

The Audubon Wyoming Community Naturalist Program

Location	Gillette, Wyoming, USA
Rio Tinto company	Rio Tinto Energy America (RTEA)
Partner organisations	Audubon Wyoming
Key people	Brian Rutledge, Alison Holloran and Dusty and Jacelyn Downey (Audubon Wyoming); Bob Green (RTEA)
Habitats	Sagebrush steppe
Birds	Ferruginous Hawk, Greater Sage-grouse, Mountain Plover
Outcomes	Work in the local community with partners to implement quality and effective educational programming on topics of conservation and natural history.

Environmental education is a key to sustainability. Extractive industry and conservation has come together in Wyoming to create the Community Naturalist Program for public education, a collaboration between Rio Tinto Energy America and Audubon Wyoming.



Greater Sage-grouse – icon of the sagebrush prairie

Project background and history

Rio Tinto Energy America (Kennebec Energy), a leading coal mining and processing company, has headquarters in Gillette, Wyoming, a town sitting in the heart of one of the most extensive and intact areas of sagebrush steppe and grasslands in the United States. This is a priority habitat that supports a number of Threatened and Near Threatened bird species. However, these habitats suffer from continuing mismanagement with the biodiversity of these systems impinged upon by fire and overgrazing of livestock. Recently, a number of gas developments have further intensified threats to the integrity of this ecosystem.

Audubon Wyoming (the state representative of the National Audubon Society) has identified environmental education as key to improved land management practices in the habitats surrounding Gillette. Widespread appreciation of the outstanding natural assets of the area will be conducive to the conservation of habitats and birds through wise and sustainable management. Birds such as Greater Sage-grouse are likely to benefit from improved land-use practices envisaged as a result of community environmental education.

Gillette, as one of Wyoming's fastest growing population centres and an epicentre of mineral development in the United States, was a natural match to launch a conservation education programme. After much consideration, the original concept of developing a nature centre was replaced by one more appropriate to rural Wyoming: Community Naturalists. The Community Naturalists Program is a "nature centre without walls", comprised of individuals who are capable of inspiring and instilling an appreciation and understanding of nature in people of all ages. They translate conservation messages through a variety of educational programs reaching classrooms, family and adult audiences, as well as coordinating and developing citizen science opportunities. Audubon Wyoming and Rio Tinto Energy America have had great success with the programme, and have been able to reach out to the local community, connecting people of all ages with nature. The programme has also proven to be a much more cost-effective method than a static nature centre, bringing environmental education to the public rather than the other way round. The Community Naturalist Program is now being viewed by the National Audubon Society as a potential national programme. Through the Rio Tinto-BirdLife Partnership, Audubon Wyoming and Rio Tinto Energy America have joined forces to make this vision a reality.

Project details

Audubon Wyoming and Rio Tinto Energy America initiated the Community Naturalist Program in 2005, hiring Dusty and Jacelyn Downey to serve as the north-eastern Wyoming naturalists. This was a big step, as the Community Naturalist Program was a new idea within Audubon. Nevertheless, it began by using the overarching principle of connecting people with nature.

Audubon's Community Naturalist Program was quickly developed on the basis of a "classroom without walls", giving citizens tangible education, focusing on environmental concerns, as well as developing potential solutions for addressing these environmental

issues. For example, basic biological and ecological principles are generally taught in the classroom as part of the standard curriculum but lack the hands on experiential component. The programme is filling this void by providing both in-class presentations, and field-based education to supplement the concepts taught in the classroom.

Financing from Rio Tinto Energy America and the Rio Tinto-BirdLife International Programme has enabled Audubon Wyoming and the naturalists to continue to improve and expand their environmental outreach throughout the Gillette area. The naturalists have developed 15 classroom programmes, nine community programmes and 11 field trip programmes, reaching over 1,600 grade school students in 15 schools throughout north-eastern Wyoming. In 2008, the programme plans to expand its reach through new school programmes and the creation of a curriculum “handbook” that can be used by teachers on an everyday basis. The programme is also continually looking for new partners and outreach opportunities into the future.

Sagebrush steppe

