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# Texas urban wildlife program networking success - getting the job done with outside help

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## Abstract

The Urban Wildlife Program of the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department became active in 1993 starting with 1 program leader and 3 urban biologists located in 2 metropolitan areas. Today the program consists of 9 urban wildlife biologists in Dallas/Ft. Worth, Houston, San Antonio, Austin, El Paso, and the Lower Rio Grande Valley area. The challenge for these 9 biologists is to serve over 10 million people in these metropolitan areas. Through networking, and looking outside of the Department to form partnerships, the Urban Wildlife Program has been able to gain momentum in spreading the word to urban residents about wildlife conservation and helping citizens make a difference in their communities. Three programs: Natural Initiatives, Texas Master Naturalist™, and Adult Continuing Education, have helped to successfully link efforts of outside organizations/agencies with the efforts of Texas Parks & Wildlife Department.

Natural Initiatives is a San Antonio program that promotes habitat management practices and sponsors educational outreach activities. The program exists under the umbrella of the Bexar Audubon Society, and includes representatives from several local agencies, organizations, and businesses. Representatives of various organizations/ agencies come together periodically to brainstorm about potential local projects to undertake in order to get the conservation message out. A few accomplishments include: the annual Wildscape Workshop & Yard Tour, the Parade of Homes wildscaped by volunteers, and *Create a Texas Wildscape* brochure developed and distributed locally.

The Texas Master Naturalist™ volunteer program has gained success in 5 Texas cities, and is well on its way to becoming a statewide program. Local citizens interested in receiving 40+ hours of training in natural resources are obligated at the end of their training to return 40 hours to the community by participating in a variety of projects headed up by various agencies/organizations. These volunteers have not only assisted with Department projects, but take on their own projects carrying out our message about wildlife conservation.

Local Independent School Districts (I.S.D.s) and/or universities that offer Continuing Education Classes have provided urban biologists a method of providing outreach to the community with a minimum of effort. The I.S.D.s and universities advertise the classes, register students, and provide the facilities to allow the urban biologist an opportunity to provide a series of detailed courses on habitat management.

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## INTRODUCTION

The Urban Wildlife Program of the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department became active in 1993 starting with 1 program leader and 3 urban biologists located in 2 metropolitan areas. Today, the program consists of 9 urban wildlife biologists serving Dallas/Fr. Worth, San Antonio, Austin, El Paso, and the Lower Rio Grande Valley areas. The challenge for these 9 urban wildlife biologists is to serve > 10 million people in these cities and their surrounding areas. It has been through the success of networking, and looking outside of the Department to form partnerships, that the Urban Wildlife Program has been able to gain momentum in spreading the word to urban residents about wildlife conservation and helping citizens make a difference in their communities. Three programs: Natural Initiative, Texas Master Naturalist™, and adult continuing education have helped to successfully link efforts of outside organizations/agencies with the efforts of the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department.

## NATURAL INITIATIVES PROGRAM

Natural Initiatives is a San Antonio program that promotes habitat management practices and sponsors educational outreach activities. The program exists under the umbrella of the Bexar Audubon Society and includes other representatives of local organizations, agencies, and businesses. San Antonio Parks & Recreation Department, San Antonio school districts, San Antonio water system, Bexar County Master Gardeners, San Antonio Native Plant Society, San Antonio Audubon Society, San Antonio's Environmental Review Team, Shades of Green and The Grove nurseries, and Texas Parks & Wildlife Department are the representatives for this program. These representatives come together periodically to brainstorm about potential local projects to undertake in order to communicate the conservation message. The advantage of this group is that the organizations, agencies, and businesses all have similar goals and the representatives combine their knowledge, resources, and efforts to make things happen locally. Occasionally, when representatives leave the program, new people representing new groups are sought out. This offers the benefit of bringing in new ideas, viewpoints, and challenges to the program.

One accomplishment of the program was creating the Wildscape Workshop and yard Tour, now an annual event (some years, biannual). This full-day event offers speakers on various topics in the morning, and touring wildscaped yards in the afternoon. We invite retail nurseries, which sell native plants, to the morning workshop to encourage people to buy plants discussed in the various presentations. One positive outcome was the development of our state's first certified wildscaped subdivision, The Preserve, resulting from a builder, Destiny Homes, attending 1 of the workshops.

The various Parade of Homes events sponsored

by the local Greater San Antonio Builders Association typically showcase the homes as well as their interior design/decoration. Natural Initiatives took it one step further, and offered builders assistance with designing wildscaped yards to showcase what people can do with their landscapes to make them beautiful and beneficial for wildlife. Typically, we organize volunteers to staff 1 wildscaped yard during the Parade event to provide information to visitors. The event allows us to distribute wildscaping information and visit with the public, but also has the advantage of giving us the opportunity to work with builders and developers.

Natural Initiative also cooperates with Habitat for Humanity. Master Naturalist™ volunteers have since taken on this project to promote the use of more than turf and a few shrubs in the landscapes of these new homes. Volunteers create a wildscaped design for each new home and work with Habitat for Humanity and local wholesale nurseries, which supply and install native plants.

