

Fairy shrimps and bears hot topics for species protection

By LAURIE DAVIS, Register Correspondent
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From barely visible fairy shrimp to highly visible black bears, we share our Napa Valley home with a rich diversity of animals, birds, fish, insects and plants. Some of them are listed as threatened or endangered. As our houses and vineyards press outward from the valley floor, we are moving deeper into our wild neighbors' spaces, and discovering that sharing habitats is not always easy.

The recent killing of four black bears at a Pope Valley vineyard drew attention to a critical question: How do we balance the need for protecting our agricultural land and crops while also preserving critical habitat for native, rare, threatened or endangered species?

The bear-killing, which was done legally to protect vineyard land, incited a strong public outcry in favor of protecting the bears, even among some other vineyard owners. It also raised curiosity about what rare, threatened or endangered species live in Napa County, and what we should do to protect them.

A recent panel discussion on "Living with Endangered Species" held at the Napa Valley Museum brought together a diverse group representing a range of environmental and agriculture expertise to explore these issues. The panel discussion reflected on the museum's most recent, stunning exhibit, "Witness: Endangered Species of North America," based on the book of the same title and curated by photographers Susan Middleton and David Littschwager. Middleton was on hand to lead a tour of the exhibit, then served as moderator of the panel discussion.

Panel members included Dr. Rainer Hoenicke, an environmental scientist with the San Francisco Estuary Institute; Stephen Rae, managing partner of MUSCI Natural Resource Assessment; Laurette Rogers, project coordinator of the Bay Institute's California Freshwater Shrimp Project; Tom Gamble, owner of Davies and Gamble and member of the Napa County Farm Bureau; Volker Eisele, owner of the Volker Eisele Family estate and organic farmer; and Davie Pia, owner of Pia Vineyards Management and member of the Rutherford Dust Restoration Team.

Each panel member gave a brief talk, then fielded questions from the audience. The bear incident was still fresh in people's minds, so the primary focus was the interface between agriculture and wildlife.

"In Napa County, our human activities don't need to interfere with wildlife," said Hoenicke. "Most farmers recognize we can pursue economic activities while living with wildlife."

Eisele, who farms 400 acres, echoed these sentiments. "Coyotes run freely on our land, they have their dens right next to the vineyards," he says. "We have a six-foot fence with no barbed wire. The mountain lions have learned to use the fence by driving deer against it. The quail and hares provide food for large raptors. And yes, we do have black bears, and sometimes they cause damage - but that's nothing compared to the thrill of having them. We get more damage from 'alien species' like feral pigs and turkeys."

Eisele got a good laugh from the audience when he was asked what he does about pests. "We do nothing, we ignore everything!" he quipped.

Gamble offered some thoughts in response to letters to the editor published recently in the Napa Valley Register. "Some critics of the bear killings suggest that fences be put around vineyards," he said. "However, growers have been criticized for installing fencing because the type of fencing typically installed impairs animal migration, thus isolating wildlife populations and encouraging inbreeding of those populations."

Gamble mentioned a neighbor who is experimenting with an innovative fencing solution: roll-up fencing. The six-foot-high fence, made of a flexible plastic or nylon material, is put in place in the spring and removed after harvest, allowing free movement for wildlife during half the year.

Fence or no fence, Gamble sees an inextricable connection between expanding urbanization and loss of wildlife habitat. "Preserving agriculture and open space is the best way to preserve wildlife," said Gamble.

Eisele noted that California loses 50,000 acres of agricultural land every year. "That is not sustainable," he said. "Europeans have learned one thing: Agricultural land is 'holy.' If you want to have a food base, you don't put a house on it. I don't understand why people here don't fight harder to stop the loss of agricultural land."

Every panel member spoke about the importance of education.

"We need more education," said Eisele. "Organizations like Acorn Soupe are doing a wonderful job of bringing this kind of thinking to children in school."

Rogers, whose core focus is educating children, was giving a presentation to a class about why watershed restoration is critical to protecting various species, and a student asked "What do we do to save the species?" She suggested the class adopt an endangered species to save. The majority were enamored by the infinitesimal but fascinating fairy shrimp.

"I have to admit, I have 'species bias,'" said Rogers. "I might have chosen something else, something more majestic, like a mountain lion," she laughed. "But we studied it and together we all fell in love with it. Pick a species, any species, and find out all about it, and you will fall in love with it!"

Rogers described her fairy shrimp project as a good example of project-based learning. She works with ranchers in Napa, including Stags Leap Wine Cellar, as well as ranchers in Sonoma and Marin Counties, to help protect fairy shrimp habitats on private property. Transparent and tiny, they are difficult to see but command a \$10,000 fine if you're caught taking one.

Some panelists shared their personal experiences with watershed and habitat restoration. Pia described how the Rutherford Dust Society (www.rutherforddust.org) was created to bring 28 private landowners in the Rutherford appellation together to voluntarily restore a four-mile section of the Napa River. The group hired a consultant to develop a conceptual plan, then applied for grants to help fund the work. "When you get involved in the river, you find so many things you didn't know about," says Pia. "I can finally say 'geomorphology.'"

The Rutherford Dust Society is now beginning to apply for permits, and their success to date has inspired other appellations further upstream to explore doing something similar. It's a difficult prospect for some landowners, however. "It will be painful," said Pia. "There will be setbacks, and some will lose vineyards and trees."

The two-hour panel discussion was followed by a wine and cheese reception for panelists and guests to "enjoy friendly arguments with fine wine," according to the Museum's energetic curator of education, Miki Hsu Leavey.

This event was a successful first step for the museum in promoting community dialogue on challenging issues. A second panel discussion is slated to take place in several months. There are also plans to exhibit the results of a land-use themed challenge to local artists later in the year.

"This is the first of a series of panel discussions we hope to have focusing on the Napa Valley and its environment," said Leavey. The Napa Valley Museum is dedicated to promoting the cultural and environmental heritage of the Napa Valley.

For more information about upcoming exhibits and events at the Napa Valley Museum, visit www.napavalleymuseum.org, or call 944-0500.

For a list of threatened and endangered species in Napa, visit Napa County Resource Conservation District Web site at www.naparcd.org. Click on "Biology" and then "Threatened and endangered species."