

HOW TO TALK TO NEIGHBORS ABOUT HABITAT

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It is usually pretty easy to talk to your hunting buddy about habitat. Your vocabulary is similar, your goals are similar, and your motives are similar. But how do you start up a conversation with your neighbor about expanding quality habitat if they don't hunt what you do, or maybe they don't hunt at all? I am going to look at a couple different scenarios and offer some suggestions.



The Farmer

Farmers own or lease a lot of land, especially in southern Michigan. The majority of farmers aim to utilize the land at sustainable and responsible levels, taking care to protect the soil and water within their control. Many farmers also enjoy hunting, or are at least open to it as a management technique to reduce crop damage.

[The Hunter Access Program](#) is a way where farmers can receive money from DNR to open up parts of their land to hunting. Along with this rental payment, the DNR will also provide funds to improve the wildlife habitat on the property. For farmers who do not hunt, and are looking to make a little extra cash on the side, this may be a great option!

For farmers looking to enhance their soil and water quality, or at least provide barriers to help protect the water quality, there are [farm bill programs](#) and technical support from DNR Private Lands programs as well as [Farm Bill \(habitat\) Biologists](#) that will supply money to install, and then pay rental payments on the installment acres. These habitat enhancements can be structured in such a way to minimize, or even eliminate, extra work on the part of moving around equipment to plant and treat the crops planted.

For farmers looking to maximize their profit, these same farm bill programs may provide value in the less desirable parts of their property. The strips by forest blocks, or in very dry/wet areas may provide more income for farmers in a farm bill program rather than in production.

There is some good research being conducted that illustrates significant value in grazing cattle on native prairies. One such project from [Michigan State University can be read here](#). Findings show that increased protein and reduced food source management are direct benefits of managing native grasslands for grazing.

Pollinator habitat to increase apiary (bee) populations is an area of concern in many circles, but especially in the agriculture community. The wildflower found in a healthy and diverse native prairie provide the nectar bees and other pollinators need to thrive.

The Wildlife Viewer

Native grasslands provide an excellent source of the food and habitat qualities that many song birds (especially many that are classified as threatened here in Michigan) and butterflies need. A common critter that is familiar to the majority of naturalists is the Monarch Butterfly. The Monarch has seen a drastic decline of about 90% in the past decade! Providing grassland habitats with milk weed is one way to help this struggling population. Other butterflies and the increasingly threatened bee population also benefit greatly from the diversity of wildflowers in well managed native prairies.

The Environmentalist

Between increased diversity in wildlife and insect species and the addition of soil health and water quality, you have a lot to work with when talking with someone who manages their land with the intention of improving their local ecosystem. In addition to what has already been discussed above, I cannot reiterate the value to water quality native grasslands add. Native grasses and wildflowers have very long roots. These roots help get water deeper down into the soil, increasing the filtration they go through prior to ending up in a body of water, or in the groundwater. These roots also help bring the water down into the soil, rather than running off the top. Having grasslands as buffer strips on either side of a stream, ditch or river, will add incredible filtration to any runoff before it enters the water. Nitrates, dirt, and other forms of water hitchhikers will be filtered out before it enters the water body if these native plants are present. They also help to hold and trap any excess soil that may be running off from local farm fields.

The Hunter

Regardless of what the key species is of the hunters preference, native grasslands provide ample sources of food and cover for a whole slew of critters. Pheasants need it for survival, and the more acres of grassland the safer they are from predators, and increased likelihood for recruitment success. Deer use it for fawning cover, bedding cover, and even as a forb source for food. Turkeys use it as an insect source, quails are found in grasslands, and waterfowl use it for nesting and food sources when near a wetland. Native grasses serve as excellent screens for hunters making the trip out to their stands in the fall as well, as plants like switchgrass can get well over 6-7 feet tall.

The best thing you can do when talking to your neighbors about habitat and wildlife is to ask a lot of questions, and feel out where their priorities lie. Then you can find some common ground, or you can come back for a later conversation with more information that is in their interest area.

Any questions, suggestions, ideas of your own, or personal experiences? Email me at amitterling@mucc.org