

Projects: In Focus 2

Sustainability in Prisons Project

Restoring Hope and Habitat:

Prison-based collaborations for ecological conservation in the USA

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The Sustainability in Prisons Project (SPP) is a partnership founded by The Evergreen State College and Washington State Department of Corrections.

SPP's mission is to empower sustainable change by bringing nature, science, and environmental education into prisons.

Programs in all twelve Washington State prisons aim to reduce recidivism while improving human well-being and ecosystem health.



Credit: Alexandra James; early blue violets and technicians

Among the myriad of programs developed and delivered by SPP in Washington State, here we focus on a few dedicated to ecological conservation, specifically the restoration of South Salish lowland prairies. Incarcerated individuals who participate in these programs may find themselves tending plants in a prairie conservation nursery, collecting and processing native plant seeds, or raising endangered Taylor's checkerspot butterflies. Although unique, these programs work collaboratively to restore critical habitat and preserve endangered species.

SPP's Prairie Conservation Nursery at Washington Corrections Center (WCC) grows beds of early-blue violet (*Viola adunca*) for Oregon silverspot butterfly (*Speyeria zerene*) habitat restoration. This endangered butterfly relies on early-blue violet as the host plant for its larvae; without the violets, Oregon silverspot caterpillars would have nothing to eat. Inmates at WCC cultivate nineteen raised beds of early-blue violet and meticulously hand collect the tiny seeds. Each season they deliver more than 3.5 kg of seeds to outside conservation groups who restore critical coastal habitat for the butterfly. The program is a significant contribution to prairie restoration in the U.S. Pacific Northwest and a ray of hope for the Oregon silverspot.



Credit: Ricky Osborne; SPP Technicians collecting seeds in the violet nursery.

At a different facility, Mission Creek Corrections Center for Women (MCCCW), incarcerated technicians contribute to the recovery of another endangered pollinator, the Taylor's checkerspot butterfly. Technicians work directly with this delicate insect, rearing each one from egg to caterpillar. At the caterpillar stage, most of the insects are reintroduced into their native prairie habitat in order to increase wild populations. A few are held back at the facility where technicians watch them complete their life cycle—morphing from caterpillars to pupae, and from pupae to adults.



Credit: Benj Drummond; a technician feeding an adult butterfly.

Ultimately, the technicians breed those adult butterflies to produce more eggs for the next year's reintroduction. In 2018, the incarcerated crew collected an astonishing 11,000 eggs, more than double the previous season's yield!



Credit: Keegan Curry; SPP technicians finding Taylor's checkerspot caterpillars in the wild.

The program at MCCCW is supported by another SPP Prairie Conservation Nursery, this one located at Stafford Creek Corrections Center (SCCC). Incarcerated technicians at SCCC cultivate many species of prairie plants, which will be placed on restoration sites to provide food or shelter for Taylor's checkerspot butterflies in the wild. They also grow English plantain (*Plantago lanceolata*) to feed the Taylor's checkerspot caterpillars at MCCCW.

Mimicking the natural interdependence of plants and pollinators in the wild, these conservation programs share resources and support each other. Fostering new partnerships between incarcerated technicians, academics, corrections staff, and conservation experts, each program cultivates a shared experience in ecological restoration. In addition, social collaboration within and between each program helps to build community among the people and prairie ecosystems of the Pacific Northwest, improving habitat while restoring hope.

For more information:

<http://sustainabilityinprisons.org>