

WILD TIMES IN CHICO

By Paul Belz

“Alligators give me hope,” Gabe Kerschner from Conservation Ambassadors Inc. told a thrilled group of Chico, California’s children and parents. “Back in the 1960s and ‘70s, these guys were hunted for their skin, which was used to make belts, wallets, and purses. They started to disappear. They were declared an endangered species, but we preserved their habitat, and they recovered.”

Izon the Alligator, whose former owner kept him in a bathtub until he was rescued opened his mouth to show the flap that prevents water from entering his mouth when he eats fish. “He only eats one or two kids a season, and we’re ok with that,” Gabe told the laughing crowd.

These children were among the several hundred who marched through One Mile Recreation Area during the 38th annual Endangered Species Procession and Faire. Natalie Carter, Butte Environmental Council’s Executive Director said, “The Endangered Species Faire was created to recognize and celebrate Earth Day! BEC hosted the first Endangered Species Faire on March 22, 1980 and the theme was "Call of the Wild". Today the Faire is held the first Saturday in May, connects thousands of participants with their local environment, and educates the community about protecting our most precious natural resources.”

Susan and Steve Tshudi spend several months each spring helping children create paper mache puppets of endangered animals. “The whole notion of extinction is not an easy one for kids to grasp, “Steve said.” They understand that the numbers of many animals are declining, but they’re not always clear about the finality of extinction. The puppets heighten kids’ awareness of the importance of endangered species. The song we sing at the end of the procession has a line, ‘If we lost them, they won’t be back again.’”

Natalie Carter said, “I grew up in Chico, and my elementary school had a booth at the ESF every year. Some of my fondest childhood memories are from the Faire. Events like the Faire nurtured my love for nature and I am sure ultimately contributed to my decision to pursue a degree in Biology. Now, I am humbled to help coordinate this amazing event for my community, and share it with my young daughter. “

Becky Holden, BEC’s Assistant Director said, “The Endangered Species Faire is the highlight of the year. I am so inspired by the procession of the species. All the classrooms with their special animal puppets, the support of the community, and the hours of work put in are all on parade. We know that education is essential. It is wonderful to have all of the educational booths at the Faire to the joy and wonder of nature with kids of all ages.”

Gabe invited a four year old girl to the stage and handed her a banana. Nikee the kinkajou, a Central and South American relative of raccoons hung upside down BY her tail and ate the fruit while the excited preschooler beamed. Children were also enthralled by Samantha the lemur, an African primate. Gabe said, “There are seventy species of lemurs. All live in Madagascar, and all are endangered.” Samantha was rescued from a man who kept her as a pet in Palmdale, Ca. “Do you know what I wish? Gabe asked. “I wish she was living in Madagascar with other lemurs.”

Katie Beeson, BEC’s Business Manager said, “I grew up as a child of a military family so traveling and learning about my 'new' surroundings has been a very central theme in my life. I see the light in children's eyes when they come to the Faire and get to see the live animals and learn about the many different species our planet is home to. It reminds me of the wonderment I experienced getting to travel to new places and learning about my new "home" and those that inhabited it.”

A wide range of Chico environmental groups tables where they could interact with local children and adults. Jessica Patten of Altacal Audubon Society said, “Each group educates the public about habitat loss and extinction. Each group is very individual. Audubon is very tuned into birds. There are a lot of endangered birds in California – clapper rails, tri colored blackbirds, and yellow billed cuckoos are endangered because of habitat loss. There are a lot of tri colored blackbirds nesting sites – biologists are out counting them.”

Suzette Welch, the chair of the Sierra Club’s Yahi Group described her group’s efforts to use hikes and other outings to connect people with the wonders around them and to inspire them to take actions. The fair is important because “it gets people out and makes them aware of all the non-profits and what they can do. I think people are really fired up after the election. We’re trying to get people to help us – especially young people.” The Club is very interested in suggestions citizens make about future actions. “When someone recommends something for us to do, I tell them, “Do it!”

Twelve year old Calix and Ashton, at the Sierra Club table is a great sign that the Faire is reaching young people. “We’re here to represent endangered species, which means there are some animals that do not have very large quantities. We’re here to improve the environment for endangered species,” Calix said.:

Ashton praised the Faire when he said, “This is my first Faire. People are getting stuff set up, it really looks good!”