Representatives of Natural Initiatives also saw the need for literature that offered the public more than just another plant list. The *Create a Texas Wildscape* brochure was produced in 1997. Representatives invited wholesale and retail nurseries and a landscape architect to join in this project to develop a brochure that introduced wildscaping, and offered the public a sample landscape design for their yard. Another goal of this project was to create a plant list that would benefit wildlife and encourage plants found in local retail nurseries. This project also created a demand for native plants with both wholesale and retail nurseries.

Originally, when Natural Initiative representatives took on projects, they often staffed them too. A Master Gardener program volunteer established a similar program which focused on the management of natural resources instead of just gardening. As a result, the Master Naturalist™ program was created. Community volunteers work on local natural resource projects and provide conservation education to the public. Natural Initiative representatives, as well as other local professionals from many backgrounds, helped to create the notebook, which is used for the Master Naturalist™ training. Some also serve as speakers during the classes. Natural Initiatives served as one of the original sponsors of the Master Naturalist™ program.

### Texas Master Naturalist™ Program

The Texas Master Naturalist™ volunteer program was initiated in San Antonio in 1996. The program gained success in 4 other Texas cities and is currently being established as a statewide program headed by the Texas Parks & Wildlife Department and the Texas Agricultural Extension Service. Each city, however, has different local sponsors for their area chapter.

Local citizens interested in receiving 40+ hours of training in natural resources are obligated at the end of their training to return 40 service hours to the community by participating in a variety of projects headed up by various agencies/organizations. The

Alamo Area Chapter (San Antonio) offers 2 classes per year and typically graduates approximately 30 Master Naturalists™ per class. These volunteers have not only assisted with Department projects, but take on their own projects in wildlife conservation. The Alamo Area Chapter currently has > 7,000 volunteer service hours recorded. The projects that the Master Naturalist™ volunteers assist with are numerous. They assist schools, agencies, organizations, corporations, and the public with projects or issues involving the conservation or restoration of natural resources, while promoting ecological education for all ages. One project covered a 6,000 square foot area of Bermuda grass into a beautiful wildscaped demonstration garden on public property downtown along the San Antonio Riverwalk. Master Naturalist™ volunteers installed and maintain this demonstration garden open to the public. They were recognized for their efforts with an award from Keep San Antonio Beautiful.

Master Naturalist™ also have been a leading part of the Texas Trails tent at the annual San Antonio Livestock Show & Rodeo, a 16-day event which brings in thousands of people. Information and activity booths were located inside the Texas Trails tent organized and staffed by Master Naturalists™. Displays as well as booths offered habitat management and outdoor classroom information, and offered fun-related activities for all ages. Natural resource information can be introduced to many people, including students or youth attending this annual event. These are just 2 examples that demonstrate how these volunteers benefit their community. The leadership, expertise, and energy offered by the Master Naturalist™ is truly amazing.

## ADULT CONTINUING EDUCATION PROGRAM

Local independent school districts and/or universities that offer adult continuing education classes have provided Texas urban biologist a method of providing outreach to the community with a minimum of effort. The independent school districts and universities advertise the classes, handle registration of the students, and provide the facilities. Urban biologists provide a series of detailed courses on habitat management. The interested student can take one or the entire low-cost course to learn how to transform their backyard into a wildlife haven. In many cases, small donations to state non-game funds have also resulted.

An urban biologist's schedule tends to remain very busy as she/he tries to meet the demands for public speaking engagements while also working on local projects. Initially, the classes were scheduled to offer groups an alternate means of getting information if the biologist was unable to schedule a presentation. Most groups typically meet during set times and days of the month, and usually are unwilling to alter their schedules. However, we found that these classes remain very popular with individuals in the

community who want detailed information about landscaping to attract wildlife. The majority of students attend the complete wildscape series offered through the independent school district and/or adult continuing education program.

The first class offered is the "Basic Wildscaping" class, which is always offered free to the public. It provides students with enough information to get started with wildscaping their properties. Topics of subsequent classes offer more detailed information to the students and include "A Focus on Native Plants," "Landscape Design," "Providing Nestboxes and Bird Feeders," and "Pond Building to Provide Water." The independent school districts and/or universities charge students a small fee for these classes to cover the cost of administration. The courses in the wildscape series are typically offered weeknights.

In addition, we also offer 2 other free classes to the public through the independent school district's adult continuing education program. They are "Attracting Hummingbirds and Butterflies" and "Beginning Birdwatching" and are typically offered during the day. As with all of our classes, habitat conservation and restoration are an underlying theme.

## CONCLUSION

Natural Initiatives, Texas Master Naturalist™, and adult continuing education programs have all benefited Texas urban biologists by providing new methods for communicating conservation information to the public. The first 2 programs mentioned were developed out of necessity, and urban biologists played a key role in their development. A key factor in the success of working together with other agencies, organizations, and businesses is spending time outlining the mission of your group and defining the goals which you wish to reach with your program. This keeps everyone involved on track and can help to define which projects the group undertakes. In the case of the adult continuing education program, it already existed, and it was just a matter of recognizing the opportunity to use this program to the urban biologist's advantage. Because of budget constraints within agencies and organizations, it is beneficial to seek out networking opportunities with other entities willing to create partnerships to work toward common goals.