

# Protecting wildlife won't curb economic growth

Texans have always taken pride in our state's great diversity of wildlife and wildlife habitat. Working with public agencies and private landowners, wildlife biologists and enthusiasts have maintained a tradition of conserving our unique diversity of wildlife and wild places. This is a critical accomplishment in a state where less than 3 percent of the land is in public ownership.

Central Texas was one of the first places in the nation to address potential conflicts between endangered species conservation and the need for land development. In 1996, the golden-cheeked warbler, which nests exclusively in a few Central Texas counties, was formally recognized as endangered under the federal Endangered Species Act, enacted in 1973. Rather than fighting the law, the city of Austin and Travis County came together to make it work for the region. Engaging federal, state and local officials and citizens, they created one of the nation's first regional multispecies habitat conservation plans under ESA, our nation's safety net for animals and plants at risk of extinction.

The resulting Balcones Canyonlands Conservation Plan is protecting the warbler and other Texas endangered wildlife species. In turn, the plan has freed other lands to allow much-needed construction of public schools, housing, roads and infrastructure to accommodate our growing population. Today, the Balcones Canyonlands Preserve's 30,428 acres of preserved lands are helping ensure the future of 27 at-risk species and another eight endangered species.

The preserve is a tremendous asset to the Austin region. Its preserves are improving our water and air quality, replenishing groundwater, maintaining habitats for endangered birds and other wildlife and providing hiking trails and other recreational opportunities. Drivers on South MoPac may not realize that the beautiful undeveloped green spaces they pass are part of the preserve. This highly successful approach to balancing endangered species conservation with development needs is now a model being adopted in other areas in Texas and beyond.

Unfortunately, some elected officials and other critics have revived old efforts to dismantle this visionary conservation plan by claiming falsely that the species it protects are not really endangered. The Statesman's Jan. 10 article, "No harmony in songbird dispute," reveals the extent to which current and former state officials, notably former state Comptroller Susan Combs, are challenging scientific decisions that should be left to professional biologists at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and state resource agencies. Texas Land Commissioner George P. Bush has joined this chorus, even claiming that the ESA and its protection of the tiny songbird pose a threat to our national security.

This latest skirmish in Texas mirrors the national battle over the ESA. In 2015 alone, members of Congress proposed 88 legislative actions to undermine the ESA, override core provisions, and strip or block federal protection from a wide range of imperiled species. Alle-

gations about the supposed catastrophic consequences of endangered species conservation are on the rise despite experience and data that directly refute them. An article prepared by staff at Defenders of Wildlife, a highly regarded national group, was recently published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Science. It found that not one of the 88,000 proposed federal, state, local and private projects reviewed by the Fish and Wildlife Service over the last seven years was stopped because it would threaten the survival of a species listed as endangered.

The extreme rhetoric pitting the conservation of declining species against the economy isn't based in reality or science. It's an assault coming from the same powerful economic and ideological interests that have asserted a false choice between the need to protect our environment and the need to enhance our economy.

Austin and Travis County can be proud of their success in protecting and conserving our natural heritage. The Balcones Canyonlands Preserve is living testimony that through thoughtful, pragmatic and science-based conservation efforts, we can leave our children and grandchildren a world rich in both economic opportunity and biological diversity.

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