**Headline:** Destroyed Habitat Breeds Death and Disease—A Movement Builds to Support Wildlife in Human Spaces

**Teaser:** The native plant movement and backyard habitat projects seek to re-create livable natural spaces for endangered pollinators and other animals.

By April M. Short

**Author Bio:** April M. Short is an editor, journalist and documentary editor and producer. She is a writing fellow at [Local Peace Economy](https://independentmediainstitute.org/local-peace-economy/), a project of the Independent Media Institute. Previously, she served as a managing editor at AlterNet as well as an award-winning senior staff writer for Santa Cruz, California’s weekly newspaper. Her work has been published with the San Francisco Chronicle, In These Times, Salon and many others.

**Source:** Independent Media Institute

**Credit Line:** *This article was produced by* [*Local Peace Economy*](https://independentmediainstitute.org/local-peace-economy/)*, a project of the Independent Media Institute.*

**Tags:** Environment, Climate Change, Animal Rights, Time-Sensitive

**[Article Body:]**

The world’s wildlife is in danger of dying off, and inevitably taking humanity out with it. Humans have destroyed enormous portions of the planet’s natural spaces, and caused a climate disaster as well as the unprecedented acceleration of mass extinction events. Among the many species struggling to stay afloat are the butterflies, birds, bats, bees, and other pollinators we depend upon in order to grow basic food crops. People cannot live without the Earth’s diverse, wild plants and animals.

Scientists agree that continued disruption of the Earth’s ecosystems [threatens](https://www.newscientist.com/article/2201697-destruction-of-nature-is-as-big-a-threat-to-humanity-as-climate-change/) the future survival of humanity as much as climate change does. And, the two aren’t entirely separate issues; healthy forests and soil systems, for example, sequester carbon naturally. As they are destroyed, there is increased carbon in the atmosphere. A [study](https://science.sciencemag.org/content/365/6448/76) published in 2019 in the journal Science found that forest restoration is among the best possible climate change solutions.

The current pandemic brings these issues home, as the problems of climate change, habitat destruction and pollinator decline are [intricately linked](https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2020/04/01/raging-oceans-dying-pollinators-and-then-the-virus/), as outlined in an article by Dr. Arshad M. Khan and [Meena Miriam Yust](https://moderndiplomacy.eu/author/meenamiriamyust/) published in Modern Diplomacy in April.

And, as explained by Ensia’s environment editor John Vidal in an [article](https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/destroyed-habitat-creates-the-perfect-conditions-for-coronavirus-to-emerge/) that appeared in Scientific American in March, the destruction of wildlife habitat in particular creates breeding grounds for new viruses—and is a likely cause of the devastating current outbreak of novel coronavirus.

Vidal writes:

“Only a decade or two ago it was widely thought that tropical forests and intact natural environments teeming with exotic wildlife threatened humans by harboring the viruses and pathogens that lead to new diseases in humans like Ebola, HIV and dengue.

“But a number of researchers today think that it is actually humanity’s destruction of biodiversity that creates the conditions for new viruses and diseases like COVID-19… to arise—with profound health and economic impacts in rich and poor countries alike. In fact, a new discipline, planetary health, is emerging that focuses on the increasingly visible connections among the well-being of humans, other living things and entire ecosystems.”

As Vidal notes, this likely won’t be the only pandemic we experience. Keeping the next one at bay hinges on protecting and stewarding habitat spaces for wildlife.

While the outlook on both pandemic and climate change can seem bleak, we’re also witnessing a demonstration of how quickly the planet can repair itself when people merely slow down a little. In just a matter of months, without changing much other than how often we go out to work, spend and gather in public spaces, the world’s skies have cleared up in places that were murky with smog for generations.

The pandemic has caused a [steep decline](https://www.wired.com/story/the-pandemic-has-led-to-a-huge-global-drop-in-air-pollution/) in air pollution levels around the globe. Weeks without hordes of tourists have deepened the blue of [the waterways of Venice, Italy,](https://www.cnn.com/2020/04/16/europe/venice-space-satellite-images-canals-scli-intl-scn/index.html) and there are reports of fish being visible through the clear waters for the first time in decades; the Himalayas are [visible](https://www.accuweather.com/en/weather-news/beautiful-view-emerges-as-polluted-sky-clears-in-india-amid-lockdown/720012) in parts of northern India that haven’t been able to catch a glimpse of them in 30 years; Los Angeles’s famous traffic has [eased up](https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2020-03-13/column-lighter-traffic-no-trouble-getting-into-most-restaurants-and-other-pandemic-perks). It’s clear that the small efforts by large numbers of people can and do ripple throughout the world, and they have the potential to combat mass destruction. If so much can begin to change when all we do is ease our operations a little, what can change if we make concerted efforts together in support of nature’s resilience?

