

Chasing Presidents for endangered species: O'Rourke, Gillibrand

By Joe Wilkinson

Special to the Economist

Never have I warned a presidential candidate, “don’t step on the iguana,” until this summer. More on that in a minute.

As you know, a couple dozen Democrats are looking for support, ahead of Iowa’s Feb. 3 caucus. That is when Democrats— and Republicans— raise hands and voices for the woman or man they want as the 2020 presidential candidate.

With a Republican incumbent, the chase— so far— is on the Democratic side. The Iowa Wildlife Federation has been asked to hear from as many candidates as we can reach regarding their support for the Endangered Species Act (ESA). Health care, agriculture, the economy, defense and immigration are all issues getting pretty wide and constant attention.

But how about endangered species, and often with it, the larger issue of climate change? So, I ask my question at candidate appearances... The answer clarifies his or her position. It often leads to a wider conversation about climate, wildlife and science. The question?

According to the 2019 U.N. report on biodiversity, we now face the sixth mass extinction in Earth’s history. A million species may go extinct over the next few decades, due to pollution, habitat loss and climate change. In the news, we have seen stories of starving orcas and polar bears, plastics pulled from the stomachs of marine species. Such losses harm our economies, our health and quality of life. As President, will you uphold our Endangered Species Act and better fund it, to protect imperiled plants and animals?

Today’s candidate No. 1: Former Congressman Beto O’Rourke.

Beating an eight-term incumbent in the 2012 Texas Democratic primary, he won the general election; repeating in 2014 and 2016. In 2018, he set his sights on incumbent U.S. Senator Ted Cruz. Despite a narrow defeat, O’Rourke amassed the most votes for a Democrat in the history of Texas. With the national attention, he set his sights on the White House.

I caught up with him at the end of the Independence Day Parade, in Independence. O’Rourke was aware of the U.N report, voicing the ‘million species lost’ warning, before I did. His steady reply indicated he has concerns the current Administration has restricted federal environmental agencies from enforcing rules within their complex



Democratic presidential candidate Kirsten Gillibrand fields questions about her Climate Change program before a crowd in Cedar Rapids July 25. The New York Senator is campaigning in Iowa to build momentum ahead of the state’s caucus in February. (photo by Joe Wilkinson)

operating regulations.

Does he support the ESA? “Absolutely, and also to use the EPA’s rule-making authority and the full leverage of the Department of the Interior, to protect those species here in the United States”, he replied. “And our global leadership to work with the other powers of the planet, to make sure we are all doing our part, and obviously, climate change— with the warming of the Earth; the changing of the environment, that some of these species depend on. You know, that is diminishing their opportunity to survive.”

Oh, the Iguana Incident? We talked as we walked along a railroad right-of-way. Looking down, I saw a 20-inch iguana between the recessed rail and the street surface. A parade leftover, maybe?

“Don’t step on the iguana there,” I warned. He saw it, stepped around it and all was fine.

Candidate No. 2 today? New York Senator Kirsten Gillibrand.

Elected to Congress (2006-09) from upstate New York, Gillibrand has been in the U.S. Senate since 2009. She was interviewed in June on a live Fox News network Town Hall, airing from the University of Dubuque (UD). I had been invited, as a UD alum. Would I like to ask a question? “This is going to be too easy,” I thought. Arriving, I realized half the crowd must have replied “yes.” I didn’t make the short list.

After the evening broadcast, Gillibrand disappeared. After 20 minutes, I gave up. Backing out of the parking lot, I recognized state senator Pam Jochum leaving. In our 20s, I was in radio news in Dubuque. Jochum was a local political activist. So, our paths crossed on occasion. I told her I’d missed my chance. “She’s having dinner with us at 7:30 p.m.,” replied Jochum. “Come on down.” We all ate, talked for an hour, comparing notes; even some family and non-political stuff. Senator Gillibrand stepped away to do a phone interview.

When she returned, it was my turn. Would she support the ESA?

“Yes, as President of the United States, I would not only fully fund the Endangered Species Act, but I would increase the funding,” Gillibrand emphasized. “I’ve been a leading voice to protect endangered species as Senator in the United States. I’ve fought very hard for the gray wolf, which is an issue where many western states want to start hunting the gray wolf, but the truth is, they haven’t recovered fully, and they need more protections. So, my track record on actually protecting is strong. As President, I will make it a priority to protect endangered species. I will also be a leading voice for ending global climate change by restarting our commitment to the Paris Global Climate Accords, as well as asking for a Green New Deal and trying to (reach) net-zero carbon emissions in the next 10 years.”

A follow-up. Last week, in Cedar Rapids, Gillibrand rolled out her climate change plan. Dubbed “Climate Change Moonshot,” a nod to the Kennedy generation’s goal of landing a man on the moon, her plan would seek net-zero carbon emissions, create a green jobs economy and lead the world on clean energy.

More candidates in the weeks ahead, with more side-stories about reaching—and sometimes missing—candidates on the campaign trail. Sometimes, it seems more entertaining than the question and answer.

Iowa Wildlife Federation’s website, www.iawildlife.org, will have this blog up and running in a week or so. Meanwhile, the candidates’ audio responses on the Endangered Species Act can be found at www.endangered.org.

Each candidate, obviously, has a website. Google his or her name and a dozen or so will pop up. It takes a little sifting through them to figure out which one can tell you what you need to know.

Joe Wilkinson is the President of the Iowa Wildlife Federation.