

Wildlife habitat enhancement:

good for wellness,
good for business



Projects to conserve wildlife habitat offer a multitude of benefits for older adults who participate—and the organizations that serve them

by Emily Voldstad, MS, and Katie Basiotis, MS

Global biodiversity—the number and variety of species on earth—provides people with numerous necessary resources, including food and medicine.

The important role that many species play in our lives makes the conservation of biodiversity crucial. Unfortunately, global biodiversity has been experiencing a dramatic decline, largely as a result of human activity.¹ Despite numerous strategies to address the problem, biodiversity continues to decline.²

Since habitat loss and fragmentation are major factors contributing to the extinction of species,³ conserving wild-

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*A tiger swallowtail rests on a
golden-aster. Image courtesy of
the Wildlife Habitat Council*



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At Asbury Methodist Village in Gaithersburg, Maryland, resident gardens include plantings that draw butterflies and hummingbirds. Image courtesy of Asbury Methodist Village

life habitat is a crucial step to support biodiversity. Currently about 11.5% of the Earth's land is protected. This land cannot provide adequate protection for global biodiversity, however.⁴ Enhancing and maintaining suitable habitat on privately owned lands is therefore important to the conservation of wildlife species.

Large preserved areas of land are necessary for some species, but are sometimes not available. In these instances, a network of smaller habitat fragments can help support these species by serving as a connective corridor between isolated bigger fragments, making larger areas available to the wildlife that needs them.⁵ A network of small fragments can also help conserve species with smaller space requirements by supplying them with suitable habitat.⁶ So, even on a small scale, habitat enhancement efforts can play a role in supporting species at a local level and contribute to corridors affecting wildlife on regional and even global scales.

Working to conserve biodiversity has many inherent values and benefits. In addition to the positive effects for wildlife and ecosystems, enhancing wildlife habitat offers a host of benefits for older adults who get involved and for the organizations that serve them.

Good for wellness

Habitat enhancement projects directly contribute to environmental wellness by creating a healthier world. Many of these projects, such as the planting of native vegetation, provide multiple environmental benefits; for example, absorbing carbon dioxide in the atmosphere and improving water quality. Projects also provide a way to use the environment to address individual wellness. A comprehensive and well thought-out program—one that features conservation education opportunities—can extend beyond environmental benefits to address other wellness dimensions:

Intellectual wellness. Involvement in projects that benefit wildlife gives older

adults opportunities to see their everyday environment in new ways. Habitat enhancements also provide a framework for educational activities, such as guest speakers discussing advances in and techniques for wildlife habitat conservation, gardening and birding. Besides expanding their knowledge, project participants may also utilize problem-solving and reasoning skills by making decisions about how to implement a project and address any problems that arise.

Physical wellness. Exposure to nature has beneficial effects on physical wellness, such as reducing stress which in turn decreases blood pressure and heart rate. Nature is particularly valuable to those with health problems and/or limited mobility. For example, research shows that patients with a view of nature (even an urban park with trees) have shorter recovery times after illness or surgery.⁷ Additionally, habitat enhancement or monitoring projects can supply structured opportunities to go outside on a regular basis, providing participants with exercise and sunlight.

Social wellness. A team approach to enhancing wildlife habitat often gives older adults the chance to meet new people and work collaboratively towards a common goal. As well as peers and employee volunteers, there is the potential to involve outside groups in projects. Engaging outside groups presents occasions for older adults to work with those they may not otherwise interact with, such as conservation professionals or school or scout groups.

Vocational wellness. Habitat enhancement projects create opportunities for older adults to use existing skills and develop new skill sets. These projects can provide a sense of purpose for the work being done, and watching the results can be rewarding. Receiving recognition for these efforts through a third-party cer-

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Asbury Methodist Village residents participate in a nature walk on Earth Day 2008. Image courtesy of the Wildlife Habitat Council

tification program can also be gratifying for participants and confirm that their work contributes to conservation on a larger scale.

Spiritual wellness. Managing land for wildlife can add a sense of purpose and meaning to life, similar to the benefits of having a pet; individuals feel that they are needed and making a difference. Additionally, believers can see nature and its enduring presence as a representation of an eternal God.⁸

Emotional wellness. Many people are attracted to nature and find it peaceful. This idea has been supported by studies showing that nature has a positive effect on recovery from stress and can also positively impact mood, concentration and self-discipline.⁹ Furthermore, research in senior living communities has found that quality of life is enhanced by the availability of outdoor settings where people can spend time.¹⁰

The multidimensional benefits highlighted above affirm that habitat enhancement projects offer older adults a great deal more than the opportunity to contribute to a healthier world.

Good for business

Besides addressing wellness and its different dimensions for participants, habitat enhancement projects produce benefits for the organizations that support and work with older adults. Some enhancement projects will have a direct positive impact on the bottom line.