**Planting Habitat From the Grassroots**

Gardening to support pollinators and other wildlife is one way individuals can [help](https://www.ktvb.com/article/life/home-garden/you-can-grow-it/you-can-grow-it-how-you-can-help-rescue-honeybees-monarch-butterflies/277-dfa0b2d6-44bb-4367-a718-98346e928869). The movement for native habitat planting seeks to re-supply wildlife with the plants and habitat spaces that support them, by way of individual garden projects.

Since the 1970s, the native plant movement has encouraged people to garden and grow native species of plants, which can provide biodiverse habitat for birds, butterflies, amphibians and other creatures that live among us. Out of the native plant movement, many backyard and community habitat gardening certification programs have emerged across the country, to educate and incentivize people to plant habitat gardens.

The largest habitat gardening certification effort in the U.S. is the National Wildlife Federation (NWF)’s Community Wildlife Habitat Program ([CWHP](https://www.nwf.org/CommunityWildlifeHabitat/Home/About)), which offers tools and a certification program not just for individual backyard gardens, but for whole communities interested in participating. The program started in 1997 in the small town of Alpine, California, in San Diego County, as a grassroots effort by a few individuals who decided to team up and encourage local native garden projects. Now, the program is a concerted national effort that works with approximately 200 certified [communities and municipalities across the country](https://www.nwf.org/CommunityWildlifeHabitat/Home/CurrentCommunities), including some major cities, such as Charlotte, North Carolina, and Houston, Texas. NWF has encouraged people to create habitat gardens for more than 40 years through its [Garden for Wildlife](https://www.nwf.org/garden). The CWHP builds upon that longstanding initiative, with a science-based program framework for community leaders to restore wildlife habitat—including wildlife corridors and road passage areas—and engage residents. The end goal for areas that participate is to be certified as a wildlife-friendly community through the NWF.

The program encourages communities to integrate a set of wildlife-friendly practices into plans for parks and general sustainability. It offers tools for its members to educate as well as motivate private community members—residents, schools, places of worship, and others—to get involved and transform their garden spaces via native trees and plants, and non-toxic practices.

Patrick Fitzgerald, senior director of community wildlife for NWF, says anyone can get involved with the habitat gardening effort, even people in highly urban areas, via container gardens.

“If you’re planting a garden, you can really make an impact for wildlife and the environment literally right outside your front door,” he says, noting that the [monarch butterfly](https://www.saveourmonarchs.org/) offers a particularly potent example of a species that might be positively affected by collective individual efforts. The Western monarch’s populations have been plummeting, down from the millions in the 1980s, to 200,000 in 2017, and just 30,000 as of 2018, as reported in March 2020 by [the New York Times](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/20/science/monarch-butterfly.html).

“The example of the monarch shows how the simple act of planting milkweeds in your garden, in a pot and just about anywhere, can have an impact for a very specific species,” adds Fitzgerald. “A lot of folks, myself included, just love this monarch butterfly for its migration and metamorphosis. It’s an amazing species. We’ve seen a call to action for the monarch butterfly, and so many people are planting milkweed and other native plants that they need to survive in their yards and telling us about it. … Knowing that you’re part of millions of people doing this, all for the sake of one black and orange butterfly, is a pretty powerful thing. It’s just tremendously rewarding.”

The NWF program also works with communities interested in larger restoration efforts, such as wildlife thoroughfares, urban forestry, water conservation, planting for climate resilience and green infrastructure efforts.

“In terms of climate resilience, a lot of the actions that our teams in our cities, counties and communities are taking have multiple benefits for wildlife and for people—and they’re also helpful in terms of addressing climate change in different ways,” Fitzgerald says.

He points to efforts like reforestation and planting trees along waterways to reduce erosion and mitigate runoff into waterways, or efforts to increase soil carbon storage.

