



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Urban Refuge Program of the Portland-Vancouver Metro Area

2015 Report: Building Relationships

"Children across our nation are increasingly disconnected from nature, yet playing outside and learning about the natural world is fun, healthy and builds confidence in kids. The Portland-Vancouver area is blessed with spectacular outdoor spaces, and a strong network of public and nonprofit leaders committed to getting kids and families outdoors, active and connected to nature."

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service Director, Dan Ashe, announcing the launch of the Portland-Vancouver Urban Refuge Program (Urban Program)

The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS) has boldly embraced the 21st Century conservation challenge of reconnecting ever-growing cities with nature, and the Portland-Vancouver community has indeed proven to be the perfect incubator for fresh, courageous and impactful ideas. It is this network of strong, committed leaders from the public, nonprofit, and private sectors that has made the inaugural year of the Urban Program so successful.

Our strategy was not to create new initiatives and projects, but to forge new and enhance existing relationships and support amazing efforts already underway. The additional resources afforded the Urban Program were leveraged to answer one important question, "How can we help you achieve success?" Sometimes the answer was funding or staff support to push a project over the finish line. Sometimes it was seeding a visionary new idea. And sometimes it was as simple as taking a neighborhood youth group on a birding trip at one of the area's four outstanding National Wildlife Refuges. Within this document are these stories, and in them we hope you will see the future that we see: A connected conservation constituency with the USFWS standing alongside thriving partners, truly an asset to the community.

National Wildlife Refuges

natural places to build relationships

Click this symbol wherever you see it to find more information



Wood Duck/©Eric Vogt



Tualatin River National Wildlife Refuge

Supporting Conservation in its Many Forms

Characterized as an “urban refuge” since its creation in 1992, Tualatin River National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) is no stranger to the delicate balance that sustains life for both people and wildlife. In addition to restoring and maintaining healthy habitats for birds, mammals, fish and many other creatures, the Refuge has long been a place for people to seek physical, mental and spiritual health through a wide variety of nature-based activities.

With abundant support from the Friends of Tualatin River NWR, activities connecting the greater Portland-Vancouver community with nature flourished in 2015, including enriching programs like the beloved Puddle Stompers for preschoolers, youth summer camp and naturalist training. Volunteer opportunities grew, with over 13,000 new plants and trees going in the ground thanks to the efforts of dozens of partners and hundreds of volunteers.



“Despite the misses it was still the best day of duck hunting I’ve ever experienced...I believe you’ve made a duck hunter/conservationist for life.”

John and Luke P. (age 15)

A new activity began in 2015 on a small section of the Refuge. Waterfowl hunting, which has long supported habitat conservation and the National Wildlife Refuge System, often lacks an appropriate venue in more populated areas. By launching a Junior Waterfowl Hunt Program, the Refuge and its partners have modeled a safe, educational environment for families with a hunting tradition to pass on their knowledge and conservation ethic through this activity.

The program received substantial support from many community partners with a shared interest in connecting urban youth to nature through hunting, including the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, Ducks Unlimited, Waterfowl Festival, Oregon Duck Hunters Association, and Cabela’s. This partnership ensured that hunting knowledge, economics, and mobility were not barriers to participation. Waders, camouflage, callers, and dog handlers were provided, and an accessible blind was constructed to provide access to youth of all physical abilities. The Junior Waterfowl Hunt Program has a bright future as Refuge staff explore ways to offer this opportunity to a broader spectrum of the community.



Ridgefield National Wildlife Refuge

Bridging Community, Culture and Nature

To be part of the daily lives of its surrounding community—it’s a status to which any National Wildlife Refuge would gratefully aspire. No refuge may be more poised to achieve this than Ridgefield National Wildlife Refuge (NWR). The City of Ridgefield, WA is fast-growing and 20 minutes from the Portland-Vancouver core. Together with the Refuge and Port of Ridgefield, the community is working to create a seamless flow between town and nature.

In 2015, Ridgefield NWR took a big—and elevated—step toward this integrated future by replacing a footbridge that for 30 years had been a barrier for safe, welcoming, and equitable access to the beauty and rejuvenation that lie on the other side of the tracks. It was an achievement embraced by the entire community when the bridge was dedicated during the Friends of Ridgefield

NWR’s BirdFest & Bluegrass event. Chinook Indian Nation Vice Chairman, Sam Robinson, and Cowlitz Elder, Tanna Engdahl, offered blessings honoring the thousands of people who had walked there in the past and those who will walk there in the future.

