



Audubon comes to the inner city

Group plans to open 1,000 centers in low-income areas

By Charisse Jones
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NEW YORK - Nature exists in the concrete jungle - and the National Audubon Society wants to help people connect with it.

That could be by bird-watching around a former city reservoir or listening for the call of a red-winged black bird in the heart of Brooklyn.

So the nearly century-old society plans to open 1,000 nature centers by 2020 in economically depressed rural and urban areas across the country.

The first will open April 26 in Brooklyn. "It's all about building a broader constituency for conservation," Audubon President Kohn Flicker says. "It's important if people are going to care about the environment that they have some connection with it."

The Audubon Society was named for wildlife painter John James Audubon. It has become one of the most influential environmental groups in the nation, but its 500,000 members are older and whiter than the USA's population.

The nature centers offer exhibits and educational programs about nearby birds, other animals and the environment. The society hopes to attract young people, immigrants and people of color.

"It's going to change us a lot, because we're going to end up having to reflect the communities that we serve," Flicker says. "That's probably the best thing that could happen to us."

Many of Audubon Society's original 35 centers are concentrated in affluent suburbs.

But this latest effort, dubbed 2020 Vision, calls for centers in such areas as:

- A once graffiti-scarred park in East Los Angeles
- A tall grass prairie in a working-class section of Lincoln, Neb.
- A bend of the Rio Grande River in Brownsville, Texas

Fundraising drives are underway for each center, which typically costs up to \$11 million for an education facility, land and operations. In some cases, the society will open a center in existing city or county parks. In other areas, it might buy a parcel of land.

Moving into these areas has caused some adjustments in the way the society does business. When it wanted to involve children in activities at a local park in Los Angeles, the issue was crime. Families had to be assured the 225-acre site was safe before they would send their children.

So the society is spending a year to help clean the park and get rid of graffiti while it sponsors activities such as bird-watching. The center, operating out of a local storefront, is scheduled to open in fall 2003.

The society wants to teach more than 30,000 schoolchildren and others who live within 2 miles of the park about the hummingbirds and coyotes that live there, just minutes from downtown Los Angeles.

"It's a great opportunity, especially for the low-income community, because they can't afford to take their kids to the museum or the zoo," says Elsa Lopez, executive director of Madres del Este de Los Angeles (Mothers of East Los Angeles), a community organization that has worked closely with the Audubon Society. "It's an experience for them to know these people are here. They're here to stay. They're part of the community."

In Brooklyn, the center will be in a refurbished boathouse under Prospect Park, which borders the working class communities of Bedford-Stuyvesant and Crown Heights as well as upscale Park Slope.

The 540-acre park has long been a destination for joggers, children and young couples. But only the most enthusiastic bird-watchers would have been aware of 200 species of birds passing by on migratory paths, or the bullfrogs and bats that live there.

"It's going to make a whole different sense of pride to Brooklyn," says Tupper Thomas, president of the Prospect Park Alliance, a coalition of community organizations.

Many don't even know there are myriad bird species in the vast park, she says. "People from Brooklyn are even more surprised than people from Nevada." In south Seattle, more than 70 ethnic groups live near the 399-acre Seward Park, where an Audubon Center will open.

The park was a center of gang activity a decade ago, but it became safer as the city began to stage track meets and ethnic festivals there.

Community advocates say they would like to see the park become more of a natural refuge to be enjoyed by the Somalian, Cambodian and Vietnamese immigrants who live nearby in densely packed apartment buildings.

"It's the incredible jewel of Seattle," says Mardi Roberts, president of Friends of Seward Park. "We have a lot of low-income housing areas, and it's just a real opportunity to learn about nature."



Flocking to Brooklyn: Artist Carol May puts final touches on a new Audubon-sponsored urban education center in New York.