



These prison inmates are saving the Earth as they serve their time.

May 23, 2016  By Erin Canty  

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It's a big day for these turtles. After rehabilitation, they're healthy, happy, and getting released back into the wild.

The 23 endangered western pond turtles swam away with much fanfare after successfully receiving treatment for a disease that caused their shells to deteriorate.

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GIFs via Oregon Zoo/YouTube.

These vulnerable animals were able to make a triumphant return to the water thanks in large part to a unique conservation effort at Larch Corrections Center.

That's right — residents of the Vancouver, Washington, minimum security facility essentially ran a small hospital for the turtles as they recovered.

They delivered basic care and provided minor treatments. And after all their hard work, the men were able to attend the release, and witness their patients' return to the river.



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Efforts like this are possible through Washington's Sustainability in Prisons Program.

It began in 2003 as a pilot project between Cedar Creek Corrections Center and Evergreen State College. Cedar Creek was looking to go green, and had already launched gardening, compost, and recycling projects. Around the same time, a professor at Evergreen, Dr. Nalini Nadkarni, was looking to work with inmates to study forest mosses, which desperately needed to be replenished.

The two projects crossed paths and within five years, the partnership grew and expanded to become the Sustainability in Prisons Program (SPP).

The program has now expanded to every corrections facility in Washington, with most boasting anywhere from eight to 12 projects on site, including gardening classes, dog training programs, composting and recycling initiatives, even environmental literacy courses and lectures.



SPP guest lecturer Rus Higley of the Marine Science and Technology Center at Highline College observes a red octopus with a student. Photo by Liliana Caughman, used with permission from the Sustainability in Prisons Project.

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The program's partnerships with zoos along with local and national fish and wildlife departments have led to many successful conservation efforts.

Incarcerated individuals at Cedar Creek Corrections Center learned about beekeeping and even became certified as apprentice beekeepers. The men in the program learned fundamentals and how to build and maintain colonies and even how to manufacture lotions and lip balms from beeswax.



Entomologist Sam Hapke (center) trains inmates to become beekeepers. Photo by Benj Drummond via Sustainability in Prisons Project, used with permission.

In a partnership with the Bureau of Land Management, **inmates at Coyote Ridge Corrections Center are growing sagebrush, a woody shrub, to restore habitats for the sage-grouse, a local bird that relies on the plant for survival.** The plants the inmates raise in the facility's nursery will be planted in central Washington.

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A conservation technician tends to the sagebrush nursery. Photo by Jeff Clark, BLM, used with permission from Sustainability in Prisons Project.

The women at the Mission Creek Corrections Center built a facility to breed and raise Taylor's checkerspot butterflies. The creatures were once fairly common in the Pacific Northwest, but have experienced rapid decline since 2001.



Photo by [USFWS Endangered Species/Flickr](#).

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Mission Creek partnered with the Oregon Zoo (which created the first Taylor's checkerspot program) and the Washington Department of Fish & Wildlife to release 2,500 butterflies into the wild each year onto restored prairies on the Puget Sound. Together, the Mission Creek and Oregon Zoo facilities have released more than 17,000 butterflies.



An inmate feeds a butterfly honey water from a Q-tip. Photo by Benj Drummond and Sara Joy Steele, used with permission from Sustainability in Prisons Project.

And though it's too early to track recidivism rates, the program already has plenty of success stories.

"The program is getting mature enough that folks are starting to release from prison and enroll in the Evergreen State College and other academic institutions," said Kelli Bush, SPP program manager.

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But SPP doesn't only benefit the incarcerated individuals who learn new skills and gain sense of pride for a job well done.

It also helps the research professionals and project partners — and not just with their sustainability efforts. Because many of them are interacting with the correctional system for the first time, it's often a learning experience for everyone.



Biologist Stefani Bergh (left) talks about western pond turtle care with SPP program coordinator Sadie Gilliom and two of Larch's newest turtle technicians. Photo by Carl Elliott, used with permission from Sustainability in Prisons Project.

"[Science and research professionals] are interacting with incarcerated individuals and gaining a human perspective on issues that are typically outside their scope," Bush said. "And so you really see just really beautiful exchanges between these two groups ... I think it's changing perspectives about who's incarcerated and what incarcerated individuals are capable of."

The model has been so successful, it's catching on across the country.

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"Other states have begun modeling programs on the work here in Washington, including really great work being done by Oregon ... Ohio, Maryland, Utah," Bush said. "So it's kind of all over the nation now. "



SPP and Department of Corrections staff members (left) join turtle technicians at a release in 2014. Photo via Sustainability in Prisons Project, used with permission.

Whether it's an injured turtle or someone behind bars, an opportunity to change can be hard to come by.

But with proper rehabilitation and lots of support, both can return home and find success.

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Watch the pond turtles and their keepers mark the end of their recovery in this short [video](#) from the Oregon Zoo.



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