

The Importance of Wildlife Conservation

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Theodore Roosevelt, the 26th U.S. president, once said, "The wildlife and its habitat cannot speak, so we must and we will..." President Theodore Roosevelt was an advocate for wildlife conservation and played an important part in the early conservation movement. During his presidency, he established many national parks, forests, and game preserves. His actions helped our country focus on wildlife conservation and realize the importance of it. The National Wildlife Federation defines wildlife conservation as "the preservation and protection of animals, plants, and their habitats." ("Understanding Conservation" 1). Wildlife conservation protects biodiversity, protects ecological stability, and ensures that future generations can enjoy our natural world. Wildlife conservation is necessary and it has to start somewhere. So, we can start by sustaining Kentucky's native wildlife.

Kentucky is home to several native wildlife species! According to the "Keeping it Wild!" packet, Kentucky is home to wildlife such as the White-Tailed Deer, Eastern Hellbender, and Monarch Butterflies. Though it may seem that Kentucky has abundant native wildlife, many of them are in danger. In fact, there are 47 threatened and endangered species in Kentucky. ("Keeping it Wild!" 15). There are many factors that cause wildlife to go extinct or become endangered. According to the U.S. Geological Survey, "Habitat loss is the primary cause of higher extinction rates. Other causes include habitat changes, over-exploitation of wildlife for commercial purposes, the introduction of harmful nonnative species, pollution, and the spread of diseases." ("Why Do Animals" 1). Many of these contributing factors to wildlife endangerment and extinction are related to human activities. According to the World Wildlife Fund 2022 Living Planet Report, direct human drivers such as "greenhouse gas emissions from fossil fuel combustion, habitat conversion and degradation from land-use change, pollution and unsustainable harvests, and the introduction of invasive species" have led to wildlife endangerment and extinction. ("Living Planet Report" 64). It's clear that there is a need for wildlife conservation, so it is our responsibility to take action.

To conserve and sustain native wildlife, researchers in Kentucky have been working very hard. Various actions have been taken, with much of it focusing on reintroducing native species to their habitats. Researchers understand that habitats are very important. According to National Geographic, "A habitat is a place where an organism makes its home. A habitat meets all the environmental conditions an organism needs to survive. For an animal, that means everything it needs to find and gather food, select a mate, and successfully reproduce. For a plant, a good habitat must provide the right combination of light, air, water, and soil." ("Habitat" 1). As you can see, a habitat provides things like food, water, and shelter that is necessary for wildlife. Many conservation efforts take the habitat into account. One effort being taken in Kentucky is reversing the decline of mussels in the state. According to the "Keeping it Wild" packet, researchers at the Center for Mollusk Conservation are restoring mussels in experimental stockings at the Big South Fork of Cumberland River. The river once held many mussel species. However, river quality has decreased because of coal mining and the water has become acidic. The creation of dams also prevented mussel migration necessary for reproduction. Recently, researchers restored mussels in Trouble Creek in the river. They chose this creek because it contained gravel, sand, and pebbles that make a good habitat for the organisms. The mussels were placed in the creek and were

seen to be healthy many weeks after the restoration, showing that restoring mussels to their habitats is possible. ("Keeping it Wild!" 12,13) Other than taking direct action to address wildlife conservation, Kentucky is also working to inform others about the importance of conservation. Conservation districts in every county of the state develop plans that protect the soil and water for the fish and wildlife of the state. ("Keeping it Wild" 2). These efforts being taken by the state are helping us sustain our native wildlife for future generations. It's also helping educate others about the topic and encouraging them to get involved.

Though it seems like biologists and other professionals are mainly involved in conservation efforts, it doesn't mean you can't contribute too. You can help conserve Kentucky's native wildlife in many ways. The Animal Welfare Institute explains "You can write to federal and state officials to encourage them to protect wildlife". You can also "plant native species of plants that can give wild animals food, shelter and a place to raise their family." ("What You Can" 1). You can even join conservation efforts right from your backyard. The "Keeping it Wild " packet, explains that you can help Monarch butterflies during their trip across Kentucky. You can create waystations in your backyard that have milkweed and other pollinator plants. The packet states, "Milkweed (*Asclepias* spp.) is the host plant of monarch caterpillars. Female monarchs will lay their eggs directly onto the milkweed plant. Once the caterpillars hatch, this food source is readily available for them to consume in copious amounts. By providing food sources for adult butterflies and growing caterpillars, your backyard can play an important role in the monarch's journey." ("Keeping it Wild" 9). As you can see, simply adding a few plants to your garden can help you support Monarch Butterflies which are a native species here in Kentucky. Though the state's efforts are appreciable, it's very important to take action to support conservation efforts yourself!

In all, wildlife conservation is very important! Conserving and sustaining Kentucky's natural wildlife is necessary. Every animal and plant plays an important role in an ecosystem. The endangerment or extinction of one species can affect other species and upset the natural balance. Conserving wildlife is also necessary to keep biodiversity found on Earth. Future generations should be able to enjoy our natural world and the incredible species that live in it. As President Roosevelt stated, wildlife cannot speak, so it is our responsibility to uptake conservation efforts. Start your fight for wildlife conservation today!

Works Cited

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