



‘Eat Endangered Species’

by Richard W. Rahn

AN INCREASED DEMAND FOR ENDANGERED SPECIES WILL INCREASE THE SUPPLY OF THEM

Yellowstone, Wyoming

Why are bison no longer endangered? There are an estimated 5,000 bison in Yellowstone National Park owned by the government. An estimated almost 100 times as many, from 300,000 to 500,000, are in herds that are privately owned. A century ago, the bison was almost extinct in the United States, and only a few hundred were alive. Bison, like chickens and cattle, are now abundant because private owners are allowed to own them and sell the meat for food, as well as other parts of the animals. That is, the owners have a strong economic incentive to raise many healthy animals.

The Trump administration has proposed reforms to the Endangered Species Act (ESA), which predictably has caused outrage among some self-identified environmentalists. Winding its way through the courts is the case of the invisible frog — aka, the “dusky gopher frog.” The government wants to lock up privately owned land as potential habitat in areas where the frog is not known to exist, plus thousands of acres of habitat for an estimated 100 frogs. The lock-up of these lands would cause severe economic loss for the landowners.

As former senior Justice Department and EPA official and lawyer, Gary Baise, has written: “The ESA defines a threatened species as one ‘that is likely to become an endangered species

within the foreseeable future throughout all or a significant portion of its range.’ Neither the 1973 law nor current regulations, however, define ‘foreseeable future.’”

There have been, and are, endless battles between government bureaucrats and private landowners over which species are or will be endangered and who will endure the cost of protecting them. There are solutions that would reduce conflict and save the animals without requiring some individuals to suffer a disproportionate cost in preservation.

As with most things, there is a market solution which works better than government theft of private property and coercion. Under the current system, a landowner finding an endangered species on his or her property has a strong incentive to kill it before the government becomes aware that it is on the landowner’s property, which they then might lock up.

Instead, imagine a system when the government identifies an endangered or potentially endangered species, it auctions off entitlements to protect and increase the population of the species. Zoos and wildlife parks already do this to some extent. Assume that the government determines that a desert gopher rat might become endangered. Rather than prohibiting landowners from using their land to its highest and best potential because some rats happen to live there, private parties (both non-profit environmental organizations and profit-making companies) could be licensed to acquire or lease suitable habitat and start raising the endangered rat on the land.

The government would determine the level of desired population and then the licensee would be paid for hitting specified population targets within a specified period of time. The cost burden would be shared among all taxpayers and not disproportionately borne by a property owner unlucky enough to have an endangered species on his or her property.

In some cases, landowners might find it more profitable to “farm” the endangered species, as a way of obtaining the government payments, rather than raise other animals or timber, or whatever, on their land. This system would be far fairer and reduce conflict.

The concept is not new. More than a half century ago, Sir Antony Fisher, a successful British chicken producer and policy entrepreneur, developed an idea for replenishing the oceans of sea turtles which had become endangered. Mature female sea turtles often lay more than 100 eggs at a time in batches in holes they dig on beaches, yet few (less than 1 percent) of the hatchlings ever reach maturity because of animal and human predators. Sir Antony realized that if sea turtle eggs were incubated like chicken eggs and if the turtles were protected until they were big enough (about age 5) to avoid predators and then released into the wild, stocks could be replenished.

To pay for the operation, Sir Antony established a turtle farm in the Cayman Islands, whereby sea turtles were raised for their meat (which is very tasty and healthy) and their shells, etc., and where 20 percent of the turtles — at age 5 — were set free. Unfortunately, unknowing or uncaring environmentalists in the United States managed to get legislation passed which prohibited trade in sea turtle products.

The Cayman farm, being unable to sell to the United States and other countries, and being located in a very small population jurisdiction was unable to reach the necessary size for viability. Eventually, the Cayman government took over the turtle farm where it is a tourist attraction and sells turtle products for local consumption while replenishing wild stocks. The sea turtle is still unnecessarily endangered because too few governments will permit it to be farmed and its products sold — all because of the environmental lobby.

If you care about preserving endangered species — eat them — wherever they are farmed. An increased demand for endangered species products will increase the supply of them, provided they are privately owned and protected from poachers and other miscreants.

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<https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2018/aug/6/an-increased-demand-for-endangered-species-will-in/>