The new bridge, universally accessible to people of all abilities, offers sweeping new views of the Refuge and connection to the cultural history of the Cathlapotle Plankhouse, the paved Oaks-to-Wetlands Trail, and countless natural wonders just waiting to be discovered.

The Refuge, the City, and the Port now look to the future together, with comprehensive plans for trails that will create a continuous loop connecting new housing developments, schools, and commercial centers to the Refuge and other cherished natural resources. As the city grows, so does its recognition as a critical link to nature for the entire Portland-Vancouver Metro Area.

Refuge Friends Groups

The Beating Hearts of the Refuges

The Portland-Vancouver refuges would not be the tremendous community assets they are without strong relationships with three vital organizations:

Friends of Tualatin River NWR



Friends of Ridgefield NWR



Columbia Gorge Refuge Stewards



From celebratory events, to educational programming, to habitat restoration and so much more, Friends are a critical part of engaging the greater Portland-Vancouver community and ensuring their experiences at refuges are full of joy and wonder.

With support from the Urban Program, these groups are expanding their capabilities to reach new and diverse audiences through additional staff and expanded training. Highlights include a cultural education specialist hired by the Friends of Ridgefield NWR to conduct programs about local indigenous communities and their refuge connections, a volunteer coordinator at Steigerwald Lake NWR hired by the Gorge Refuge Stewards, and an expanding Friends of Tualatin River NWR volunteer base nurtured through modern, digital communication techniques and new topics focused on cultural understanding.



Health & Nature



Supporting Healthy Conversations & Strategies

The Intertwine Alliance (TIA), a local coalition of over 140 partners in urban conservation, is tackling the connection between health and nature head-on. With support through the Urban Program, TIA has convened several forums where partners, including the USFWS, meet to share knowledge of nature and its positive impact on our community's health.

Partners use these platforms to approach region-wide programs and activities strategically, while making a collective impact greater than any one organization would accomplish on their own.

The effort has evolved to a place where partners are now generating larger collaborative projects, with the Health and Nature Steering Committee providing support and guidance to these efforts. The projects include the launch of a four-county prescription play program where health care providers will prescribe nature as a positive health intervention, as well as projects that involve the greening of schoolyards and the development of a broad-based health and nature communications plan.

CULLY PARK



Photo by permission from Verde

Improving Neighborhood Health Through Park Creation

The USFWS embarked this year on a relationship with one of the most amazingly diverse and culturally rich neighborhoods in Portland. As the most park-deprived area in town, the Cully neighborhood took matters into their own hands. Through the Urban Program, the USFWS had the pleasure of investing in their effort to bring an inter-tribal gathering garden and nature play space to a new 25-acre park.

Arguably more important than this modest contribution to their park development efforts is the door that has opened to a reciprocal relationship of learning. With resources from the Urban Program, local refuges supported the participation of Club Aves, a Cully neighborhood youth club, in a series of six birding trips through Living Cully and Hacienda's Expresiones After School Program.

Club Aves was also a guest at Ridgefield NWR where they received a personal tour by Project Leader, Chris Lapp, who introduced them to the recovery efforts underway for endangered Columbian white-tailed deer. The visit concluded with a sunset spectacle of sandhill cranes flying into their night roost.

"What a great year of birding with youth! A big thank you to all of our partners for making Club Aves a success and for our extra special trip to Ridgefield National Wildlife Refuge."

Anna Gordon
Living Cully Communications &
Outreach Coordinator and Verde

Equity & Inclusion



Learning Together

Recognizing a need to find common ground among varied and diverse communities, the Urban Program supported the Intertwine Alliance in offering partners a range of options to further explore and address equity and inclusion in the community's nature-based work.

- **Anti-racism Workshops** – USFWS staff, along with over 150 local conservation partners, attended 1-day and 2 ½-day workshops designed to build awareness and examine the history of systemic racism and its continued presence in our society.
- **Park Directors Retreats** – With support from the Urban Program, several area parks department directors continued regular gatherings to learn about and discuss strategies in response to shifting community demographics. These discussions are a sign of a new era of leadership in addressing equity and inclusion and the role of nature in this dynamic. Conversations have been facilitated by former Deputy Director of the National Park Service, Mickey Fearn.
- **Equity Assessments** – Knowing that change begins by understanding our own strengths and weaknesses, ten local environmental groups conducted comprehensive self-assessments of equity and inclusion within their organizations. This eight-month process was facilitated by the Coalition of Communities of Color and Ann Curry-Stevens, a Portland State University professor. Once compiled and reviewed, this process will yield insights that can be shared with the broader community of partners.



