign be coming to your neighborhood soon?  
*Barb Church is a North Mankato resident.*



**BARB CHURCH**  
My View

# Democracy dies in silence

By David Winston  
For CQ-Roll Call

What happens to a democracy when people stop talking to one another about what matters to them and the country? When people are afraid to speak their minds because they fear the personal blowback likely to come their way? Or worse, when they come to believe that their concerns, their views and their values just don't matter to anyone anymore, and so they "turn off and tune out," to quote an old line?

What happens? That's when democracy dies. Not necessarily in darkness but in silence.

Political voices matter on all sides even when it is uncomfortable for those in power or for those looking to replace them. Maybe that's when freedom of speech matters most — when the people of a democracy, any democracy, debate their future and the future of their country among themselves.

There was a good example of this Monday, when Sen. Kamala Harris got a lesson in direct democracy from a 91-year-old woman named Roberta Jewell. Harris dropped by a Muscatine, Iowa, nursing home for a standard photo-op moment with a room full of elderly nursing home residents playing an afternoon game of bingo.

Ms. Jewell called Harris over and pointedly asked her how she was going to pay for her "Medicare for All" health care plan. When the California Democrat tried to explain that we are already paying for health care for all through the cost of emergency room care, the feisty senior citizen was having none of it.

"No, we're not," Ms. Jewell told Harris. "Leave our health care system alone. We don't want you to mess with it."

Democracy can be a sticky business when the objects of a photo-op instead decide to engage on policy that matters to them. Monday, it was Harris' turn, but every candidate is likely to have a Roberta Jewell moment. It's good for them to hear directly from the people whose lives will be affected by their plans and proposals, and hopefully, they will take those opinions to heart.

That's how democracy should work, thanks, in large part, to the protections of the First Amendment. As a people, we have a right to debate and discuss the issues of the day, express our views without fear of retribution and vote our conscience. And then we have the responsibility to accept the outcome, win or lose, knowing that in two or four years, another opportunity to win

our issues will come around again.

For more than 200 years, our constitutional freedoms have kept American democracy strong and our political system stable, when others have faded away into socialism and statism. And none has been more important to the success of our republic and the preservation of our democratic ideals than free speech.

But the authors of the Constitution, when they protected our speech, did so in an era when communications were difficult. News was disseminated by horseback and broadcast by town criers. Ideas were exchanged through broadsides and pamphlets.

Ben Franklin, when he called for the improvement of "the common Stock of Knowledge," didn't envision a global technology able to reach every corner of the planet, although given his inclinations, he might have approved of the internet, at least in theory. But today's town square has morphed into the ubiquitous social media, spurred on by an increasingly subjective news media. Instead of friendly arguments, too many political platforms have normalized hateful rhetoric and the personal destruction of those who disagree with them. Political debate in the time of Washington and Jefferson and Adams could be harsh and personal in tone, but the anonymity of social media and its reach are rapidly changing the country's political environment and not for the better. It's turning democratic debate into a belligerent shouting match and that's not good for politics or the country.

Whether it's Facebook or Twitter, media news sites or political websites, it's clear that online behavior is becoming increasingly linked to violence whether in a Walmart or at a baseball field. As social media evolves and extends into almost every aspect of our lives, the power of this relatively new form of communication to affect social interactions, positively and negatively, is growing exponentially and often organically.

That political fact of life is something that everyone from business leaders to lawmakers, from media of every stripe to political operatives and candidates, need to understand. More importantly, they need to take responsibility for the role they play in inciting increasingly negative social interactions on- and off-line. What we're seeing is people becoming more and more fearful of expressing their views and opinions because of the blowback they know they will experience.

In a survey done earlier this year, we

asked people whether they keep quiet about their political views online to avoid conflict with friends and family. Almost half, 49 percent, said that's exactly what they did to duck what they had come to expect would be personal attacks in response to their political posts.

Republicans and independents were more likely to downplay their views than Democrats. Women were also more likely than men to downplay their views online, especially Republican and independent women. That fear of online retribution is antithetical to the concept of freedom of speech and as social media grows, it threatens to undermine the legitimacy of our political system writ large.

Venture capitalist and technology guru Mary Meeker issues an annual report on internet trends that is must-read for anyone trying to understand where new technology is going and its future potential impact on society. In her most recent analysis, released in June, she tells us that in 2019, people will spend more time on mobile devices than watching TV. They spend an average of 6.3 hours a day online between mobile devices and computers.

Twenty-six percent of people overall and 39% of 18- to 29-year-olds say they are online "almost constantly." Forty-three percent of Americans get news from Facebook, 21% from YouTube and 12% from Twitter (according to a Pew study cited in the Meeker report).

But perhaps Meeker's most important insight is this: "Owing to social media amplification, reveals/actions/reactions about events can occur quickly — resulting in both good & bad outcomes." That's why acting responsibly online with the good of the country in mind, matters.

Despite concerns over the growing antagonism and division that seems to emanate from so much of social media these days, this new medium still has the potential to fulfill Franklin's dream of improving "the common Stock of Knowledge." It still represents the very essence of democracy by giving voters the means to freely voice their complaints and concerns to their political leadership and interact with each other to debate the issues of the day.

But as our political discourse continues to devolve into name-calling and worse, it's worth wondering whether either side can tone down the rhetoric, talk to, not at, each other and put the country first. At its core, democracy works when we fight (figuratively) for what we believe in, but also listen to each other and respect our differences.

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