For example, native landscaping and meadows require less maintenance than traditional landscaping and lawns, so these projects can lower landscape maintenance expenses. Planting portions of open areas with native grasses and wildflowers instead of turfgrass can save as much as US\$960–2,000 per acre over a 10-year period.¹¹

There are a number of less direct positive impacts associated with implementing a wildlife habitat enhancement program. A Duke University study noted numerous benefits experienced by businesses implementing such programs. Surveys of these businesses found that almost all respondents (95%) indicated wildlife habitat programs improved their employee morale. In addition, the programs improved relationships with environmental groups and the community (62% and 60%, respectively), according to the respondents.¹²

Habitat enhancement programs can also serve as a selling point in attracting environmentally conscious older adults to an organization. At Asbury Methodist Village, a continuing care retirement community in Gaithersburg, Maryland, Director of Communication Linda Aber notes that the community's "130-acre campus and the purposeful maintenance of the surroundings is in itself a fact that sells Asbury." (To learn more about the program at this community, see "Asbury Methodist Village: profile of a successful wildlife habitat enhancement program" on page 62.)

As wellness programs and services increasingly become a top priority for older adults,¹³ more robust programs that include an environmental component will give a competitive advantage. According to a 2010 ICAA survey, wellness programs are growing exponentially across the spectrum of active aging. An article on the survey's results concluded that "the industry's offerings will only expand and diversify as older adults seek supportive wellness environments and aging Boomers swell the ranks of the 65-plus population."¹⁴

Habitat enhancement projects are one way to add a welcome new dimension to an organization's offerings.

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Creating a wildlife habitat enhancement project: general steps and an example of how to implement them

Step	Example: a pollinator garden at a senior living community
Assess organizational support	The program could fit into the organization's goals by being part of the existing sustainability plan. Program leaders consult landscape maintenance staff that would be impacted by the program.
Initial site assessment	Available space is limited, and there are a limited number of native flowers growing in the area.
Determine goals	The project should be accessible to those in wheelchairs and be esthetically pleasing to fit in with the rest of the campus landscaping.
Create a team	Leaders recruit residents and employees who are interested in wildlife and habitat as volunteers through the community newsletter.
Select a project	A garden of native wildflowers in raised beds will enhance habitat for pollinator species and provide opportunities for residents to observe wildlife.
Make a plan	The team signs up resident and employee volunteers to help monitor and maintain the garden. A small amount of the landscaping budget is allocated to the garden, and fundraisers such as a calendar provide supplemental funds. Selected plants have a variety of bloom dates and are obtained from a local native plant supplier.
Implement the project	After the landscaping crew installs the raised beds, the team holds a planting event. Residents and employees invite friends and family to participate and the group works together on planting the garden, leaving markers noting the name of each plant. The team creates an inventory of the initial plantings to use as a monitoring tool in the future.
Conduct monitoring and maintenance	Residents and employees monitor the garden regularly during the growing season to assess plant health and determine which pollinators are benefiting from the garden. Observations are recorded in a monitoring log, and pollinator guide books are available to aid volunteers in identifying pollinators.
Obtain recognition	Residents and employees prepare and submit an application to obtain recognition of habitat enhancement efforts. Once certification is achieved, the marketing department uses this as a tool to attract future residents.
Continue to maintain and improve the project	To ensure that the project continues to benefit wildlife, volunteers continue to maintain and monitor its success. When problems are observed, such as some plants not surviving well, the volunteers take steps to address the problems and improve the success of the project.
Expand the program (optional)	After the garden is successfully established, a number of residents express an interest in installing bird houses and initiate a second project.

Table 1. General steps to follow in creating a wildlife habitat enhancement project, together with suggestions for how to implement the steps using the example of a hypothetical pollinator garden in a senior living community.

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Creating a wildlife habitat enhancement program

Although habitat enhancement projects will vary considerably based on factors such as location, available land, budget and number of volunteers, there are some general steps your organization can follow to establish a project with long-term potential (Table 1 on page 59 offers an example).

Establishing support within your organization from the beginning will help ensure that projects are in keeping with the goals and objectives of the organization as a whole and complement any existing sustainability measures. Program leaders should collaborate with managers in the early stages to ensure that specific considerations such as budget, safety or other concerns are incorporated into the decision-making process.

Once you affirm that a habitat enhancement program can be implemented, you can then tailor the program to ensure it will meet your goals. By determining priorities, goals and objectives at the

program's start, you can use them in deciding which projects to implement.

Priorities might include:

- accessibility
- low-cost implementation
- community engagement
- intergenerational activities
- utilizing local groups or experts
- educational opportunities
- esthetics

Another important early step is to create a "wildlife team" or a team that will be responsible for the habitat enhancement project. A wildlife team can be composed of employees as well as the older adults you work with. By engaging a variety of people in the program initially, you will ensure that volunteers have input in choosing the projects based on their personal interests.

