





NEIGHBORS HELPING NEIGHBORS

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Conservation IN OUR Communities

BY MARY ELLEN COLLINS

Most Association of Zoos and Aquariums-accredited facilities deserve congratulations for being impressive environmental stewards on their own campuses. But how do they extend those efforts beyond the gates to their backyards? What does it mean to be a good neighbor?

Becoming stewards of the ecosystems in your community requires time and resources, but the facilities that prioritize reaching out to the neighbors agree that the benefits are worth it. Their efforts increase the number of conservation-minded citizens; enhance their own reputation as a community asset; and most importantly, make a positive impact on wildlife, plant life, and other natural resources.

For example, the Family Community Service Program at the Cincinnati Zoo & Botanical Garden in Cincinnati, Ohio, offers guests and members a chance to build on what they learn when they visit.

“We recognized that we do a really good job of inspiring guests while they’re at the Zoo, but when they get home they’re likely to fall back into their routines,” said Shasta Bray, manager of interpretive exhibits, visitor research, conservation communications, and fun. “We wanted to provide something to get guests ready for their next step in being involved in conservation, and we wanted to make it social, fun, and easy.”

Anyone can apply to the program and once they’re accepted, they can participate in monthly projects including Ohio River clean-ups and tree plantings in state parks. In the first two years of the program, 638 participants partnered with 10 organizations and completed 1,615 volunteer hours.

“It’s really important to be a good neighbor,” said Bray. “Serving the community is built into our mission, so we want the community to look to us as a place to get involved and to see that there’s plenty to do in our own backyard.”

Grow the Volunteer Force

Zoo and aquarium staffers like Bray agree on the value of an ever-increasing volunteer corps.

“I believe in the critical importance of service,” said Lace Garland, manager of volunteer programs and internships at the New England Aquarium in Boston, Mass. “When you go out and volunteer you build connections

to the impact area. You’re instantly empowered. The more you volunteer, the more likely you are to build social capital and make social change, and the more we engage folks in making change, the more they will have a positive influence on the environment.”

Five years ago, the Aquarium instituted a program to accommodate people who could not fulfill the weekly commitment required by the existing volunteer program.

“When we found that 85 percent of people who wanted to volunteer couldn’t because the available opportunities didn’t work with their schedules, we designed the Live Blue Service Initiative to be episodic and flexible and take our mission outside the walls of the Aquarium,” said Garland.

The Aquarium partners with Boston-area environmental organizations and provides volunteers to work on their projects. Live Blue participants can sign up for monthly field activities ranging from helping marbled salamanders cross the road to removing invasive water chestnuts from the Charles River. The program is also identifying political races that have environmental causes at play and doing text banking and calling donors for the Environmental Voter Project. In 2018, the volunteers participated in 200 projects.

Since May 2018, Riverbanks Zoo and Garden in Columbia, S.C., staff volunteers have engaged volunteers from local businesses and organizations for a monthly Saluda River sweep. The Zoo is located on the lower banks of the river, and the volunteers participate in a regular clean-up that prevents trash from entering the Atlantic Ocean via Charleston Harbor.









“While litter left on beaches is one culprit of polluted oceans, waste hundreds of miles inland can also be carried to sea by rivers,” said Milo Anderson, conservation communication manager. “Since the river sweeps began, volunteers have removed nearly 5,000 pounds of toxic trash from the banks of the river, and Riverbanks also has been able to recycle more than 2,100 pounds of the litter collected.”

Institutions like Riverbanks serve as valuable role models when engaging local citizens in this type of hands-on activity. “We are proud to lead by example,” said Anderson. “We are proud to conserve wildlife and wild habitats at home and beyond the banks. Encouraging participation in river sweeps is also inspiring a love of nature and a desire to be good stewards of the environment.”

Engage Citizen Scientists

California Academy of Sciences in San Francisco, Calif., has created two projects that encourage community members to collect valuable data for environmental research. The City Nature Challenge began as a way of inaugurating Citizen Science Day in 2016, according to Rebecca Johnson, co-director, citizen science.

