

Corinne Fox

Biodiversity in the Grinnell Community

Overview

Over the course of PGC, one of the things that impacted me the most was the horror of learning how little there is left of native ecosystems like Iowa's formerly grand tallgrass prairies. I wanted to involve both the college and the local community in a CAP to encourage biodiversity in the town.

Goals

My main goal was to hold a seed-swapping event to attract gardeners in the community while also handing out native prairie seeds to encourage people to bring more biodiversity to their garden. In addition, I wanted to do work on campus to aid biodiversity in the form of exploring ways to limit bird collisions with windows and alternatives landscaping practices to glyphosate herbicides. These project ideas had a twofold goal: both to actually encourage more biodiversity on my campus and in my community, and to educate students and community members about why these practices are important. Ultimately, the herbicide portion of the project could not be prioritized. Instead, I incorporated it into the seed-swapping event by bringing information about glyphosate herbicide. The seed-swapping event ended up morphing into a larger informational event about ways to increase biodiversity in the garden.

Journey and Timeline

Project Green Challenge, and even more so the San Francisco summit, were a crazy, busy, wonderful time. Throughout October, I followed every challenge that I could, spending hours researching climate issues and solutions, and coming up with some ideas of my own; while at the summit, I met amazing people and got to hear their stories. But after it was all over, I was a little scared. Suddenly, I realized that I was the one who had to decide where to go, what to do, and how to make my own story.

The first step in my project was to bring other people into it. I talked about my idea for a reporting form for bird collisions to identify problem areas with my professor who was teaching a class about birds. He was really excited by the idea, and made it part of the class' final projects. Alongside Kevin, Abby, and Johanna, who were also excited about the project and really inspired to make it happen. We posted flyers and QR codes linking to the form all over the school and spread the news about the project.

Additionally, I recruited my roommate and friend, Sophia Unzicker, who had been supporting me emotionally throughout the month of October and was eager to get involved in my project. At first, the main task she and I worked on was not very fun. We had a lot of organizations and individual people to reach out to to see if they wanted to be involved in, advertise, or otherwise hear about the seed-swapping event. Some groups were community-based, like the local Poweshiek County Conservation Department and Imagine Grinnell, a grassroots environmental organization. Others were student-led groups and some were individuals in the community who were involved in conservation work. Emily Klein and Jake Hill, respectively the manager and head horticulturist at the Conard Environmental Research Area (CERA), were very helpful. Not only did they provide us with a large amount of prairie seeds harvested at their facility, but they gave us advice about our event and a huge list of contact information for people and groups who might be interested.

The people who ended up agreeing to table at our event were the Poweshiek County Conservation Department and Imagine Grinnell. Jake came over for part of the time to chat. Other groups, especially student groups, agreed to advertise our event on social media, which was very helpful.

While we were finishing up these details, the school newspaper published an article about the window collision project, interviewing me and my groupmates. This was really exciting, since most students at least flip through the paper. Unfortunately (or fortunately, for the birds), the main risk of window collisions is towards migrating birds, whose numbers won't peak in Iowa until late April and early May.

Finally, there was the event itself. We posted advertisements in local shops, on social media, and around the park where our venue was. My mom and sister came up from Saint Louis to help out (and as an excuse to visit me). It was sunny and just the right temperature, we had lots of decorations and arts and crafts activities for kids and adults, and the people who were tabling brought their own informational pamphlets and some more activities. We had a system for the seed-swap itself, although it quickly became clear that the main draw was the promise of information about biodiversity, and, of course, the free prairie seeds. I had a great time. People showed up and were excited to get seeds. Many stuck around for a while to talk about biodiversity to me, Sophia, or the other people tabling. I got to speak with some very cool people, including the people from the Conservation Department and Imagine Grinnell.

Challenges

I was definitely concerned about my capacity to get people involved in my project. I am a first year college student in a completely new community. I had a significant amount of anxiety over emailing people who I had never met in real life and had no connections with while asking for so much. It was helpful to draft out the messages beforehand and clearly indicate that they could choose the degree to get involved in the event. Sophia was super helpful with contacting people as well. She took on some of the burden, proofreading my emails and sending a lot of her own.

The timing wasn't always ideal for the project, either. I was still adjusting to life in college, and I was surprised by how suddenly I could get bogged down with schoolwork. Additionally, the school breaks caused me to be away from campus at inconvenient times. It took months to arrange a meeting with the people at CERA, and the event itself had to be pushed back to after Spring Break in April. Once again, it was really helpful to have another person on board, and Sophia and I were able to find time between our schedule to work on logistics.

The day of the event itself seemed like it would have perfect weather- sunny with a high of 67. Unfortunately it was unusually windy that day, which might not seem like a big deal, but unusually windy in Iowa means that nothing would stay put on the picnic tables, from tablecloths to baskets of seeds to every pamphlet that we and the people tabling had brought. Luckily, my mother was very quick-thinking and had brought twine and tape to strap everything down.

Impact

I was really happy with the impact of my project. Its aim was to impact my local community, and I think that it achieved that. People didn't show up to the event in overwhelming numbers, but lots of people did come, and most of them were very excited about getting the information and resources to grow their own prairie. I talked to several people about their project ideas- one lady was hoping to fill in the space near a new railroad bridge and wanted to try out wildflowers, and another had a vision of filling in a section of her yard. One adventurous college student even wanted to try to grow the prairie seeds in a pot to see how it would turn out. The local organizations who tabled with us got a lot of names on their email lists, and were able to talk about their work and the resources they had available to people in the community, like an energy efficiency kit that could be checked out from the local library.

The window collision reporting form is a project still in development, but the article on it in the school paper brought some focus onto it. I received a very nice email from a faculty member who thanked us for doing something about the issue, as it was something he had noticed in the new, window-covered building that he works in. I brought information and examples of methods to prevent window collisions to the seed-swapping event as well, which several people were interested in.

Ongoing Potential

The seed-swap was a success. Jake and Emily at CERA mentioned that it could become an annual event, and I think it has a lot of potential to evolve and expand. Maybe next year, it can be in an indoor venue, with more or different groups sharing information about biodiversity in the Grinnell

community. I learned so much about planning and running an event through this process, so the next time I do it, it will be even better. Some of the people who came by asked what group was putting on the event, and a couple students who stopped in were interested in setting up and running a similar event.

I'm going to stick with my collision reporting form as well. Birds are wonderful creatures that I am especially passionate about protecting, and since windows are the second leading man-made killer of birds, there is a lot of change needed. I plan on doubling down on advertising the form during peak migration season in the late spring and fall. With enough data, I will write a proposal to either the Facilities Management team on campus or the Student Government Association to come up with a plan on how to stop the problem, likely with temporary decals on certain windows during peak migration season, but potentially encouraging bird-safe windows to be used in future construction projects.