

Student helps inmates restore greater sage-grouse habitat

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By Maegan Murray, WSU Tri-Cities

CONNELL, Wash. – Education has cultivated Gretchen Graber’s growth as an environmental scientist, so teaching inmates to raise sagebrush to restore habitat for the greater sage-grouse seemed like a natural offshoot.

In November, her students at the Coyote Ridge Corrections Center in Connell will transport 20,000 plants they grew to a site near Wenatchee, Wash., to help rebuild some of the bird’s shrub-steppe habitat burned by wildfire.

See a video about the work at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mBObDj8lZWs>:



Story: <https://news.wsu.edu/2015/10/28/ws-student-helps-inmates-restore-greater-sage-grouse-habitat/#.VkTRKL8nkhF>

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Nurturing skills, restoration

Since May, Graber has taught inmates basic horticulture, botany and sustainable practices using what she has learned as a master's student in environmental science at Washington State University Tri-Cities. She also manages the native plant greenhouse on campus while serving as horticulture labs instructor.

"Through the program, inmates learn not only about what it takes to grow sagebrush, but also the responsibility that people have for protecting and supporting the local environment," Graber said.

As the plants grew, she also has seen personal growth among the inmates.

"They feel like they are doing something positive for the community and nature," she said. "It's making a difference to the well-being of the inmates, as well as providing restorative justice."

"I'm learning horticulture skills and how to grow native plants," said inmate Kevin Bowen. "I would like to make it into a permanent career. If not, it would be a hobby and I would get a greenhouse."

"The main benefit is just knowing how to grow plants from seed to maturity," said inmate Brian Younce. "If something bad happened in the world and you had to grow your own food, then I feel I now have the skills to grow gardens and feed people."

Network of partners

Graber was hired by the nonprofit Institute for Applied Ecology (IAE) in Corvallis, Ore., to work with the inmates at Coyote Ridge after both organizations joined with Sustainability in Prisons project staff at Evergreen College to ensure a future for the greater sage-grouse. The IAE had partnered with the U.S. Bureau of Land Management to assist with habitat restoration following the fires.

Conversion of shrub-steppe lands to agriculture, invasion of noxious weeds and fire have depleted the native environment in the Pacific Northwest. As a result, greater sage-grouse numbers have dwindled, causing concern for its future.

"The greater sage-grouse use the shrub-steppe habitat for raising young, for protection and as the main food source," Graber said. "When you start removing the main food source for any animal, you are going to see a domino effect throughout the ecological food chain."

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Propagating the benefits

But the effects of the restoration project also are far reaching.

The Sustainability in Prisons project “reduces idleness, and there are lower infraction rates,” said Dorothy Trainer, sustainability liaison at Coyote Ridge. “When inmates get out of prison, they have a science background and could start their own horticulture business or a garden.”

And the work helps local industry, Graber said.

“If organisms are listed as an endangered species, restrictions start to happen, which can have an impact on private industries that utilize this shrub-steppe area for their business,” she said. “With this project, everyone wins.”

And she herself has benefited.

“Any time you can impact someone’s life for the better through education, I’m all for it,” Graber said. “WSU Tri-Cities gave me the skills to enhance my work in environmental science. I’m using those same skills to encourage these guys to succeed in their own lives.”

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WSU Tri-Cities student Gretchen Graber.

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