Celebration of Wild Steelhead

Neighborhoods matter, and reaching them one-by-one is a journey the USFWS has joyfully undertaken with the guidance and leadership of partners like Soul River. With resources through the Urban Program, the USFWS supported the 2nd annual Celebration of Wild Steelhead. This neighborhood park event calls attention to an iconic fish of the Pacific Northwest while fostering strong community ties and raising awareness of natural resource conservation. Fly fishing, local art, funk music, soul food, and an accessible, friendly atmosphere define this vibrant event.

Soul River's model of connecting with urban youth where they are at, such as their neighborhood park, is inspirational. The USFWS intends to further support this work through the Urban Program and seek out other groups working to make similar impact in their local neighborhoods.

“The future demographics of Portland bear out a clear path toward multiculturalism. More than 40 percent of youth in Portland’s schools are people of color. Our mission cannot succeed if we do not address historical inequities and build a broader movement.”

Rob Sadowsky, Bicycle Transportation Alliance, a participant in the Anti-racism 2 ½-day workshop and Equity Assessments. From the Intertwine Alliance Outside Voice blog post: *“Examining Everything: What antiracism work has meant for us”*

Conservation Education



Oregon Zoo Collaboration

The USFWS is modeling new ways of urban engagement in the Portland-Vancouver area by building a uniquely strong relationship with the Oregon Zoo. A truly cross-program effort, led skillfully by the Oregon Fish and Wildlife Office (Ecological Services), the Urban Program has contributed design and interpretive expertise to the Zoo's development of a state-of-the-art Conservation Education Center scheduled to open in 2017.

This mutually-beneficial relationship will see the scientific integrity and passion of the USFWS on display while we learn from the time-tested skills of the Zoo in engaging a huge urban audience (over 1.6 million annual visitors). In keeping with new approaches, the USFWS has created a Park Ranger position that will work at the Zoo, side-by-side with the Zoo's Education Center Coordinator, to establish the goals and aspirations for the Center and ensure the USFWS is an active and visible part of meeting those goals.

Partnering with Educators

This year saw the start of a new partnership with a unique and treasured resource of the suburban Portland landscape: Greenway Elementary School in Beaverton, OR. Compared to many Portland-area suburbs, the community served by Greenway is significantly more racially diverse. The area also faces

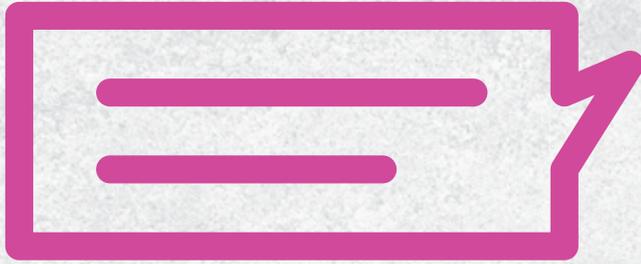
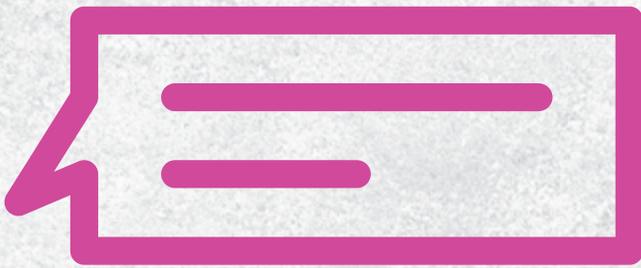
economic challenges that often disproportionately affect communities of color. Of the total Greenway student population, 75% receive free or reduced cost lunch, 50% are English Language Learners, and students arrive without the aid of school buses. While the community shares close proximity to Fanno Creek, a resource accessible by trail, very little nature-based education had taken place in the school prior to this partnership. The Friends of Tualatin River NWR led the way in forging this relationship, with support through the Urban Program.

A Comprehensive Approach: The relationship began with Refuge and Friends education specialists meeting with Greenway teachers over the summer to assess resources and needs. The Refuge then hosted a workshop, attended by the entire staff and faculty, to explore a multidisciplinary approach to integrating nature education into the entire academic and school experience. Friends staff and volunteers went to the school to plan in-school activities and eventual trips to the Refuge. Volunteers returned during the school year to prepare students for a visit to the Refuge, culminating in the first two successful field trips to Tualatin River NWR.