“A lot of folks who participate in our programs, they just love wildlife, and from there, they’re looking for strategies to attract more wildlife to their neighborhoods and communities,” he says.

Houston, Texas, is one of the largest communities certified by the NWF Community Wildlife Habitat Program. Kelli Ondracek, the natural resources manager for the City of Houston Parks and Recreation Department, says that when the city started working toward the certification in 2016 it was a natural fit, as many of the efforts already underway in the city overlapped with the NWF’s habitat certification program. The city of Houston partners with the Houston Audubon, for instance, to replace invasive plant species in public areas with bird-friendly natives, and Houston is a certified “Bird City” of Texas by the state’s Parks and Wildlife program.

In order to encourage Houston residents to participate and plant backyard habitat gardens, Ondracek says they began to include information about the certification effort at all of their regular events. Since the city was already offering many of the educational events and information required for the NWF certification, once they got enough homes and common areas involved with the project, it came together citywide, by way of volunteer efforts.

Among the bigger habitat initiatives in Houston is its longstanding [prairie restoration](https://www.csmonitor.com/Environment/2019/1001/Houston-s-pocket-prairies-Natural-solutions-to-unnatural-flooding) project, which replants fields full of native prairie grasses and wildflowers throughout the city’s parks, medians, and other relevant public spaces. Ondracek, who oversees the city’s greenhouses, says the prairie restoration efforts have involved collecting seeds and propagating more than 10,000 gallon pots’ worth of native plants.

Ondracek says the wildlife habitat project in Houston involves taking inventory of the land in their parks system—which is vast—and assess what that land would have historically looked like. Then, they work to re-create it.

“We try to get it as close as possible back to the historic habitat, with a focus on really diverse native species,” Ondracek says. “We’re really trying to focus on native plants—and we’re growing them ourselves because often you can’t really purchase them—so that we can get our restoration projects completed.”

The prairie restoration project serves to provide habitat, and also to mitigate climate change–related threats such as increased flooding and drought, as detailed in a Christian Science Monitor [article](https://www.csmonitor.com/Environment/2019/1001/Houston-s-pocket-prairies-Natural-solutions-to-unnatural-flooding) published in October 2019.

Ondracek says Houston also has a native tree farm and is working to replant trees along waterways in 70 of its parks, with the goal of planting more than 200,000 trees along the city’s bayous and other water systems. Trees along the waterways, known as [riparian buffers](https://www.fs.usda.gov/nac/practices/riparian-forest-buffers.php), serve to reduce the impacts of flooding and improve water quality for both humans and wildlife. The goal of this effort is twofold: to rehabitat these spaces as wildlife corridors, and to create a more climate-resilient future for the city. The tree project acts as part of Houston’s [Climate Action Plan](https://tinyurl.com/yc88f828), which centers on large restoration projects like tree installations to mitigate inevitable increased flooding and help sequester carbon.

Many cities, counties and states around the U.S. offer their own habitat certification programs, unrelated to the NWF’s certification. Portland, Oregon’s local [Backyard Habitat Certification Program (BHCP)](https://backyardhabitats.org/), for instance, is a collaboration between Portland Audubon and Columbia Land Trust.

Megan Van de Mark, the Portland BHCP’s program manager, says the localized program is particularly hands-on and serves more than 6,100 properties throughout Oregon’s Clark, Clackamas, Multnomah, and Washington counties. The program originated in Portland, where more than 4,600 properties are enrolled, and works hands-on with community sites, including religious institutions, multi-family complexes, schools, etc., as well as private backyards.

“One person can make a difference where they live by incorporating native plants in their yards and gardens, by removing noxious weeds, by reducing or eliminating the use of pesticides, and by taking actions that steward wildlife and manage stormwater at home,” Van de Mark says in an email.

Van de Mark says the program shows that the cumulative actions of individual people can add up to a significant positive impact.

“An ecosystem is an interconnected system,” Van de Mark says. “What each of us does makes a difference specifically because we’re all connected. The ecosystems within which we reside are home to many. By building habitat where you live and reside (i.e., by planting native plants, removing noxious weeds, reducing or eliminating the use of pesticides, and by taking actions that steward wildlife and manage stormwater on-site), you can help ensure that birds, pollinators, and other species also have enough to eat, a way to get around, and a place to call home. We’re all in this together.”