

A Promise to a Utah Prairie Dog. On the 50th Anniversary of the Endangered Species Act, Looking Back to Look Forward

Book excerpts

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As a child, I watched the men I loved in my family lift their high-powered rifles and shoot one prairie dog after another and another for fun, and then walk away. They called them "pop-guts." On the way back to our camp, I stepped over their small blood-soaked, blown-apart bodies left in the matted grasses of their prairie dog town. And then, a single prairie dog raised her head out of a burrow and stood up and faced me. I froze in place, unable to avoid her gaze. She disappeared underground.

On that day, I made a vow, short of standing in front of my father's rifle, that I would be their ally. I have tried to keep that vow.

I graduated from high school in 1973, the same year the Endangered Species Act was signed into law. **At that time only 3,300 Utah prairie dogs remained in 37 isolated colonies.** Due to political pressure from ranchers and developers, **they were not listed on the original endangered species list. Prairie dogs were seen as vermin.**

In 1977, I lobbied the Utah legislature as a graduate student in education from the University of Utah. I had created a Utah Prairie Dog curriculum for the Salt Lake City school district. At the State Capitol, I was met with incredulity and disdain by representatives who insisted on calling prairie dogs "varmints," the Speaker of the House handed me a recipe for "Prairie Dog Stew."

Finally in 1984, the Utah prairie dog was added to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife's Endangered Species List and remains on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species.

But in 2000, in a special millennial issue of *The New York Times Magazine*, the Utah prairie dog was featured as one of 10 species most likely to become extinct by the next millennium. Their fate was to become a ghost species. I wrote a book on prairie dogs. Every month I sent a picture of prairie dogs in different poses (one with a helmet and bazooka) to friends at The Utah Nature Conservancy, a playful nudge for protection. Did any of these gestures make a difference? It made a difference to me. This was my wild promise that became a vow I made to the lone Utah prairie dog who survived my family's massacre.

What is the difference between a promise and a vow? A promise is "a specific declaration or assurance that one will do a particular thing or that a particular thing will happen." A vow is "a solemn promise" — a deepening gesture that one makes with one's whole being. Both are nouns. But what if we see them as verbs, as actions that grows out of a commitment?

A promise becomes giving one's word — "assuring someone that one will definitely do, give, or arrange something; undertake or declare that something will happen." A vow is an open-ended commitment over time that moves into the realm of a sacred obligation — "dedicated to someone or something, especially a deity." If one believes, as I do that the Divine resides in all living things, then there are many gods among us, in a myriad of shapes and sizes and forms.

What Wild Promise Will We Make?

Artist Allen Crawford has created *A Wild Promise*, an illustrated celebration of the Endangered Species Act, vibrant and instructive by featuring 80 vulnerable species. He is a visionary artist who not only cares about the survival and sustaining grace of the "more than human world" but has chosen to put his gifts to use with the intention of inspiring us to care more deeply and act more consciously on behalf of these vulnerable creatures.

Perhaps as you come to know their stories, and others like them, you will be moved to seek out an endangered or threatened species that lives close to you, learn their natural history and give them not only your attention, but your devotion. Or maybe you know of a species in your state or a particular ecosystem that needs federal protection. You can support a specific species campaign addressed to the Fish and Wildlife Service to nominate newly threatened plants and animals to be concerned for protection under the endangered species list.

The Endangered Species Act is an act of love that asks for our engagement, each in our own way with the gifts that are ours in the places we call home. Learn their names. Speak their names. Remember their names. Act.

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Excerpted with permission from the introduction to [A Wild Promise: An Illustrated Celebration of The Endangered Species Act](#) by Allen Crawford, published by Tin House.

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