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Turtle races: Family fun or harmful?

Video raises concerns about turtle welfare

By Elizabeth Vierkant
evierkant@perhamfocus.com

The turtle races have been part of Perham's summers for 40 years. Every Wednesday, June

through August, people from all over gather in Turtle Race Park, next to the Perham Area Chamber at 185 E Main St., to race turtles. However, the ethics and sustainability of the races have recently come into question.

Snake Discovery, an organization that presents educational rep-

tile programs and has a YouTube channel with 2.36 million subscribers, recently called into question the ethics and sustainability of Perham's turtle races. The group recently made a video on this topic that has had more than 350,000 views.

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One of the winning turtles from Perham's first turtle races of 2021 crawls across the finish line on Wednesday, June 2.

Elizabeth Vierkant / Focus

Relay For Life back for 2021

By Elizabeth Vierkant
evierkant@perhamfocus.com

Soaring Higher, Meeting Challenges, Bringing Hope," the theme of 2021's East Otter Tail Relay For Life is a simple phrase that describes the event in its entirety. On the evening of Friday, July 9, into the morning of Saturday, July 10, East Otter Tail County residents gathered at the Perham High School track to support family members and friends who are fighting cancer and to help raise money for cancer prevention and research.

Public events began with activities at 5:30 p.m. At 7 p.m., opening ceremonies began. Anthony Bass, a former player with the Minnesota Vikings and the executive director of the Minnesota American Cancer Society, addressed the crowd of residents gathered on the bleachers.

Bass said he was incredibly excited to



Elizabeth Vierkant / Focus

Relay For Life's honorary co-chairs, Lola Bachmann (left) and Courtney Frohling (right) lead the Survivor's Lap.

come to Perham for this Relay For Life, and, as he said in his speech, it lived up to his expectations. He believes

Perham has a really generous community and the East Otter Tail Relay shows what life is about, seeing a

community thriving and willing to give back and help people.

Following Bass' speech came the

releasing of the doves. To the tune of inspirational music, several kids opened up baskets, allowing doves

to fly into the sky in memory of those lost to cancer.

Afterward, led by honorary co-chairs of the event, Lola Bachmann and Courtney Frohling, cancer survivors walked around the track as community members clapped and cheered for them.

At around 9:15 p.m., luminaries made supporting those struggling with cancer and celebrating lives lost to it displayed around the relay's track were lit to the tune of piano music by Leona Rogers.

Activities at the relay were to carry on until 6 a.m. Saturday. Lisa Peterson, the chair of this event, encouraged everyone to come at some point throughout the night if they're able to.

"I hope (Relay For Life) has meaning for (attendees) and it's something they want to be part of," Peterson said. "Our (hope) is people will take the time

RELAY: Page 6

Perham rescinds COVID-19 local state of emergency

News Staff

In March 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the city of Perham declared a local state of emergency. Over a year later, Perham held a city council meeting on the evening of Monday, July 13. At this meeting, the local state of emergency was rescinded.

The Minnesota Legislature passed a bill to end the peacetime emergency on July 1. Because of this, executive orders, business restrictions and "stay safe" requirements have ended.

In the declaration to rescind the state of emer-

gency, it was stated that Perham understands COVID-19 is still a public health crisis that should be taken seriously and will make any accommodations to continue with activities in a safe manner.

As of Tuesday, July 13, the CDC has reported that 38.1% of Otter Tail County residents are fully vaccinated, and about 41.9% have received at least one dose. The level of community transmission has been rated as low.

COVID-19: Page 6

OTTER TAIL COUNTY COMMISSION

Kirkbride, broadband, Nelson Lake may get federal funding

By Karen Tolkkinen
ktolkkinen@echopress.com

Several major Otter Tail County projects are facing the prospect of getting federal funds, including the Kirkbride building in Ferguson Falls, broadband expansion and fixing the flooding problem from Nelson Lake near Parkers Prairie.

Deputy Adminis-

trator Nick Leonard told Otter Tail County Commissioners at their Tuesday, July 13, meeting that Sens. Amy Klobuchar and Tina Smith had chosen them from among the many projects submitted by the county.

He warned commissioners he didn't want them to get too excited about the prospect.

"It's still a long-



Echo Press file photo

Otter Tail County has added gravel to build up County Road 6, but water from Nelson Lake still washes across, as shown in this April 7 photo.

shot," he said.

The projects that have advanced toward funding include \$2.7

million for Nelson Lake, which has risen significantly, flooding

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WHAT'S INSIDE

New homes near completion in Perham. See page A3

QUOTE FOR THE WEEK

"The short-cut to popularity is to lend everyone your ears, instead of giving them your tongue."
— Frank Bettger

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EOT County Fair returns next Thursday, July 22

News Staff

The East Otter Tail County Fair is back for 2021. Starting on Thursday, July 22, the fair will carry on through Sunday, July 25.

Presale tickets, which can be purchased until Thursday, July 22 at noon, are \$20 for 10 tickets. Armbands are \$18. In Perham, presale tickets are available at Bremer Bank, Cenex Oasis, Central Market, East Otter Tail County Fair Office, Central Minnesota Credit Union, Main Street Express, Perham Chamber Office, Service Food, Silver Moon and West-side Services.

