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**NATIONAL
WILDLIFE
FEDERATION**



Community Engagement



Impact Report

2025-2026

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LETTER FROM THE DIRECTOR of Community Engagement



Dear partners, community leaders, funders, and friends ~

Across the Great Lakes, communities are showing us what place-based conservation can look like when it begins with people. It looks like a congregation turning an underused lawn into a vibrant habitat, neighbors and families learning how native plants can support pollinators and help manage stormwater in their neighborhoods, people engaging in a hands-on maintenance workshop to share technical knowledge and lived experience. That is the heart of the National Wildlife Federation Great Lakes community engagement work. We are investing in local leadership, supporting trusted community institutions, and creating green assets where people can care for the water, land, wildlife, and one another. Yes, we install gardens. But it is so much more.

During the 2025-2026 program year, we continued deepening our

engagement in Detroit and Grand Rapids while supporting established and emerging relationships across Cleveland, Toledo, and Northern Michigan. Together - with houses of worship, community organizations, conservation partners, and funders - we expanded access to native plants, education, restoration resources, and opportunities for meaningful relationship building and partnership. In the past year, our programming has engaged more than 1,000 people across 26 houses of worship, community spaces, schools, and early childhood programs through training, workshops, native garden installations, and outreach. Through 10 community workshops, bus tours, and celebrations, more than 2,000 native plant plugs were distributed to community members, expanding access to native plants and neighborhood conservation.

Thank you to every participant, site leader, partner, funder, volunteer, and colleague who has helped build this work. Our impact is rooted in your leadership and commitment to healthy habitats and communities.

With gratitude,

Tiffany Jones

Director of Community Engagement
(Great Lakes)

OUR BROAD IMPACT

All Time



**12,000 +
Native Plant Plugs**

distributed to community members through Bringing Home Nature workshops



**170
Community Spaces**

including houses of worship, schools, and early childhood programs were reached through Sacred Grounds and Healing over Habitat



100 + Events

including Bringing Nature Home workshops, Sacred Grounds workshops, bus tours, and celebrations



25 + Faith Practices

engaged from different houses of worship

2025-2026



1,000 + People

engaged through trainings, workshops, native garden installations, and additional outreach



**26
Community Spaces**

including houses of worship, schools, and early childhood programs were reached through Sacred Grounds and Healing over Habitat

**2,000 +
Native Plant Plugs**

distributed to community members through Bringing Home Nature workshops



10 Events

including Bringing Nature Home workshops, Sacred Grounds workshops, bus tours, and celebrations

INTRODUCTION TO THE GREAT LAKES

Community Engagement Team / Mission

The National Wildlife Federation's Community Engagement team works alongside communities to connect conservation with the places, institutions, and relationships that shape everyday life. Our work is grounded in a simple belief: the strongest and most lasting conservation solutions are shaped by the people who know their communities best.

Across the Great Lakes region, we partner with houses of worship, community organizations, schools, healing spaces, neighborhood leaders, and conservation practitioners to pair local knowledge and leadership with conservation resources, expertise, and regional connections. Together, we create opportunities to **restore habitat**, **manage stormwater**, and **deepen their connection** to the Great Lakes and the places they call home.

Sacred Grounds

Sacred Grounds is a National Wildlife Federation program that recognizes congregations, houses of worship, and faith communities who both create wildlife habitat and actively link faith practices and caring for the environment. We believe that when people come together across differences to confront the challenge of a changing world, both wildlife and people will thrive. By building trusted partnerships with local partners, we assist houses of worship and faith based institutions and their communities with project planning and technical expertise to increase native plant gardens, while prioritizing their goals, visions and experiences through the process. In the region, the Sacred Grounds Program is currently active and has supported 170 sites across: Detroit (MI), Grand Rapids (MI), Cleveland (OH), Toledo (OH) and Northern Michigan.

Healing over Habitat

Healing over Habitat is an extension of Sacred Grounds that partners with community organizations engaged in healing work and houses of worship to transform outdoor spaces into places of healing for people, wildlife, and water. Launched in Grand Rapids and now active in Detroit and Toledo, the program builds on the Sacred Grounds model by expanding beyond faith communities and intentionally connecting habitat restoration with community well-being, environmental justice, and relationship-building.



Community-Driven Action

Engagement varies by community. In Detroit and Grand Rapids, our team provides deep, multi-year support that can include outreach, cohort development, design charrettes, restoration planning, workshops, installations, celebrations, maintenance resources, and evaluation. In Cleveland, Toledo, and Northern Michigan we offer a lighter-touch approach shaped by local capacity and need, including relationship support, resource-sharing, technical connection, and opportunities to remain linked to the broader regional network.

