

The Proposed Idea

The Wild Ones' planning for an April 4th presentation by Doug Tallamyⁱ has sparked an idea:

We are proposing that we adopt Dr. Tallamy's idea for a homegrown national park, and realize it here in Elgin at the city level – position ourselves as a model city.

With growing public awareness of disruptions to our way of life, more and more people are wondering what to do. Mounting severe weather, polarized politics, food insecurity, increasing migration, diminishing supplies of safe water, and more – these problems feel overwhelming.

Where does one start to *do something?* to make a difference?

The Vision

This proposal advocates for a profound but simple change to address an underlying cause of these crises that we're experiencing. That cause is **our disconnection**

from the natural world and our place within it;
from our neighbors, our communities, our best selves;
from the land and production of our food;
from our own power, which we have delegated;
from our wildness, our creativity, our joy.

In his bookⁱⁱ, Dr. Tallamy puts his finger on this underlying problem: He writes that we have become so disconnected from the natural world that most people feel nature is something apart from us, something that is somewhere else, not where we are. We have moved ourselves out of reach of the larger Life of which we are part; we have believed in our mastery and wisdom in taming nature; and we have been inured to our folly. Starting in our yards, we can begin to learn what we need to know.

Bringing native plants into our yards re-establishes habitat for the wildlife that we're pushing to extinction. It builds corridors to connect isolated bits of habitat into a size that can sustain the species living there. And as we incorporate into our landscapes the plants that once thrived here, we come to know them. We learn to appreciate the many gifts they offer. And getting to know them, we come to value them. We make our way toward knowing our place in nature, toward releasing our old story of separation from it.

Dr. Tallamy has refined his ideas over decades of studying insects as a research professor of entomology. As his understanding of the relationship between insects and the plants they depend on deepened, he formulated this concept:

Replace half of the lawn we currently maintain in our yards with native plants. This would provide habitat in which struggling birds and other wildlife might survive our transition to a re-connected existence.

This repurposed land (landscapes of contributing plants where there was just grass) would add more acres of habitat than the total of our ten largest national parks. It would bring the vitality, variety, and health benefits of living systems to each of us where we can enjoy, observe, wonder about, and be inspired by them.

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In addition, this habitat would provide ecological functions to the community. These services have been lost through our fragmentation of “the life support systems that keep living things, including us, fed, healthy, buffered from severe weather, and supplied with plenty of clean air and water...”ⁱⁱⁱ

Tallamy’s wise ideas provide us a way forward – a simple, accessible, hands-on, immediate, effective, satisfying, profound and powerful way to begin. This way forward is infinitely variable, exceedingly flexible, stimulating and engaging. It allows everyone’s creativity, and appreciates everyone’s muscle.

It’s not something that can be done alone. There is much cooperation in creating habitat on this scale. Re-connection occurs as people cooperate to remove the invasive buckthorn and honeysuckle from their neighborhood, as they prepare the earth for these returning plants, trade seeds, ideas, plant starts and enthusiasm. There is a commonality in what they’re about. Like the old barn-raisings and quilting bees, they come back together to restore what’s been lost – from the land and from our communities.

This is not a program to be put in place for a year or two. Rather, it is a vision for how to do something that immediately addresses the issue of disconnection and begins to restore our connection to land and life, to each other and to our future. This simple idea holds the seeds of profound change in which anyone who gets inspired, or even vaguely interested, can participate. And if we believe the quantum physicists, this re-connection affects the disconnection we’re living out everywhere; re-connecting in this sphere builds momentum that adds to re-connection of the whole.

With patient intent, momentum will build, more organizations and individuals will be inspired to learn and join. People’s creativity will surprise and delight them, elaborating the simple idea as it spreads and branches. Ideas catch fire, and the fire of this idea can be part of a transformation that’s already underway. Elgin can become a model for creating homegrown habitat.

As more and more people catch on to why this is important, to why the difference it makes is so profound, Elgin could become a model for those who find a similar vision. And twenty or thirty years from now, when asked if they’re familiar with Elgin, people might say, ‘Oh, that’s the city that started our citywide corridors,’ just as people used to identify us with Elgin watches.

James and Deborah Fallows, in their best-selling book *Our Towns*,^{iv} list 10.5 characteristics of a successful town. In addition to citizens’ having a clear idea of what their town is about and accomplishing things together locally, successful towns have big plans for ‘impossible dreams.’

Sharing a vision binds us together.

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Ideas for Getting Started

Plant two or three centrally located, high-traffic grass-to-habitat models to inspire and educate.

Create a presentation designed to interest people in exploring this possibility further.

Identify three to five interested citizens to get started.

Connect with everybody who might have an interest in re-connection, habitat restoration, native plants, birds, other wildlife, mitigating climate crisis, health and well-being, community planning...

Initiate a citywide Big Read of *Nature's Best Hope* by Douglas Tallamy

Add properties with existing habitat to a citywide map.

Integrate the city map with The Conservation Foundation's mapping project.

Establish some beginning guidelines.

Design a logo.

Talk about Start in Your Yard to everyone, every day. Envision, dream, imagine an Elgin where the residents and the life-filled landscape are vital, healthy and happy.

Know that anywhere we start our journey of re-connection
leads us into the profound changes that beckon.

ⁱ Dr. Douglas Tallamy is a professor of entomology at the University of Delaware. The Wild Ones organization in Northern Kane County, along with numerous organizations and individuals, sponsored his presentation scheduled for April 4 in Elgin at The Centre, in conjunction with Elgin's Green Expo. This was, of course, cancelled in the face of the pandemic.

ⁱⁱ Douglas W. Tallamy, *Nature's Best Hope: A New Approach to Conservation That Starts in Your Yard*, Timber Press, 2020.

ⁱⁱⁱ Tallamy, page 106

^{iv} James Fallows and Deborah Fallows, *Our Towns: A 100,000-Mile Journey into the Heart of America*, Pantheon Books, 2018.