After determining priorities and forming a wildlife team, you can begin to assess potential habitat enhancement projects within that framework. A number of re-

Resources

Asbury Methodist Village

www.asburymethodistvillage.org

Wildlife Action Plans

www.wildlifeactionplans.org

Wildlife Habitat Council

www.wildlifehc.org

sources are available to help you decide what projects would most suit wildlife in your area. In the United States, one good resource is the Wildlife Action Plan for individual states (see "Resources" above). These documents, prepared by state natural resource agencies, provide information about the top conservation priorities for each state, and list the wildlife species or habitats in greatest need of conservation.

Several habitat enhancements are relevant across much of the US and Canada. Examples include landscaping

Certification programs

Recognition for wildlife habitat enhancement and conservation education efforts

Audubon International

- Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program
<http://acsp.auduboninternational.org/>
- Audubon Partners for the Environment Program
<http://ape.auduboninternational.org/>

North American Butterfly Association

- Certified Butterfly Garden
www.nababutterfly.com/cert_index.html

National Wildlife Federation

- Certified Wildlife Habitat™
www.nwf.org/Get-Outside/Outdoor-Activities/Garden-for-Wildlife.aspx

Wildlife Habitat Council

- Corporate Lands for LearningSM
www.wildlifehc.org/programs/corporate-lands-for-learning/
- Wildlife at WorkSM
www.wildlifehc.org/programs/wildlife-at-work/

Sources of local recognition

Government entities

Your township or city

Your state Wildlife or Natural Resources agency

State, territorial and tribal links available at US Fish and Wildlife Service website
www.fws.gov/offices/statelinks.html

Statewide nonprofit organizations

National Audubon Society Chapter

www.audubon.org/search-by-zip

Native Plant Society

www.nanps.org/index.php/resources/native-plant-societies

with native plants to provide habitat for pollinator species (e.g., birds, bees and butterflies), or controlling invasive plant species that are outcompeting native plants. Ideally, you will find a project that meets both your priorities and the conservation priorities for local wildlife. Once the wildlife team chooses a project, the fun can begin!

Initial implementation is often the most intensive part of a habitat project, so it is an ideal opportunity to engage a large body of volunteers. By promoting a “kickoff” event, you may be able to interest additional volunteers in the wildlife team. Outside groups or family and friends can also be invited to participate in this event, providing both project assistance and an occasion for older adults to interact with a wider group of people.

It is important to monitor a project after it is initiated to help you assess its success and determine whether any changes are necessary. Wildlife team volunteers should monitor and maintain the project over the long term to ensure it continues to benefit wildlife.

Many of the above wellness and business benefits are associated with an actual habitat enhancement project. Recognition for project efforts, however, confers additional benefits. Receiving recognition, such as third-party certification, is a good way for the volunteers involved in a project to feel that their work is appreciated and has helped make certification possible. Certification also serves as a useful tool for marketing and community relations. There are a variety of organizations and agencies that recog-

nize habitat enhancement projects at the local, national and international levels (see “Certification programs” on page 60 for information).

A winning scenario

Enhancing habitat for wildlife is a multiple-win scenario for organizations that work with older adults. Wildlife benefits from habitat enhancement projects; older adults gain wellness benefits from participating in projects; and businesses save money, enhance their competitive advantage, and improve their relationships with employees, community members, and the older adults they serve.

David Denton, executive director of Asbury Methodist Village, remarks that

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“what amazes and delights me is how engaged so many of our residents and associates have been in caring for our outdoor space, each focusing on their own particular passion. I’m seeing everyday living confirmation,” he adds, “of the powerful benefits individuals of any age experience via close association with nature.”

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Asbury Methodist Village: profile of a successful wildlife habitat enhancement program

Awareness of environmental impacts and biodiversity loss leads some older adults to proactively request wildlife habitat enhancement projects in their communities or neighborhoods. Asbury Methodist Village (AMV), a continuing care retirement community in Gaithersburg, Maryland, began a habitat enhancement project after approximately 150 residents signed a petition in 2005 requesting a bird sanctuary. The AMV administration supported the idea of enhancing the campus for wildlife. The residents then set out to raise funds by creating and selling a calendar of photographs they had taken of wildlife on the property.

AMV’s habitat enhancement program has enjoyed many successes since it began. From the original goal of creating a bird sanctuary, the program has expanded to encompass numerous additional projects, including pond and

stream restoration, a tree inventory and trail, and conservation education. Today, AMV’s 130-acre campus includes a 17-acre nature preserve, and the habitat enhancement program was recently recertified as a *Wildlife at WorkSM* program by the Wildlife Habitat Council. The space has become a safe haven for a variety of wildlife, including deer, foxes, songbirds, waterfowl, butterflies and bees.

The program has also fully engaged the community, with 80 employees and residents participating in the Wildlife Habitat Team. “Our hope is that this wildlife management initiative will carry on for generations at Asbury Methodist Village,” says Lydia Page, resident co-chair of the community’s Wildlife Habitat Team Steering Group. “Now that we’ve set things in motion, I am optimistic AMV’s campus will remain a prized and protected ecosystem”