During-the-fair prices are seven tickets for \$20, one ticket for \$3 and a family pack of 20 tickets for \$50.



Perham Focus File Photo

The East Otter Tail County Fair in Perham.

Armbands will be \$20.

Prior to the public events starting Thursday, those participating in the fair can attend the following:

Tuesday, July 20

▶ 3-8 p.m. - Open class entry (Main exhibit building)

▶ 1-6 p.m. - 4-H Non-livestock judging

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OTTER TAIL

From Page 1

nearby roads and drive-ways at times, and which lacks a natural outlet. It has been forwarded to the Senate Transportation Committee. It also includes \$26 million to extend broadband in the county, which will be considered by the Senate Agriculture Committee, and \$39 million for the Kirkbride, a former state hospital for the mentally ill, which could be includ-

ed in the U.S. Department of the Interior budget.

The committees will put together a report of which projects will get funded, and the county will learn more in September, Leonard said.

Those who originally advocated for draining Nelson Lake have now withdrawn their requests, but that doesn't mean that nothing will be done. The county highway department appears to be taking the lead, said board chairman Lee Rogness.

Perham to Pelican Rapids trail

Commissioners will use their eminent domain powers to acquire rights-of-way for the construction of the McDonald and West Segments of the Perham to Pelican Rapids trail.

The trail is designed for foot and bicycle traffic, and is intended to provide safe travel between Perham and Pelican Rapids, and the county said it has acquired all necessary rights of way and ease-

ments except for 36 tracts.

In other action:

Commissioners are considering setting up a Local Housing Trust Fund that would help people who make moderate, low or very low incomes with housing.

It could help with a variety of needs, such as helping with down payments, rent, homeownership counseling, or developing, rehabilitating and financing housing.

Otter Tail County's Housing and Rede-

velopment Authority Board started the fund with \$165,000 and say that anybody can contribute, including local governments, private donors, grants, loans and employers.

At its next meeting, the commission will vote on an ordinance that would allow the trust fund to operate in Otter Tail County.

Travelers who want to avoid road construction on county roads can now subscribe to a map that shows which roads are under construction.

The map is at ottertail-countymn.us/project-county-road-conditions.

A private developer looking to build 36 twin homes and 10 rental units on 10 acres east of Fergus Falls is seeking a tax abatement. Current taxes on the property are \$8,500, and once the project is complete would generate \$170,000 for the county, said Community Development Director Amy Baldwin. A hearing on whether to grant the abatement to the Prairie View Development is set for Tuesday, Aug. 10.

TURTLE

From Page 1

Emily Roberts of Snake Discovery made several points throughout her video, leading her to the conclusion that Perham's turtle races need to either be changed or eliminated. She sat down for a phone call with the Perham Focus to discuss her opinions and the facts that helped build them.

The information Roberts, who is from the Twin Cities area, presented in her video came from when she visited Perham in 2016, making some of the information either outdated or inaccurate. The Perham Focus went over the following with Roberts:

Turtle diets

The video's claim: The turtles are primarily fed turtle pellets.

How things look in 2021: The turtles are also fed minnows, leafy greens and insects.

Did this change Roberts' stance: No. While she's glad to hear they have a more balanced diet, vegetation from their original habitats is still quite different from romaine lettuce.

Number of turtles

The video's claim: The city collects hundreds of turtles each year from the wild.

How things look in 2021: The city starts out with about 35 turtles and, through donations, ends up with about 50. They'll release some if there are too many.

Did this change Roberts' stance: No. An article from the Society for Conservation Biology notes that only about 40% of relocated wild turtles survive. Especially with stress as a factor, many turtles are still dying.

How turtles are released

The video's claim:

The turtles are released into a single body of water once the races are over.

How things look in 2021: The turtles are released in several different locations at the end of the summer.

Did this change Roberts' stance: No. The stress of relocation is still something that causes turtle death. In fact, turtles are less likely to survive when released in a smaller group, the Society for Conservation Biology says.

When Roberts was visiting Perham in 2016, the person who was looking after the turtles told her only about half of the turtles survive through the summer. "I don't know why someone would overexaggerate how many turtles die," Roberts said.

The city of Perham and the Chamber of Commerce were advised not to comment on the matter. However, Sandy Palubicki, the person who currently looks after Perham's turtles, was interviewed by the Focus earlier in 2021. She said the turtles live on her farm during the summer in a large cage that's half in the sun and half in the shade. It has tall grass, a pool and sprinklers to keep them cool.

"(Taking care of them) is pretty easy," she said. "They don't talk back; they just kind of hang out." Palubicki mentioned how happy everyone, especially kids, were to have the turtle races back in Perham for 2021 after the COVID-19 pandemic. People also shop in town after the races, increasing business in the city.

Minnesota Herpetological Society's conservation committee chair, Christopher Smith, also shared his thoughts on the turtle races. He said turtle populations face many threats, and any increase to mortality will impact the population.

