

Engaging Inner-City Youth in Urban Habitat Restoration

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Involving inner city youth in habitat restoration and land stewardship is a powerful opportunity to address natural resource conservation and social justice issues while diversifying, expanding and strengthening the community of conservationists in our society.

Indeed, the quality of life for all species is precipitously declining in the inner cities. Industrial, commercial and residential activities impact the quality of our air, water, soil and food, and nowhere is this experienced more intensely than in neighborhoods already stricken with poverty, unemployment, crime and neglect. In San Francisco, the predominantly African-American Bayview Hunters Point neighborhood has borne the brunt of environmental degradation and toxic contamination for decades. Human and wildlife habitats in this community have been subject to disruption, toxic dumping and an inordinate share of negative impacts from human activities. Meanwhile, in spite of heightened awareness and interest, real solutions and actual work in this community to address these problems have not been adequately forthcoming from mainstream environmental organizations.

Through innovative collaborative programs involving diverse communities, city and state agencies, businesses, community-based and national organizations, the San Francisco League of Urban Gardeners (SLUG) is working to build an informed, active constituency for restoring plant, animal and human habitats in urban centers and beyond. One such program is the Saint Mary's Urban Youth Farm ("the Farm"), combining food production, wildlife habitat restoration, mid-scale composting, and community education and volunteer activities.

The Farm is located in San Francisco's Saint Mary's Park at the south foot of Bernal Hill. It is home to two small endemic stands of purple needlegrass (*Nassella pulchra*), *Iris longipetala*, *Eschscholzia californica*, and other coastal prairie species. It also has two very small creeks with a small wet meadow that supports the indigenous *Juncus phaeocephalus* and introduced species. This five-acre portion of the park has been neglected for years and provides habitat for red-tailed hawks, American kestrels, alligator lizards, western terrestrial garter snakes, and numerous invertebrates. SLUG's Youth Garden Internship and Habitat Field Trip program involves inner-city youth in the management of invasive fennel, pampas grass and European grasses, and the re-introduction of local native plant species, and other in horticultural activities.

Program Description

Saint Mary's Urban Youth Farm Site Stewardship and Development

Community involvement - Residents of the Alemany public housing community adjacent to the Farm have been involved since the initial phases of design, development and management of the site and its enhancements in 1994. An internship funded by the San Francisco Housing Authority focused on job readiness and career development and supported work at the site in native habitat protection and restoration, and community garden, urban orchard and crop area development.

Remnant coastal prairie and wetlands - Inner-city teens in the youth garden internship, with assistance from the California Native Plant Society (CNPS), Yerba Buena Chapter, have been pulling fennel, European grasses, mallow and other exotic species from the patch of purple needlegrass manually and with small hand tools. Beyond the margins of the remnant prairie, school groups coordinated by SLUG and guided by CNPS have planted native plants propagated from locally-collected stock. Species include *Achillea millefolium*, *Lupinus*

bicolor, *Iris longipetala*, and *Eschscholzia californica*. Propagation is done by teens at the end of their sentences in a nursery at Log Cabin Ranch, a division of the San Francisco juvenile justice system.

Wetland areas include two tiny creeks with water flowing year round into a small wet meadow. Numerous non-native plant species are cleared from the creek and wet meadow periodically to provide access to the water for wildlife. To further diversify wildlife habitats and educational opportunities, a 60-foot diameter pond is being constructed just below the wet meadow. Native wetland plants propagated at the Log Cabin Nursery from locally collected stock are being introduced to wetland areas by teen interns and visiting school groups. Species include *Heracleum lanatum*, *Mimulus guttatus*, *Plantago subnuda*, and *Scrophularia californica*. Reintroduction of the rare San Francisco Fork-Tailed Damselfly (*Ischnura gemina*) will be assisted by San Francisco State University entomology professor John Hafernik and graduate students next year.

Urban agriculture demonstration areas - A one-acre farm plateau, a two-acre urban orchard, and a 2,500 square-foot community garden are among the demonstration areas used at the farm to teach urban residents the techniques and values of urban food production. Teen interns are the primary cultivators with some volunteer help and SLUG crew labor. Produce is distributed to residents of the adjacent housing development regularly, or processed into any number of products (such as *Urban Herbs* Jammin' Jams and Herbal Vinegars) which have been developed, produced and marketed by teens in the program.

