

EAST OREGONIAN

Founded October 16, 1875

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OUR VIEW

File predator study under 'junk science'

Straight from the Department of Wishful Thinking comes a new study that offers the theory that predators are good for people.

Why? Because they eat deer, and a deer that's been eaten can't jump in front of a car and cause a wreck.

Such tortured logic is popular these days, as some researchers desperately try to paint a "Happy Face" on real problems.

Because they reside at the top of the food chain, wolves and cougars eat just about anything that moves. Mice, squirrels, deer — all are on the menu. So are sheep and cattle.

In the recent "Predators Are Our Friends" study, researchers wanted to prove that having cougars and wolves around isn't all bad. In fact, these predators do good by eating those pesky deer that station themselves along roads at night waiting for a car to jump at.

There is no argument that deer are rural traffic hazards, especially during rut, when the males go looking for love in all the wrong places.

Some years ago, a particularly amorous deer saw his reflection in the plate glass window of a Salem-area restaurant. He crashed through the window and slid across the floor. The impact broke the jaw of a customer who had been sitting at a table drinking coffee.

Others tell the story of a deer that

charged the side of a minivan that had stopped on the road to avoid hitting him.

In those cases, the deer would have been much better off staying in the woods.

Or better yet, hunters should be allowed to thin the ranks of cougars, wolves, deer — and elk, too, for that matter. We would prefer a regulated hunting season over an unregulated population of predators preying on ranchers' livestock.

To make the case that any predator that kills a deer — unless it was getting ready to jump through a restaurant window — is a benefit to mankind is a stretch.

Many humans have problems with cougars and wolves. They are called ranchers, and they have to clean up the mess after a cougar or wolf has torn a sheep or cow to shreds. They also pay for the honor by losing valuable members of their flocks or herds. Predators cost Western ranchers many thousands of dollars each year.

We admire the efforts of the researchers who attempted to create a happy story about predators.

But the reality remains that ranchers continue to have many problems with predators, including cougars and wolves. A well-regulated hunt would go a long way toward solving those problems.

Unsigned editorials are the opinion of the East Oregonian editorial board of Publisher Kathryn Brown, Managing Editor Daniel Wattenburger, and Opinion Page Editor Tim Trainor. Other columns, letters and cartoons on this page express the opinions of the authors and not necessarily that of the East Oregonian.

OTHER VIEWS

Public records law still needs more bite

The Oregonian, Aug. 13

It shouldn't require superhuman tenacity, legal expertise or deep pockets to be able to review how school districts, state environmental regulators or other governmental agencies handle the public's business. But in Oregon, where legislators routinely shield agencies from disclosure requirements and where agencies demand as much as \$1 million to retrieve data for the public, those seeking to scrutinize government workings have needed to summon all three.

That's not likely to change much, even with the recent release of proposed public records reforms by Oregon Attorney General Ellen Rosenblum.

Rosenblum's draft amendments provide some worthwhile ideas, but the proposal avoids tackling some of the biggest problems facing those seeking public information. The draft amendments to the public disclosure law leave unlimited the fees that agencies can charge for fulfilling requests. The reforms lack any built-in consequences for public bodies that take excessive amounts of time to respond. Agencies can continue citing any one of the more than 400 exemptions that shield public records from public scrutiny.

In short: Oregon's cagey relationship with the public continues.

Still, the proposal offers a foundation upon which Rosenblum and her task force of public officials, journalists, citizen advocates and others can and should build more aggressive reforms. True government accountability and transparency depend on it.

First, the positives.

The proposed changes give shape to a law that currently measures compliance with fuzzy standards of whether an agency responded "as soon as practicable and without unreasonable delay." Rosenblum's proposal calls for specifying that public bodies acknowledge a request within five business days and fulfill them within 10, except for schools that are not in session. It also calls for producing an exhaustive catalogue that lists the exemptions legislators have authorized over the years. And a new statement of purpose makes clear that the default mode for government should be to make records accessible to the public — with narrowly construed exceptions.

But the fixes are largely symbolic and won't resolve many of the conflicts that citizens and media members reported to the task force, such as the

\$1,042,450.20 estimate Portland Police cited to fulfill a request from The Oregonian/OregonLive's Carli Brosseau for information from the bureau's evidence database, or the \$750 that the Department of Environmental Quality wanted to charge The Oregonian/OregonLive's Rob Davis to search and produce emails with a few keywords.

For many citizens who don't have the resources or desire to spend such money, \$750 might as well as be \$1 million. This is how a government thwarts citizen scrutiny.

With no consequences in the proposed legislation, it's unclear whether the fixes would have prevented one of the most egregious public-records runarounds recently. In December 2014, Anne Marie Gurney with the Freedom Foundation requested from the Department of Human Services the names and contact information for home health care workers to alert them of their rights regarding paying fees to unions. Although the information was public, the agency stalled and put Gurney off for four months — long enough for the Legislature to pass a law exempting that information from public disclosure laws. Gov. Kate Brown signed the bill, despite knowing there was an unfilled request for the information, Brown acknowledged earlier this year.

Fortunately, there's still time to strengthen the proposed reforms. Veteran Oregonian/OregonLive investigative reporter Les Zaitz, who serves on the task force for the Oregon Territory Chapter of the Society of Professional Journalists, plans to raise the issue of fees at an Aug. 31 meeting. And Michael Kron, the attorney general's special counsel who is heading up the public records task force, said Rosenblum wants to continue convening the group to tackle fees and streamlining exemptions, even if those issues don't get addressed in the 2017 session. Separately, Brown's office is developing a proposal for a public records advocate to handle disputes.

These are promising steps. But as Zaitz noted, there needs to be a change in mentality as well as a change in law. Public officials need to get away from this misconception that they own public records and that citizens gain access only by their good grace, he said, adding "this is about citizens watching what their government is doing."

