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Why Grow Sagebrush Seedlings in Prisons?



August 11, 2016

Photo: Jessie Brothers sows sagebrush seed with the inmate crew at Snake River Correctional Institution in Idaho. In 2016, SRCI is growing 40,000 sagebrush seedlings, which will be planted on BLM land to improve wildlife habitat and rangeland.

Ask an Expert: Jessie Brothers, ecological education coordinator and Great Basin sagebrush project coordinator with the Institute for Applied Ecology

Story by Brianna Randall, photos by Stacy Moore/Jessie Brothers

<http://www.sagegrouseinitiative.com/grow-sagebrush-seedlings-prisons/>

What is the “sagebrush project”?



Inmates at Idaho State Correctional Center water and care for 60,000 sagebrush and bitterbrush seedlings.

It's a sister project to the [Sustainability in Prisons Project](#), which brings science and nature into prisons. The sagebrush project teaches inmates how to seed and grow a variety of sagebrush species, which then get planted on BLM lands to improve the ecosystem. It's funded by Seeds of Success, the national native seed collection program led by the [Bureau of Land Management](#). The project started in 2014 with 20 inmates at one prison in Oregon. This year, we've expanded to 175 inmates growing sagebrush in 11 prisons across 6 states.

How do the inmates grow the plants?

Each prison has between 3 and 10 inmates who volunteer for the project. They seed in the spring, and then they are in charge of thinning, fertilizing, and watering the plants throughout the summer. In the fall, select inmates go out to plant the seedlings, which are usually about 4-6 inches tall by then. It's amazing to see their dedication—some inmates spend 5 hours per day working with the plants.

What kind of results have you seen from the project?



This sagebrush seedling, sowed in April 2016, is the average size of a plant grown by inmates.

We have a 85-95% success rate on germination. This year, inmates planted a total of 390,000 plants in containers. Depending on the capacity of the prison, inmates are in charge of between 6,000 to 60,000 seedlings. The seeds are collected by BLM botanists directly from the place where the shrubs will later be planted. This ensures that the plants are well-adapted to each specific site.

BLM monitors the sites so we can adapt our program. They found that plants grown in 10-inch cones do the best in the field, so now we're growing all the seedlings that way. We've also learned that planting the seedlings later in the fall yields better survival rates, since the sagebrush get more water naturally and the soil temperatures are lower.

Does growing sagebrush help the inmates?

It's incredible to see what the inmates are getting out of it. Studies have shown the benefits of people connecting with nature: less anger, more relaxation and happiness. In prison, it's hard to



Inmates at Idaho State Correctional Center water and care for 60,000 sagebrush and bitterbrush seedlings.

have that connection. This project not only gives them access to the natural world, it also fosters an ethic of responsibility and helps the inmates build trust in their community.

We give certificates out to participants, and they're so proud—it's almost like a diploma for some of them. Once they're successful at growing plants, it gives them the confidence to take on even more. Some are getting garden programs started to provide vegetables for local food banks or their own institutions. Others are writing grants to continue sustainability work.

Can you share a few stories from the participants?

We had a former scientist in the system who didn't leave his cell for three years. When the sagebrush project started, he began working on the plants and it changed his outlook on life completely. It rebooted his whole reason for living.

One girl in South Boise Prison requested a room switch when a room with a window became available so that she could look out at the sagebrush. Last time I was there, she told me that she'd seen a sage grouse outside her window one morning! She was so excited to tell me the story—seeing the bird and being around the plants has changed her perspective on the world around her.



Select inmates have the opportunity to participate in planting the seedlings on BLM land each fall.

How does this project benefit the sagebrush sea?

Planting these seedlings helps hundreds of species, along with many people who live and work on the range. We teach this to the participating inmates through a monthly lecture

series, which features experts on everything from soil health to wildlife. Though the sage grouse is the iconic animal on the range, the benefits of restoring sagebrush on the landscape goes beyond just the bird.

Will the project continue?

Most definitely. Other prisons are interested, which is great. We're hoping to add more states and institutions in 2017 to restore even more sagebrush habitat.

Meet the Expert

Where do you live?

My home is Corvallis, Oregon. I feel lucky to live in such a special place, only an hour's drive from both the mountains and the ocean.

Tell us a bit about your background.

I have experience in marketing and communications as well as in natural resources. I used to volunteer with Audubon before this position became available. I also teach students about aquatic ecology and habitat restoration, and lead hands-on field trips.



1 No stranger to adventure, Jessie enjoys rock climbing, hiking, and canyoneering.

How do you spend your free time?

Outdoor adventures are my favorite! I love rock climbing, hiking, and boating. I recently received my whitewater raft guide and swift water rescue certification through Oregon State University, and I'm currently taking a canyoneering course to learn how to safely rappel down waterfalls. Wildflowers are my other hobby. I enjoy taking photos and pressing flowers to help keep a record of how the landscape is changing and evolving over time.