Extensive wheelchair-accessible pathways are under construction and interpretive signage is planned for the Farm.

Saint Mary's Urban Youth Farm Habitat Field Trips Program

With support from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation and the Educational Foundation of America, SLUG initiated a field trips program at the Farm in early 1997. The response was overwhelming-nearly 100 teachers applied for just 22 slots to visit the site and over 500 school children (K-12) participated in learning, pulling weeds, mulching and planting.

Curriculum development - With assistance from numerous restoration and education organizations and agencies in the Bay Area, existing curricula were reviewed and a field trip outline with pre-field trip and follow-up activities was developed. Activities from the California State Environmental Education Guide and A Child's Place in the Environment proved useful.

Teacher training - Prior to the field trips, all teachers participating were required to attend a training to learn about the natural history of the Farm, the importance of and threats to urban wildlife habitats, and logistical considerations of the trip. A packet of pre-field trip activities for classroom use was distributed at the training.

Pre-field-trip presentations - The week before each field trip, an educator visited the classroom to introduce students to habitats, native plants, and field trip logistics. With the younger groups, we used many simple visual props and songs and dances from the State curriculum and from the Banana SLUG String Quartet of Santa Cruz. With the older groups we used slideshows and interactive group activities.

Field-trip facilitation - School groups were brought to the site on school buses or public transit and stayed an average of three hours. After an introduction, the class was divided in half and one group would get a habitat safari tour, and the other would conduct a hands-on activity. With the younger groups, pulling weeds and mulching were the preferred hands-on activities, for the older groups, planting was preferred. The group would then reconvene and have an environmental lunch, a wrap-up, and review activities.

Follow-up activities - Teachers conducted follow-up activities at their schools to reinforce concepts learned in the field trip. Activities included planting native plant gardens, assisting with site stewardship activities in natural areas near their schools, composting, recycling and energy conservation.

SLUG Youth Garden Internship and Community Outreach Programs

With support from the Mayor's Office of Children, Youth and their Families, SLUG operates a paid internship for teenagers to learn job readiness, career development, and horticultural and community outreach skills. Between 20 and 60 teens work and learn at the Farm 20 hours each week during the summer and 12 hours per week during the school year. Several other community training and outreach programs at SLUG

involve youth and adults in building gardens and teaching composting and gardening in schools, community centers and workplaces citywide.

Curricula - This year, with assistance from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, the Vanguard Foundation, CNPS, and the Golden Gate National Parks Presidio Stewardship Program, a curriculum will be developed to integrate habitat restoration into the horticulture, community outreach, career development and environmental justice curriculum of the Youth Garden Internship.

Intern activities - Interns and community members on the crews are involved in all aspects of site stewardship and development at the Farm, from pulling weeds to building paths and signage.

Community outreach - Youth Interns promote program activities to community members through tours of the Farm, community door-to-door surveys, conference presentations and assistance with school programs. Involving the greatest diversity of community members is facilitated by meeting with existing groups to find common goals. In the case of the Farm, the need for jobs, educational opportunities and neighborhood beautification provided a basis for collaborative activities with the neighboring Alemany Resident Management Corporation, the Bayview Hunter's Point Foundation and local schools. As more youth and adults become involved in site stewardship and enhancement activities and collaborating groups assist with promotions and outreach, a growing constituency for conservation in this neighborhood is forming.

Conclusion

Last year 17 local native plant species were reintroduced at the Saint Mary's Urban Youth Farm, 2,400 people visited the Farm, 18 schools participated in the Habitat Field Trips, and over 650 hours of volunteer service in invasive plant species removal and site improvements were generated. People from diverse backgrounds joined together in learning and working to restore and develop this previously trash-strewn lot into a vibrant community farm, education center and wildlife habitat. Youth from across the city learned the value of preserving wildlife habitats through restoration, gardening, recycling and energy conservation, at-risk teens and young adults gained vital job skills and developed new entrepreneurial enterprises, and volunteers and neighbors gained a renewed sense of pride in their community and an understanding of the values of natural resource conservation.

SLUG looks forward to building on the successes of these efforts by assisting with exotic pest plant removal and habitat restoration on San Francisco's Bayview Hill and the San Francisco Bay waterfront. Continuing these efforts can only help to strengthen the conservation movement by broadening its base of support to include new constituencies in urban areas.