

A Colorado community unites to bust myths and save their prairie dogs

What do you get when you combine a community without a voice and a beloved Boulder, Colorado, wildlife habitat? It's called Gunbarrel Community Alliance.

Gunbarrel Community Alliance is a nonprofit corporation born in May 2020 to meet the need of Gunbarrel residents to have a voice in Boulder city and county land use and development decisions. Gunbarrel is different from the rest of Boulder: On a map Gunbarrel looks like a satellite two miles northeast of its home planet Boulder. Gunbarrel is only a part of Boulder because valuable commercial real estate here was annexed by Boulder in the 1950s and 1960s. But it's complicated, because not all of the developed area known as Gunbarrel is within Boulder city boundaries. Many residential neighborhoods and, yes, even a country club fall outside the city in Boulder County. As a result, Gunbarrel residents' voices have often been ignored by Boulder city and county governing bodies.

Enter GCA, teams of neighbors working as volunteers to create a livable, inclusive, vibrant, resilient, and healthy Gunbarrel. GCA is supporting our community with education, connection -- and especially, opportunities to save a beloved wildlife habitat that is important to us all.

First, a little more history: Back in 1999, Celestial Seasonings was caught in the act of poisoning a prairie dog colony -- 600 burrows -- despite their marketed image as an Earth-friendly, environmental company. In order to lift a nationwide boycott, Celestial Seasonings pledged to protect the survivors of the colony as well as their habitat "during all activities utilizing the facility" in a seven step action plan. [See photo- Steve Hughes' Letter to the Boulder Community] The first step is: "Immediately limit prairie dog colony management activity to relocation within property boundaries only." Another step in this action plan created a prairie dog preserve, a source of delight for the millions of visitors to Celestial Seasonings for more than 20 years now.

Fast-forward to the present: Celestial Seasonings, now part of the Hain/Celestial Group, is planning to develop 10 acres of the very same prairie dog preserve into a massive 268-unit high-density residential complex that will obliterate the local ecosystem and force all of its inhabitants out. The prairie dogs would be relocated; the hawks, eagles, owls, ravens, foxes, rabbits, and other wildlife will have to search for new homes on their own. As prairie dog colonies are removed and paved over throughout Colorado, so too the other wildlife will be removed as well.

In order to ensure that Hain/Celestial keeps their promise to protect the colony, Gunbarrel Community Alliance has organized a boycott of all Hain/Celestial brands and products until the prairie dog preserve is no longer under threat. We are also circulating a petition that has over 4,800 signatures (as of the time this is written) and rising. In addition to the boycott and petition, GCA is working in the City of Boulder development process to oppose this development proposal. And as stated above, there is so much more at stake than this one colony (which in and of itself deserves to be protected). With so many prairie dog colonies and wildlife habitats being destroyed all across the state, our animals will soon run out of places to live. We are in very real danger of losing our biodiversity and along with it the natural beauty that makes Colorado such a desirable place to live. We can stop this from happening if we can help set the precedent that our wildlife needs to be protected.

As keystone species, prairie dogs are among the most important animals in our ecosystem, but due to the fact that they are often "in the way" of money-making plans, there have been quite a few old wives' tales that have been told in order to justify their removal. These claims often have little or no basis in scientific research. We'd like to dispel some of the myths and misconceptions surrounding prairie dogs.

Myth 1. Prairie dogs are not important.

Facts: Prairie dogs are a keystone species upon which many other species of wildlife depend for survival. Some of the more noteworthy species include the burrowing owl and black-footed ferret, both of which live and raise their young in old prairie dog holes. Prairie dogs are the only source of live prey for the ferruginous hawk during winter in Colorado. Prairie dogs aerate the soil, maintain the native vegetation, and are essentially the backbone of the ecosystem throughout the west.

Myth 2. Prairie dogs spread disease.

Facts: One of the most prevalent myths is that prairie dogs spread the deadly bubonic plague. Fears of humans contracting plague from prairie dogs are often exaggerated and sometimes even used as an excuse for extermination. However, the Colorado Department of Health states, "If precautions are taken, the probability of an individual contracting plague, even in an active plague area, is quite low."

While prairie dogs themselves are susceptible to the plague (which is one of the reasons that fragmenting their habitat is so detrimental), an infected colony would die off too quickly to spread it to humans. We can easily avoid contracting the illness by not touching the prairie dogs and keeping ourselves and our pets away from their burrows and their bodily fluids (this should go without saying!)

Myth 3. Prairie dogs are overpopulated.

Facts: Black-tailed prairie dogs are currently at less than 1% of their historic population size. They have been shot, poisoned, relocated, and bulldozed to the brink of extinction. Despite their declining populations, they have not been put on the endangered species list because special interest groups such as in the real estate industry have high stakes in maintaining their legal right to destroy them.

Sure, if you are in an area that has prairie dogs, it might seem that "they are everywhere, " but at the rate we are destroying individual colonies, the losses will add up and one day they will be gone. After that, we'll stop seeing hawks on poles and hearing owls at twilight. Our flora and fauna will have lost a crucial keystone species, and the natural beauty that once was Colorado will be lost forever.

Myth 4. Prairie dogs breed like crazy.

Facts: Black-tailed prairie dogs reproduce only once per year, and the average litter size is two to three pups. Confronted with barriers to expansion or years of poor vegetative growth, prairie dogs practice population control.

Myths can mislead us into making poor decisions, but if we know the facts, we can make decisions that will stand the test of time.

So now our beloved prairie dog habitat has a voice to represent it: Gunbarrel Community Alliance. This group is young, but in only two months GCA has mobilized dozens of neighbors into teams, created a website (<https://www.GunbarrelCommunityAlliance.org>) and an impressive social media presence, and has become an informed participant in Boulder city development processes. GCA believes Gunbarrel needs to be brought into equity with other subcommunities in Boulder: Gunbarrel needs a current subcommunity plan to guide local development. Such a plan will help as we work to create a livable, inclusive, vibrant, resilient, healthy Gunbarrel.

Every day the prairie dogs and the many other species that depend upon them live and raise their young in a natural balance we don't fully understand. Every day GCA volunteers are working 1) to ensure the protection of Gunbarrel open spaces, wildlife corridors, and other valuable natural resources, and 2) to represent Gunbarrel residents in City of Boulder and Boulder County land use planning and development decisions affecting Gunbarrel. We hope we can live happily as neighbors like this for a long time.