



A sagebrush sea change from behind barbed wire

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For some Americans, sagebrush is so ubiquitous it is forgotten — always in the background of the classic Westerns but somehow never looked at.

Until now.

Millions of acres of sagebrush land, managed mostly by the federal government because nobody else originally wanted it, have become a target for the largest, most ambitious habitat conservation effort in American history. The breadth of public-private, federal-local and other cross-management cooperation is so wide, even prison inmates in the West are sowing sagebrush seeds; and they are all doing this to save the greater sage grouse, a bird smaller than a turkey that has become a measuring stick for an entire disappearing ecosystem.

Before touching down at the airport in Spokane, Washington, I can see sagebrush mingling with the mostly grass fields separating the runways. I came to eastern Washington to visit the largest prison in the state, where a half-dozen inmates have mixed BLM organic materials with scientific education to generate 20,000 growing sagebrush plants in a small courtyard of their medium and minimum security facility.

There are almost two dozen different types of sagebrush ecosystems in 11 western states, between the coastal ranges of the Pacific and the Rocky Mountains. Like Spokane in eastern Washington, the areas are semi-arid, and both cold in the winter and hot in the summer. Where there is sagebrush, the sage grouse has historically lived. The bird that the Lewis and Clark Expedition called “the Heath Cock or cock of the Plains” once numbered in the several millions, as opposed to the 200,000 estimated today.

“Have you ever heard of the sage grouse?” I asked my cab driver from the airport.

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“Sage?” he replied.

“Sage grouse—it’s a bird,” I explained.

“No — it’s in Spokane?” the driver asked.



See video at

<https://www.facebook.com/BLMOregon/videos/1214727435215720/>

Not all Americans—especially those of us flocking towards large cities—know of the sage grouse and its distinctive mating dance that is mimicked in Native American ceremonial dance by all the tribes within the bird’s historic range.

It lives in the sagebrush sea, as it was often referred to by former Secretary of the Interior Sally Jewell, an area so massive it took generations to realize it was

evaporating as urbanization, ranching and energy development moved in.

The bird’s sustenance derives from the sagebrush, it hides its eggs underneath it, and every spring, if possible, it returns to the same sagebrush mating ground, or lek.

Scientists generally have agreed that as the sage grouse goes, so could go the pygmy rabbit, pronghorn elk, golden eagle, mule deer and countless other animals also reliant on the same habitat.

At Coyote Ridge Corrections Center, about 90 minutes southwest of Spokane, inmate Keven Bowen is all but totally consumed with growing healthy sagebrush root systems. Not long ago, he requested to move cells so that his small window looked out onto the 40-foot-long by 10-foot-wide greenhouse that provides shelter for the young plants.

When I spoke to him, he was using a small wooden stick to check all 20,000 of the 10-inch-long ‘cone-tainers’ for a tough soil buildup at the top that was preventing water from soaking the roots.

Thanks to Bowen’s attention, every single plant under the open-air greenhouse with a clear plastic roof was clearly thriving, each with an inch or two of growth above their black cone homes.

“They’re all taking off now,” said Bowen after telling me about the rough weather they got when sowing in late May.

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Work just like this is also being done at the largest prisons in Oregon and Idaho, among others, as the successful program has more than doubled since 2015.

The [Institute for Applied Ecology](#), the nonprofit that is helping the BLM manage the growing of sagebrush, now has programs running at 11 correctional facilities across six western states.



A network of courtyards connects the numerous buildings at the Coyote Ridge Correctional Facility, Washington state's largest prison, Sept. 8, 2015. Photo by Jeff Clark, BLM

The executive director for the institute, Tom Kaye, said combining nonprofit expertise with BLM public land and department of corrections labor has been a success so far. "We're able to complete this circle of collecting the right seed, propagating it well and putting it on the right landscape to maximize our success on habitat restoration," said Kaye.

The 11 prisons in 2016 produced about 319,000 sagebrush plants. In 2017, the program intends to deliver 445,000 sagebrush plants grown specifically to thrive in their local environment, whether that be in Idaho, Montana, Nevada, Oregon, Utah or Washington. But this program is all about quality, not necessarily quantity, according to BLM staffers.

Peggy Olwell, who leads the BLM plant conservation program, said often times there are no large-scale growers who provide sagebrush, and if they do, it isn't necessarily a good fit for every environment.

"Sagebrush does better when you get the local material," said Olwell. "That's one of the reasons we're doing it this way."

Everything from the amount of nutritional content and toxicity in the leaves, to when the plant flowers and the insects come are all additional factors for selecting local seed, said several BLM wildlife biologists working or assisting with the prison project.

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Inmates at Coyote Ridge have a multitude of work opportunities—they make children’s toys for



charity, mattresses for college dormitories and frozen burritos for the state’s school system—and most jobs earn \$.35 an hour. The sagebrush program is unique, though, because it requires the completion of the prison’s conservation curriculum and it is the only job that gets inmates outside working to grow a living thing.

About 20,000 sagebrush plants, specifically sown to survive in the central Washington climate, grow in their makeshift greenhouse inside the security fences for the state’s biggest prison, Sept. 8, 2015. Photo by Jeff Clark, BLM

“Mr. Bowen and Mr. Le, they’d spend all

day out here if I let ‘em — ain’t that right?” asked Tom Townsend, the towering construction and maintenance supervisor overseeing the sagebrush work crew at the expansive prison complex.

Townsend told me how he had to remove inmates from the work crew who goofed off while watering the plants, and how the work is not for everyone.

“It takes a special kind of person — they actually have to care about what they’re doing,” he added.

Prior to taking the Seeds for Success conservation course sponsored by the [Sustainability in Prisons Project](#)—a joint endeavor by Evergreen State College and Washington State Department of Corrections—inmate Hai Le was another unaware American when it came to the link between sagebrush and sage grouse.

“That’s the reason we’re doing this, to keep (greater sage grouse) off the endangered list,” Le told me.

In September of 2015, citing “an unprecedented conservation partnership across the western United States,” the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service [withdrew the greater sage grouse](#) as a candidate species for listing under the Endangered Species Act.

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There are other measurements that make this program a success, but they are harder to quantify. Does growing plants help foster a more peaceful prison environment? Can caring for a living plant help nurture the rehabilitation of the incarcerated?



Inmates at Coyote Ridge Correctional Facility tend to the 20,000 sagebrush plants they are growing for the BLM, Sept. 8, 2015. Photo by Jeff Clark, BLM

Almost everyone I spoke to with exposure to this program told me it was a “win-win,” “two-fold” or “mutually beneficial” effort.

But it was the inmates who articulated it the best.

Jerome Watson, a self-described Seattle city kid with no green thumb experience other than weeding his mother’s lawn as a youngster, said he felt “blessed” to have a prison job that got him literally outside what can be an intense living environment.

“It’s nice to be outside, not in the melee of everything,” he told me.

“It’s a stress-free environment,” echoed another inmate, Ronald Wisner, gesturing to the plants and canopied area, “and it trickles down to your other relationships.”

good for me, personally,” said Wisner.

Then there is Bowen, the group-promoted leader, who only wishes he could actually plant the sagebrush at their future home on BLM-managed land.

“It’ll be cool to see ‘em—like a picture or something—when they’re planted,” he said, one of the few moments he paused to look up at me while working.

And what a photograph that could be: greater sage grouse lurching about, as only they do, among the sagebrush grown by environmentalists at America’s correctional institutions.

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“The empathy, in taking care of the planet, is