Sherri Bloker of Chico 350 said, “We’re all about trying to combat climate change. We want to educate children about climate change, figuring they’re going to be faced with these problems even more than we are.”

Katie Beeson said, “The fun, creative, energetic atmosphere is a great way to engage children and their inquisitive natures which then provides a perfect opportunity for giving them more serious information about what *they* can do to help save our wildlife. When

children and adults make the connection that there are endangered species in their *own* back yards, it changes everything.”

Sheri shared solar toys – a fan, a pinwheel, and a toy car that moved when exposed to sunlight. “We figure that a lot of people who are here are aware of climate change, but we want to show kids there are other ways besides fossil fuels.” She also showed a wind-up fan she brought in case cloudy conditions blocked the sun.

Gabe introduced Flower the Skunk, whose mother was killed by a car. The driver rescued and raised baby Flower and her siblings. Gabe commented that this was kind, but said the driver made a mistake. “She’s a perfectly intact wild creature who can’t go back to the wild because she thinks people are cool and represent food,” he said. “She would get into lots of mischief if she were free.

Skunks avoid people, and will only spray after someone ignores their warnings. They wave their tails, stomp, then do hand stands before trying to defend themselves. “How many kids are on a soccer team called ‘The Skunks’?” Gabe asked. Imagine a t-shirt that says ‘We really stink!’ They don’t get our respect.”

Natalie Carter said, “We definitely design the Faire to be fun, I have always found that the natural science and the arts have a deep connection. Through creative expression we often discover deep truth and build a lasting emotional bond with our subject. Our puppeteers learn about the species before they build the puppets and carry with them knowledge of the species and the challenges they face.”

The Paradise High School band played the “Star Wars” theme and led the procession around the One Mile Recreation Area. Three hundred children from local schools, homeschool groups, and the Boys and Girls Club followed, carrying their puppets. Flamingos, jaguars, sharks, orcas, octopuses, a walrus and many other wild animals circled the swimming area. Birds sang wildly as kids and parents howled like wolves.

Biology professor Becki Brunelli and other members of the Chico State Elephant Club carried an elephant along with the kids and their creations. “Our goal is to raise awareness about the plight of the elephant,” Becki said. “We do education and outreach, and work on conservation. We learn about elephants, and share the information.”

The Procession reached the main stage, where the puppeteers marched past cheering parents and supporters. “Every year, I think ‘This is exhausting, I’m not going to do it again.’ But when we get to this point, I think, ‘Next year we should...’

“The kids are great, they come up with new ideas,” she continued. “This year we have some sixth and seventh graders who have been making puppets since they were in kindergarten. They made a cheetah, and all four of them will be inside!”

The Faire continued after the Procession ended with the children’s song. Some joined a scavenger hunt that helped them learn about habitats and wild creatures that live in Bidwell Park. A Creative Corner was a new addition this year. Storytellers and writers

offered nature based tales and poems. The group will expand this effort as the fortieth Faire approaches in 2019.

Natalie Carter said, “We have been kicking around some ideas...and hoping to make our 40th the biggest and best yet! MORE and BIGGER puppets, MORE vendor booths, MORE prizes, and MORE ways to learn about and get engaged with the Environmental Community!”

Gabe shared Wanda and Cosmo, two Madagascar hissing cockroaches that clung to an excited boy’s shirt. “I think the way we think about them is all messed up,” he said.

“They don’t bite or scratch, they’re very clean. We’re taught to be afraid.” These big, fudge brown insects eat and decompose dead plants, enriching the soil. “If you get past the idea that they are dirty, they are stunningly beautiful creatures. They look like polished wood.”

Becky Holden said, “We all know you cannot care about something you don't know about. To have the opportunity to share information and to then foster a sense of stewardship for the environment is what it’s all about. And to inspire everyone to remember the awe that only fresh air, beautiful trees, and being connected to your surroundings can bring.”

Tonya, the red tailed hawk was found near Davis after someone shot her. “I love her and love to share her,” Gabe said, “but I wish she were free. We should be proud of our hawks and eagles. We’ve been taking care of them, and we’ve got them soaring overhead.” He led the crowd in the hawk’s loud, descending cry, “Pyyyyooooooooouuu!” This day would remain in the children’s and adults’ memories, and give them hope.