"Reptiles have well-established home terri-

tories," he said. "When people catch and move turtles outside of their home territories and release them outside of home territories, this increases the level of turtle mortality."

Smith continued, saying that turtles brought together from different environments might infect one another with diseases, increasing the risk of mortality even more. Then, if these infected turtles are released back into the wild, they'll continue to spread that disease among other wild turtles, impacting the turtle population all throughout the area.

Roberts compared this to the COVID-19 pandemic. She said that the way we watched that virus spread so quickly across the population of humans could also happen to turtles.

"Turtles are some of the most imperative vertebrates on the planet, and while we're fortunate to have an abundance of turtles in Minnesota, there would be reason for concern if (turtle races and deaths) continue on this trajectory," Smith said. "We might not have turtles for future generations."

As previously mentioned, it's estimated that about 40% of relocated turtles survive. Another factor for turtle deaths is stress. Roberts said that, with relocation, the heat from the races and the way they're scared with buckets during the races can cause the turtles a significant amount of stress.

Though turtle races are a popular summer tradition in Perham, they can be found all over Minnesota outside of the city. Nisswa is another Minnesota town that holds turtle races throughout the summer, and Detroit Lakes hosts them as a part of the Northwest Water Carnival.

Minnesota law

While the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources didn't have any statistics on the environmental impact of the races, they referred to one of Minnesota's laws: "A person can't take, possess, buy, transport turtles for sale, sell turtles or take turtles for sale using commercial equipment without a turtle seller's license except if they take, possess, rent or sell up to 25 turtles greater than four inches in length for the purpose of providing turtles for nonprofit turtle races if they are a resident under 18 years old."

"We know a lot more now about turtle conservation, and the rules that allow turtle races are grossly outdated and haven't kept up with what we know about turtle welfare now," Smith said.

Roberts agrees that this law is outdated. In 2016, she noticed that adults were selling turtles at a garage sale in their kids' names.

"It's a loophole that's being taken advantage of," Roberts said. "It's just going to be abused."

Local reaction

On Facebook, the Perham Focus called Perham residents to comment on Roberts' video. Several came forward to voice their various stances.

"I do believe the Perham area turtle races are done very well. The staff take great care of the turtles, all summer long," Kris Nicole commented, saying children will also pick up and drop wild turtles outside of the races. "Sure, we don't want anyone or any animal to get hurt, but accidents can happen. I am confident the staff at the turtle race is able to handle and monitor the turtles' well-being."

Trudy Swanson believes the races are a great way to gather different generations for a memorable experience. She said the

video contains misinformation and thanked the Chamber of Commerce, community and children who help make Perham a nice place.

"The words, 'It's just a turtle,' keep repeating in (my) head," commented Linda Mickelson. "It is a living thing that needs to be handled with care . . . fed properly and not dropped or tossed, as seen in the video. If there are ways to make the turtle races more humane, I think those changes should be made."

Gary Doll said the turtle races are one of the best tourist attractions around. He would always have a busy day with his business during the races before he retired. Paul Haarstick, on the other hand, thinks the races could be done more sustainably. He thinks wild things should be left in the wild.

Some suggestions

Roberts offered a few changes Perham could implement in order to make the races more sustainable:

Instead of capturing wild painted turtles, use domestic red-eared sliders. There is an abundance of them that are released to reptile rescues.

Instead of collecting wild turtles from many different places, maybe rent them from a singular domestic source, such as a reptile rescue or a herpetological society, in order to prevent the spread of disease and relocation death.

If the turtles are not all being rented from a single place, maybe keep them in individual homes.

However, neither Roberts nor Smith could think of ways to continue the turtle races in a way that wasn't cruel or scary for the turtles. The turtles are scared to move with buckets banging, which both Roberts and Smith are against.

Roberts had people in

her video's comments suggest waving a piece of lettuce toward the turtles, but she said this isn't something that would entice a turtle to move.

Smith, in offering an alternative, brought up the tradition of country snake roundups that were culturally significant and popular in some Southern states. Many of these areas have started using captive snakes and changed the event into an educational opportunity.

"Is racing turtles needed, or would just a cool educational event be just as attractive?" Smith asked.

Roberts enthusiastically agreed with Smith's proposed change. She said that, if Perham wanted to continue including a racing aspect, they could hold kid-friendly derby car races where they compete on a track.

She also suggested allowing kids to decorate their cars to keep up with the turtle theme. Then, there could be a booth where people meet domestic turtles and learn about the species.

"As a society, we need to think long and hard about what our values are," Smith said. "I have no doubt that (Perham) folks appreciate turtles, otherwise these (races) wouldn't have come to be, but given what we know today, there are better ways to appreciate and learn about turtle populations."

Roberts agreed that the people of Perham obviously have an appreciation and love for the turtles.

"The races are quite contradictory to (Perham's) love for turtles," she said. "They're running away from the buckets because they're scared. Whoever scares their turtle most is the winner. Is this behavior really a good way to show your love for turtles? It's a question to ponder."








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ottertailcountymn.us/prairielakes/

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