Next Steps: More field trips are being coordinated and the Friends' Habitat Restoration Specialist is planning on-the-ground restoration projects at the school. The Refuge is also working with the school and Oregon Natural Resources Education Program to explore Greenway's participation in the Stewardship School Program, bringing State level resources to increase on-campus environmental education programs.



Public Engagement



Supporting Tomorrow's Leaders

Through Environment for the Americas' Latino Internship Program and Urban Program resources, two young women experienced six-month paid internships at Tualatin River NWR. Brenda Ramirez and Lily Calderon explored career opportunities in natural resources and blazed new trails into urban communities. As Nature Ambassadors, they reached nearly 1,000 children and families through after-school nature activities at NE Portland's SUN School and by leading bilingual tours at the Refuge. They also enjoyed field work, assisting with habitat and wildlife surveys, and even took time to share great insights on diverse youth employment with the U.S. Office of Personnel Management Director.

"Thank you so much for everything. Like literally everything. It has meant so much to me to have people that genuinely care about and support me."

Brenda Ramirez, Nature Ambassador through Environment for the Americas

Engaging Youth Through Service in Nature

As most youth mentoring practitioners can attest, fostering a connection to place and offering hands-on ways to contribute are key to engaging young people in nature. With support from the Urban Program, the Portland-Vancouver refuges partnered with Northwest Youth Corps in 2015 to engage 50 youth from a variety of backgrounds in more than 5,000 hours of service to nature. These inspirational young people worked tirelessly with staff, volunteers and Friends to enhance habitats and keep trails and visitor facilities in impeccable condition.

This stepping-stone program generated personal growth in many participants who began their service as nature novices. Over time, they began to understand the importance of their work, explore careers paths in environmental fields and build pride in their contributions to stewardship. They left with greater comfort and connection to the outdoors.

A Smarter Way to Get Outside



Nature doesn't have a marketing department but it competes for attention with those who do. Together with Intertwine Alliance partners, the USFWS is answering this call by co-creating the Daycation Mobile App. Daycations are multi-stop adventures on the trails and greenspaces of the Portland-Vancouver area, created by the community, for the community. The app will encourage exploration and sharing stories about nature.

Development of the app kicked off in 2015. The Urban Program has contributed expertise in visual design and outdoor engagement.

Looking Ahead

The Urban Refuge Program is a long-term investment of U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service resources in the Portland-Vancouver Metro Area, directed at amplifying the voices of those tackling the conservation challenges of the 21st Century. The program's approach is as flexible and unique as the partners it engages and people it serves. As the refuges of the Portland-Vancouver area reflect on what has been accomplished in the first year of the Urban Program, it is equally important to look forward to what is to come in 2016 and 2017:

- Continue to get to know the community beyond the boundaries of the four area National Wildlife Refuges. Continue to build and strengthen relationships by listening closely to the thoughts and ideas of community members and partners and moderating our practices to help accommodate these new ideas.
- Stay engaged in existing collaborations and seek out new coalitions working to connect urban residents to nature.
- Engage social science professionals to refine measurements of success.
- Continue the journey to ensure nature is genuinely equitable and inclusive to all. Facilitate opportunities for partners to join us in learning, conversation, and practice.
- Support refuge Friends groups so they can continue to provide excellent education and engagement programming on behalf of the refuges. Connect Friends to community leaders and programs who can provide information about audience-appropriate program development.
- Invest in youth, especially underserved youth, through employment and leadership programs that expand opportunities to foster future conservation stewards.
- Expand the community's understanding of the Urban Standards of Excellence (www.fws.gov/urban)  that drive much of the Urban Program's direction and meaningfully translate them to the work of community partners.

Learn more about the refuges

 bit.ly/RidgefieldNWR

 bit.ly/SteigerwaldLake

 bit.ly/TualatinRiver

 bit.ly/WapatoLake

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 [Portland-Vancouver National Wildlife Refuges](#)

Learn more about the national USFWS Urban Wildlife Conservation Program

 fws.gov/urban

The Portland-Vancouver Urban Refuge Program staff can be contacted at
Tualatin River National Wildlife Refuge
19255 SW Pacific Highway • Sherwood, OR 97140
(503)625-5944