Rosenblum, Brown and legislators need to show with their actions that that's an outcome they genuinely want to support.



OTHER VIEWS

To get to Harvard, go to Haiti?

This summer, as last, Dylan Hernandez, 17, noticed a theme on the social media accounts of fellow students at his private Catholic high school in Flint, Michigan.

"An awfully large percentage of my friends — skewing towards the affluent — are taking 'mission trips' to Central America and Africa," he wrote to me in a recent email. He knows this from pictures they post on Snapchat and Instagram, typically showing one of them "with some poor brown child aged 2 to 6 on their knee," he explained. The captions tend to say something along the lines of, "This cutie made it so hard to leave."

But leave they do, after as little as a week of helping to repair some village's crumbling school or library, to return to their comfortable homes and quite possibly write a college-application essay about how transformed they are.

"It rubs me the wrong way," Hernandez told me, explaining that while many of his friends are well intentioned, some seem not to notice poverty until an exotic trip comes with it. He himself has done extensive, sustained volunteer work at the Flint YMCA, where, he said, the children he tutors and plays with would love it "if these same peers came around and merely talked to them."

"No passport or customs line required," he added.

Hernandez reached out to me because he was familiar with writing I had done about the college admissions process. What he described is something that has long bothered me and other critics of that process: the persistent vogue among secondary-school students for so-called service that's sometimes about little more than a faraway adventure and a few lines or paragraphs on their applications to selective colleges.

It turns developing-world hardship into a prose-ready opportunity for growth, empathy into an extracurricular activity.

And it reflects a broader gaming of the admissions process that concerns me just as much, because of its potential to create strange habits and values in the students who go through it, telling them that success is a matter of superficial packaging and checking off the right boxes at the right time. That's true only in some cases, and hardly the recipe for a life well lived.

In the case of drive-by charity work, the checked box can actually be counterproductive, because application readers see right through it.

"The running joke in admissions is the mission trip to Costa Rica to save the rain forest," Angel Pérez, who is in charge of admissions at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut, told me.

Jennifer Delahunty, a longtime admissions official at Kenyon College in Gambier, Ohio, said that mission-trip application essays are their own bloated genre.

"Often they come to the same conclusion: People in other parts of the world who have no money are happier than we are!" she told me. "That is eye-opening to some students. But it can be a dangerous thing to write about, because it's hard to rescue the truth from that cliché."

Many of the students taking mission trips or doing other charity work outside the country have heartfelt motivations, make a real (if fleeting) contribution and are genuinely enlightened by it. Pérez and Delahunty don't doubt that. Neither do I.

But there's cynicism in the mix.

A college admissions counselor once told me about a rich European client of his who called him in a panic, wanting to cancel her family's usual August vacation so that her son could go build roads in the developing world. She'd just read or heard somewhere that colleges would be impressed by that.



FRANK BRUNI
Comment

He asked her if she had a roadway or country in mind. She didn't.

Richard Weissbourd, a child psychologist and Harvard lecturer who has studied the admissions process in the interest of reforming it, recalled speaking with wealthy parents who had bought an orphanage in Botswana so their children could have a project to write and talk about. He later became aware of other parents who had bought an AIDS clinic in a similarly poor country for the same reason.

"It becomes contagious," he said.

A more recent phenomenon is teenagers trying to demonstrate their leadership skills in addition to their compassion by starting their own fledgling nonprofit groups rather than contributing to ones that exist — and that might be more practiced and efficient at what they do.

"It's a sort of variation on going on a mission trip and figuring out that people all over the world are really the same," said Stephen Farmer, who's in charge of undergraduate admissions at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

"I don't mean to make light of it," he added, acknowledging that many such trips and nonprofits have benefits, and not just for the college-bound students engaged in them.

But they're largely reserved for students whose parents are affluent enough to assist the endeavors. And they're often approached casually and forgotten

quickly. "My concern is that students feel compelled to do these things — forced — rather than feeling that they're answering some inner call," Farmer said.

In many cases they are compelled. Tara Dowling, director of college counseling at the Rocky Hill School in East Greenwich, Rhode Island, said many secondary schools (including, as it happens, Dylan Hernandez's) now require a minimum number of hours of service from students, whose schedules — jammed with sports, arts, SAT prep and more — leave little time for it.

Getting it done in one big Central American swoop becomes irresistible, and if that dilutes the intended meaning of the activity, who's to blame: the students or the adults who set it up this way? Dowling noted that without the right kinds of conversations and guidance, "Kids don't know how to connect these experiences to the rest of their lives, to the bigger picture."

There are excellent mission trips, which some students do through churches that they belong to, and less excellent ones. There are also plenty of other summer projects and jobs that can help students develop a deeper, humbler understanding of the world.

Pérez told me that his favorite among recent essays by Trinity applicants came from someone "who spent the summer working at a coffee shop. He wrote about not realizing until he did this how invisible people in the service industry are. He wrote about how people looked right through him at the counter."

Helicopter parents, stand down! Pérez's assessment doesn't mean that you should hustle your teenagers to the nearest Starbucks. It means that whatever they do, they should be able to engage in it fully and reflect on it meaningfully. And if that's service work, why not address all the need in your own backyard?

Many college-bound teenagers do, but not nearly enough, as Hernandez can attest. He feels awfully lonely at the Flint YMCA and, in the context of that, wonders, "Why is it fashionable to spend \$1,000-plus, 20 hours traveling, and 120 hours volunteering in Guatemala for a week?"

He wonders something else, too. "Aren't the children there sad, getting abandoned by a fresh crop of affluent American teens every few days?"

Frank Bruni is a New York Times columnist.

LETTERS POLICY

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