

Groundwork-Walkkill Connection Urban Wildlife Refuge Partnership

Yonkers, New York



A local community effort to reclaim and restore a Yonkers river has grown into a nationally recognized partnership connecting the city's residents, businesses and young people to its river. A partnership between the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Yonkers-based Groundwork Hudson Valley, called Groundwork-Walkkill Connection: Fostering Urban River Stewards, will engage residents from the southwest area of Yonkers in restoring land near public housing along the Saw Mill River. The Service designated the collaboration as an urban wildlife refuge partnership in August 2014.

Manufacturing around the Saw Mill River began over two centuries ago with the first saw mills built along the river's banks. Since then, business, industry, and residential development have straightened and reinforced banks with concrete; buried the river under culverts, parking lots, and buildings; and created a "hidden" river that is often used as a dumping ground. Despite this, upper stretches remain one of the few extended open space corridors below Interstate-287, used by thousands of bikers, joggers, rollerbladers and fishermen; and the river provides habitat for two endangered species, the river herring and American eel.

In 2001, Groundwork Hudson Valley founded the Saw Mill River Coalition, a dynamic partnership of nonprofits, government agencies, municipalities, and businesses committed to revitalizing and protecting the river. Together, these groups are incrementally improving their riverside communities through physical improvements and community engagement. Achievements include exposing previously buried or hidden stretches of the river; creation of citizen stewardship programs; annual river cleanups; and numerous vine cutting projects that engage residents in the rediscovery of their local hidden gem. Together, these efforts promote connections to a natural treasure in the city's urban core.

Through this partnership, Groundwork and the Service's Walkkill River National Wildlife Refuge will create and restore a riverside park to become an urban oasis for hundreds of Yonkers residents. The park adjoins a public housing complex and city ball fields that are often filled with families and children. Refuge staff will lend expertise and assistance to physical improvements of the site, including sloping river access, removal of invasive plants, planting of native streamside vegetation, debris removal, and the creation and installation of tables and benches. These improvements will help absorb stormwater runoff, decrease stream velocity, and improve water quality and riparian habitat, while also creating recreational river access through a natural oasis for local residents.



Groundwork

Green Team members participate in a cleanup of the Saw Mill River at the new Daylighted Park in downtown Yonkers.



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The project aims to work with youth and adults from the surrounding community to monitor water quality issues, including illegal dumping in the river. Residents and youth will learn about the history of the river; how it became degraded, and how they can become more engaged in its conservation through community involvement. The park will also serve as a platform for events and workshops about the river and how its health is connected to that of the community. Participants in the effort will then travel to Wallkill River National Wildlife Refuge to experience conservation issues on a regional scale, and will assist with riparian restoration and invasive species control at the refuge.

Groundwork and Wallkill River Refuge have been working together since 2011, and have brought dozens of Yonkers students to the refuge over a series of visits. In 2012, the refuge hosted Groundwork's national conference, giving delegates from across the country the opportunity to see this partnership in action. The 360-degree learning, by which students and community members first apply conservation skills in their community and then extend these concepts in visits to Wallkill River Refuge, provides stepping stones of engagement, that can help Yonkers residents understand how fish and wildlife conservation benefits their community.

In February 2014, the project competed nationally to be designated as an urban wildlife refuge partnership. The designation is a formal recognition of excellence under the Service's urban refuge initiative. Under the initiative, the Service is striving to make wildlife conservation connections in urban areas. This partnership provides a cost effective, innovative way to enable urban communities to learn more about the National Wildlife Refuge System and wildlife conservation, and to gain an appreciation for the outdoors.



Members of Groundwork's Green Team, students from Yonkers, who come out to the refuge to help tackle invasive species.



Green Team youth removing a shopping cart from the site of the new park at Walsh Road.



Groundwork's Green Team youth prepare the foundation for the project's new pocket park along the Saw Mill River at Walsh Road.