

Zoo to You column for Garden City Telegram

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Topic: Family of the Earth

Memorial Day is fast upon us. In my family, when I was little, it was a time to get together with aunts, uncles, cousins, second cousins, and so on to honor those that had passed but also to celebrate the family that was still with us, as well as a time to remember those who had died while serving in the armed forces. Over the years most of us have moved in different directions and no longer get together annually, but the sentiment is still there, for those who have served, and those that were and are part of the family.

Family generally involves those living together in a household or who are descendants of a common ancestor. What if we extend the definition of family beyond our flesh and blood relatives, some of whom we share a house with, and open it up to those with whom we share the planet on which we live?

With that outlook, we have a number of species to honor that have passed before us. Extinction has claimed approximately 1,000 species over the last 500 years. Included among those species would be the woodland bison, the passenger pigeon, the Carolina parakeet, and the Rocky Mountain grasshopper.

Extinction is a natural part of life when considered on a grand scale. It's always been happening in the background at a slow rate, almost unnoticeable, until more recent years. The current extinction rate is estimated to be 1000 to 10,000 times the background rate of the past. The reason for the increase is the impact of humans. We are a very impactful species. On a global scale we have knocked down trees for building materials and to clear land for development; we have plucked or mowed under native flowers and other plants; we have hunted animals to eat and for souvenirs; we have introduced species to areas where they don't belong, and have polluted water systems with various chemicals and trash that will last longer than our lifetime. That's just a peek at our influence on the Earth and those with whom we share it.

No one is saying we, as a species, have to stop every bit of everything we're doing. But we must be mindful of the ramifications and look for a balance or a less impactful way of living, for our own sake if nothing else. While the extinction of the Rocky Mountain grasshopper or the Carolina parakeet may not sound critical to your way of life, extinction affects every species eventually, either directly or indirectly.

Amphibians, which are very sensitive to changes in their environment, are considered the “canary in the coal mine” when it comes to global health and they are currently under extreme pressure. It’s estimated that a third or more of all known amphibians (6,300 species) are at risk of extinction. Each species that is lost lessens the biodiversity of the Earth. The loss of a species has effects on the other species that were connected to it. What other plants and animals did it eat? What ate it? Did it help disperse seeds of any plants? Each of those connected species are affected and the species connected to them are also affected. The ripple effect goes on from there. That’s the web of life.

Biodiversity is a safety net. It gives the community of living species of the planet flexibility in dealing with the various issues that arise. If a new disease flares up it will affect some individuals, and even some species, more than others. The more diverse we are as a species and as a community of species, the less harmful the effect as a whole. Each of the extinct species should be celebrated for the diversity they added to our planet. That also applies to those that are still with us and is a reason to protect them. Biodiversity is our safety net.

Does this sound too enormous to take on by yourself? Don’t worry; you don’t have to do it alone. Collectively we can have a positive impact. There are many little things we can do individually to help protect the biodiversity of the planet. Shop wisely. Watch for the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) label to support global forest protection. Watch for Dolphin Safe tuna labeling as well as RSPO (Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil) labels as well. Choose fish which are sustainably raised or fished and watch for the blue Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) logo. Plant a tree. Walk or bike when you can. Group your errands rather than making multiple separate trips. Be careful when buying souvenirs (make sure they aren’t made from any endangered species). Save water by fixing drippy faucets or by turning off the tap when brushing your teeth, shaving, or washing vegetables. Turn lights off when you leave the room. Save paper by thinking before you print something and by using both sides of a piece of paper when possible. Even just one act, when combined with that of others can have a huge positive effect. Together we can turn the tide of extinction and protect the family of the planet Earth.