Yonkers Parks Urban Wildlife Refuge Partnership

Yonkers, New York

urban wildlife refuge PARTNERSHIP

What began as a local community effort to reclaim a Yonkers river has grown into a nationally recognized partnership connecting the city's residents, businesses, educators and youth to nature. A partnership between the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Yonkers-based Groundwork Hudson Valley, called Yonkers Parks Urban Wildlife Refuge Partnership, engages residents and youth in the restoration, conservation, and recreational use of previously industrialized land along the Saw Mill River.

Manufacturing around the Saw Mill River began over two centuries ago with the first saw mills built along the river's banks. Over the years, business, industry, and residential development straightened and reinforced the Saw Mill's 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, the river's upper stretches remain one of the few extended open space corridors below I-287, and the South County Trailway (following the Old Putnam rail line) is used by thousands of bikers, joggers, rollerbladers and fishermen. Despite its urban character, the river remains as habitat for two endangered species, the river herring and American eel.

Since 2001, Groundwork-Hudson Valley has been leading a dynamic partnership of nonprofits, government agencies, municipalities, and businesses in revitalizing and protecting the river. More recently, a second effort has centered around reinventing the abandoned Old Putnam railbed as a modern Greenway through Yonkers, increasing access to local businesses, parks and neighborhoods, promoting physical activity, and connecting with transit and other trails. Together, these efforts are reinvigorating Yonkers communities through physical improvements and community engagement. Achievements include daylighting of previously-buried or hidden river stretches; citizen stewardship programs; annual river cleanups; creation of community parks and playgrounds; invasive vine cutting projects; and other activities that engage residents and youth in the rediscovery and stewardship of their local hidden gems. Together, these efforts promote connections to natural spaces in the city's urban core.

Through this partnership, Groundwork and the Service's Wallkill River National Wildlife Refuge have worked to create and restore riverside parks, facilitate refuge field trips for youth and residents, and provide conservation programming to Yonkers youth. This has been achieved through reciprocal activities at the refuge and in Yonkers which step youth up in conservation understanding and involvement. In 2015, the partnership received additional funding to build pollinator gardens and a mini-refuge near Yonkers' School 13, enabling nature study to be incorporated into the K-8 curriculum where it was previously restricted to the after-school involvement of high school students; and to expand efforts to include the city of Newburgh, NY. These efforts are

Groundwork

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

Groundwork Hudson Valley

creating urban oases for hundreds of urban residents, engaging students and residents in conservation stewardship, and building the next generation of conservation stewards.

Key to this partnership has been the participation of local residents in the planning, construction and restoration of sites within their community. This model, achieved by Groundwork's grassroots involvement, allows the Service to foster a stewardship ethic among urban audiences by creating or restoring locally accessible, wildlife-friendly parks that are desired, appreciated, and cared for by the neighborhoods in which they are built. Direct engagement, combined with the opportunity for refuge visits, allows residents to experience conservation issues on a regional scale, while also providing access to expansive natural areas lacking in the urban environment. Similarly, the 360-degree learning model, by which individuals first apply conservation skills in their community and then extend these concepts in refuge visits, 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 wildlife conservation program. Under the initiative, the Service is striving to make wildlife conservation connections in urban areas.

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.