

## Salt Lake City should invest in ‘messy-looking’ natural areas

Salt Lake City is growing rapidly. Much of our focus is on building homes and livable communities for humans. We have seen investment in more vertical development, and in city parks that enhance and support quality of life. But soccer fields are not nature, and we need to be thinking equally about preserving and expanding “homes” and habitat for other living things. We must also invest in the “messy-looking” natural areas as well.

The world has witnessed a drastic decline in our pollinator species, including the monarch butterfly, whose western population across North America has dropped more than 80% in 30 years. One key reason for that decline is loss of breeding and overwintering habitat. Monarchs rely on a single species of plant, milkweed, for survival. Habitat that used to be plentiful decades ago no longer exists, as agricultural fields have become subdivisions and commercial properties.

The monarch is the only insect that carries out a two-way migration, traveling up to 3,000 miles to reach overwintering habitat in Mexico or California. They clump together in pine trees to stay warm, living off bodyfat, and in spring migrate back to Texas, Arizona and inland California to find breeding habitat, creating the first generation of the new season. With the smaller western population collapsing at a faster rate, Utahns are at risk for not enjoying monarchs here at all.



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Over the past three years, Salt Lake City created a successful monarch butterfly and pollinator habitat pilot project around the pond at Fairmont Park — the first of its kind for the city. With funding and staff support from the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources (DWR) and the Watershed Restoration Initiative, Utah Friends of Monarchs, Salt Lake City’s Public Lands Department and the DWR collaborated to restore the park’s pond and natural springs and replant many species of native wetland plants. The habitat was immediately successful attracting monarchs, hummingbirds and a variety of bee species, as well as many human admirers.

For residents in the Sugar

House neighborhood, their nearby outdoor environment would have been no more interesting than an expanse of Kentucky bluegrass, and a collection of sport courts. Now, they have access to a thriving natural area buzzing with pollinators and other animals that can coexist well with humans in our urban environment. Neighborhood children can witness butterflies feeding from a milkweed blossom, peer under rocks for caddisflies in the flowing spring water and observe native bees on colorful flowers in bloom from June to October. The pond now attracts kingfishers and cormorants to feed on the trout at this new public fishery.

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opportunities that serve multiple purposes. Establishing these natural areas not only allows for the survival of diverse species of plants, animals and pollinators critical to our web of life, they also benefit people. Hundreds of studies have proven that time spent in nature is measurably beneficial to human physical and emotional health. In addition to offering ball fields and monkey bars, our parks can play a critical role in restoring nature in many places where it has been lost a truly healthy environment and all that belongs in it.

Salt Lake City’s Public Lands Department is currently considering establishing a native plant center along the Jordan River in the Rose Park neighborhood, in Salt Lake City’s west side. The proposed site would include a farm and greenhouse dedicated to restoring native plants that once thrived in this valley, growing plants for use in pollinator habitat restoration projects in parks across the city. The site would include a public education and research facility to make this vital work more accessible to the public, study

and improve restoration methods, and facilitate interagency collaboration for improving the environmental health of our urban public spaces.

Although the monarch butterfly is now a candidate for the Endangered Species List, Fairmont Park has attracted some of these amazing monarchs, and is giving them a fighting chance. We urge Mayor Erin Mendenhall and the Salt Lake City Council to continue to build on this success by funding the native plant center at the Jordan River and demonstrate the city’s leadership as an ecologically inclusive city.

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