

Habitat Means Home

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Originally published in *Branches Magazine*.

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One prayer I often say is, "Help me be of service to all that I love." If you love birds, wildflowers, streams, meadows and forests, then you likely appreciate the beauty and abundance of nature. What may not be as obvious — though critically important — is all that is necessary to support diverse and thriving natural habitats: insects to feed those exquisite birds, healthy soil to produce magnificent native wildflowers, upland woods and swamps to house the threatened copperbelly water snake, and forests teeming with trees so the female endangered Indiana Bat can tuck safely under the bark during warm summer months.

One major threat to many species is loss or fragmentation of habitat. Animals are no different from us in that they need food, shelter, water and a place to raise their young. For animals and plants, habitat means home.

As one example, think about the grass lawns in your neighborhood. To a rabbit, bird, opossum, and many other creatures, that perfect green lawn becomes a barren wasteland in winter. There is no protection from predators. No protection from the elements. No shelter. And no food source. In short, there is no viable habitat.

Animals cannot go to the grocery store to pick up extra food supplies during inclement weather. They cannot install elaborate alarm systems to warn of danger. And if a road or a new housing development breaks up their home, it may make it impossible for them to gain access to their food and water supply. It is like having your refrigerator miles away from your kitchen sink.

As we thoughtlessly destroy natural habitats, we lose plants and animals. And as we lose plants and animals, we lose significant sources of knowledge. There is much we can learn from species other than our own. For example: the Indiana Bat, *Myotis sodas*. In the past 25 years, the Indiana Bat population has declined by approximately 50 percent in the United States. It is on both the federal and state endangered species lists.

According to the Indiana Department of Natural Resources, gray bats, like the Indiana Bat, consume an estimated 3,000 insects per feeding (including mosquitos). They eat night-flying insects, helping both humans and crops with pests. They are endangered because tourists and vandals disrupt the bats' winter habitat (caves) and pesticides and tree-cutting interfere with their food sources and summer habitat. White-Nose Syndrome, a fungal infection thought to be spread unwittingly from cave to cave on the clothing of recreational spelunkers, is causing a sharp decline in the bat population. Since healthy Indiana Bats raise just one offspring per year, their future is uncertain.

What might we learn from the bat? Why should we care? Studies of the bat's use of echolocation have led to advances in water craft sonar technology, such as that used in submarines, and may lead to improved navigation skills for humans who are blind. There is also an interest in how bats breed. Bats have complex reproductive capabilities, including delayed ovulation, long-term sperm storage and delayed fertilization. Studies of these creatures may someday provide solutions to human female infertility.

The web of life is fragile. We do not know today what plant or mammal may provide the cure for cancer, or what insect holds the key to some local crop problem. There is no way to fully comprehend all the consequences of our actions when natural habitat is destroyed or impaired. To survive, all species need

habitat. Birds, snakes, insects, worms, butterflies and bats need a home, just as we do. They need trees, native plants, prairie grasslands, shrubs, streams, rivers, ponds, forests, caves, and wetlands.

What can we do? First, learn more. Visit, support or volunteer at wildlife and conservation organizations that care about habitat and how to preserve it. Build bat houses, grow native plants, stay away from caves and don't block their entrances, eliminate or at least start reducing pesticide use, plant trees, preserve wooded areas, and allow natural wetlands to thrive instead of draining them. Encourage your neighborhood, local schools, and place of worship to become wildlife-friendly.

Learn to see the intricate connections between all that exists on this miraculous planet we call home.