

Podcast: Why no flu season? Cloning endangered species; Free speech vs science on college campuses

The world has experienced a shockingly mild 2020-2021 flu season, defying the expectations of many infectious disease researchers. How is that possible? Scientists have successfully cloned the first endangered species. Will the technology help us preserve more endangered animals, and maybe even bring back extinct species? Colleges are dedicated to the pursuit of truth and free inquiry, but do those principles extend to campus events that promote dubious science?

Join geneticist Kevin Folta and GLP editor Cameron English on this episode of Science Facts and Fallacies as they break down these latest news stories:

- [The US is experiencing the mildest flu season in memory. Here's why](#)

As of this writing, [the CDC has reported](#) just 1,561 positive tests for flu this season. By contrast, there were 183,000 positive tests at the [same time last year](#) and 39 million – 50 million cases total last season, [the agency reported](#), raising the obvious question: how could a virus that normally takes a severe toll on public health have such an underwhelming impact this time around, especially amid the coronavirus pandemic?

Researchers have proposed several possible explanations, but acknowledge that they [were expecting a](#) “twindemic,” not the mildest flu season anyone can remember. “Nobody has seen a flu season this low, ever,” Vanderbilt University infectious disease expert William Schaffner [told WebMD](#) in late February, “and some of us have some gray hair.” So, what’s going on? Have social distancing measures and lockdowns blunted the flu’s usually deadly effects, or is there some other variable in play?

- [Meet black footed ferret Elizabeth Ann, the first cloned endangered species in North America](#)

Scientists have cloned an endangered species for the first time in history, a black footed ferret named Elizabeth Ann. Cloning technology remains controversial, in part because it’s still very expensive and has a low success rate, somewhere [around 10 percent](#) depending on the animal. That said, Elizabeth Ann provides more evidence that cloning can be done safely (she is alive and well so far), and experts hope that her experience will serve as a model for restoring other endangered, and perhaps extinct, animals.

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- [Viewpoint: Free speech vs science—Should colleges invite anti-GMO speakers they ‘know’ spread misinformation?](#)

Free speech is essential to a flourishing society, as is science. But what happens when the two conflict, for example, when popular anti-GMO advocates use universities as platforms to spread nonsense? Free-speech advocates argue that colleges should allow controversial figures to speak, even if their ideas are

objectively wrong. Meanwhile, critics maintain that institutions of higher learning have no business platforming speakers who promulgate falsehoods. Is there a way to preserve open inquiry and disarm anti-science activists whose speech could harm public health?

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