“We had been doing the same type of work as the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles, but we had never brought our programs together. So we decided to capitalize on the longstanding rivalry between San Francisco and Los Angeles and create a competition.”

During the weeklong Challenge, community members photographed and documented the location of as many wild plants and animals as possible and then uploaded the information to iNaturalist, a free app. Although Los Angeles won the first Challenge, it was a success for both cities, as more than 1,000 participants made over 20,000 observations of 3,154 species. The competition caught on and went national in 2017 and international

in 2018. In 2019, 35,000 people in 159 cities around the world made 963,000 observations of 31,000 species.

“One of the beautiful things about City Nature Challenge is that it is really grass roots,” said Alison Young, co-director of citizen science.



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“It doesn’t have strict parameters, and it gets everyone on the same page.”

Johnson and Young also developed Snapshot Cal Coast, a statewide effort to document species up and down the coast of California. Individuals, families, and other groups make and share their photographic observations of plants and animals, with a particular emphasis on species in marine protected areas or on Johnson and Young’s “most wanted list.”

“We work with numerous partners to get them to organize their local communities,” said Johnson. “The project gives us an annual snapshot in time of where species are all along the coast.” Since the program’s inception in 2016, approximately 4,000 people have made 71,000 observations of 4,000 species.

Although participants in these projects may not call themselves ‘citizen scientists,’ project leaders make sure to emphasize the link between their efforts and the work of scientists who are dedicated to maintaining the health of the physical environment.

“Most of the folks involved think of themselves as volunteers or naturalists,” said Johnson. “We usually talk about what we are doing together—collecting data on biodiversity and where it is found—and [the fact that] documenting species is critical for scientific research.”

Improve Infrastructure

In addition to offering the Family Community Service Program at the Cincinnati Zoo & Botanical Garden, the institution has also prioritized improving the infrastructure of the historically underserved neighborhood in which they are located.

Light Up Avondale is a project in which the Zoo and Garden hopes to convert every home, business, church, and school to energy efficient LED lighting. Thanks to \$725,000 in energy conservation grant funding from Duke Energy, the Zoo was able to finish converting its campus to LED lighting and start on the neighborhood properties.

“All people had to do was give us time and access to their home, and an install team from Groundwork Ohio River Valley would go in and change all of the bulbs,” said Fia Turczynewycz, sustainable communities advocate. “Our commercial partner had their contractors do the work in business buildings.”

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About 75 houses and 30 organizations have been completed, with 150 apartment units scheduled to be done last December.

“This project isn’t just about energy efficiency,” said Turczynewycz. “It’s contributed to workforce development, increased safety along public walkways, and reduced crime in parking lots. It’s been a win-win-win-win. It’s a great opportunity to show that the Zoo is about more than just animals. It’s about natural resource conservation and building a strong community.”

On a larger scale, the Zoo facilities team takes a hands-on role in an annual project to improve physical structures throughout the community.

“In 2013 the Cincinnati Reds asked us to get involved in upgrading an Avondale ball field for their annual Community Makeover,” said Mark Fisher, vice president of facilities, planning, and sustainability. Since then, the Zoo has partnered with the Reds, P&G, and Kroger on a number of rehab projects.

“We all review ideas, and then it’s on the Zoo facilities team to make it happen. It’s our sweat equity,” said Fisher “It usually involves a community center, baseball field, and park or a school that gets upgraded electric, plumbing, landscaping . . . the whole nine yards.”

When colleagues question whether neighborhood construction projects are really the Zoo’s responsibility, Fisher has a ready answer.

“Our industry needs to be more people-centric. We need to completely rethink our approach to wildlife conservation because it all starts with people. When people suffer, the Zoo suffers. And when the Zoo suffers, nature and wildlife suffer. Helping the neighborhood is just the right thing to do. It’s great for staff morale because people want to serve. And when your neighbors see and feel you giving back to them in an authentic way, it pays you back a million times.”

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