Equity & Justice

Conservation is inseparable from equity, access, and environmental justice. Many communities where we work have experienced generations of environmental burden, disinvestment, and exclusion from decisions about land, water, and access to nature. Our approach recognizes that communities closest to these challenges also hold essential knowledge about what their neighborhoods need and what meaningful conservation looks like. We support program sites with resources, funding, technical expertise, and opportunities that expand access for historically underserved communities.

Long-Term Climate Resilience

Native plants support wildlife and healthy ecosystems while creating opportunities for people to connect with nature in their own communities. Native plant landscapes can also help manage stormwater, reduce localized flooding, improve water quality, support local food systems, and mitigate the impacts of climate change. Our work extends beyond individual gardens by building the relationships, knowledge, infrastructure, and local leadership needed to sustain conservation over time. We believe resilience is communities having greater capacity, stronger relationships, and resources to steward their environments for generations.

DEEP ENGAGEMENT

Detroit, MI Highlights 2025-2026

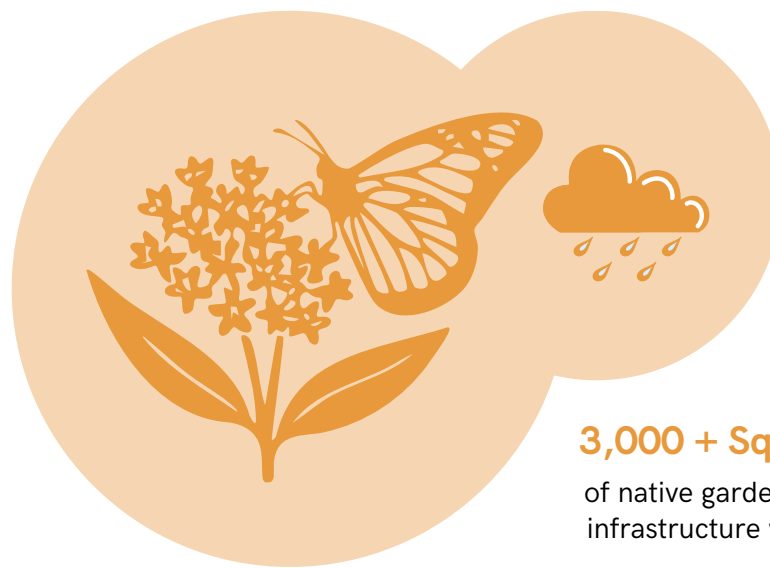
Intensive models: Detroit (MI) + Grand Rapids (MI)

Deep, place-based engagement centered on sustained community partnerships, locally driven programming, on-the-ground project implementation, and long-term investment in community conservation capacity.

Detroit, MI

In Detroit, **Sacred Grounds** supports **30 houses of worship** and other trusted community institutions across Detroit, Hamtramck, and Highland Park as they transform outdoor spaces into habitat for wildlife and people. Since 2020, program sites have **combined green stormwater infrastructure and native plant restoration** with community learning, collaborative design, celebration, and long-term stewardship.

The work begins well before installation. Through orientations, site visits, and design charrettes, site leaders and community members share how they use their spaces, what they value, and what they want their landscapes to become. Our technical partner, **Friends of the Rouge**, helps translate that community vision into practical designs and installation. And our education partner, **Sierra Club of Michigan**, assists with Rain Garden 101 workshops, Bringing Nature Home events, native plant giveaways, and maintenance workshops providing participants with knowledge and tools they can apply at project sites and at home.



**216,000
Gallons**

of estimated
stormwater
captured
annually

3,000 + Square Feet

of native gardens and green
infrastructure were created

In 2025-2026, Detroit Sacred Grounds has paired deep community engagement with direct investment in neighborhood conservation. Six rain garden projects were completed, each accompanied by garden blessings and community celebrations. More than 1,300 native plants were distributed to residents. Together, these projects created more than 3,000 square feet of native gardens and green infrastructure and are estimated to capture more than 216,000 gallons of stormwater annually.

Since spring 2026, the team has hosted five design charrettes and Rain Garden 101 workshops and supported five rain garden installations. We also hosted our fourth annual Detroit Green Space Bus Tour with Detroit Bird Alliance, bringing 30 participants across the city to experience Detroit Bird City projects and Sacred Grounds sites. This fall, our sixth annual Bringing Nature Home Workshop, in collaboration with Keep Growing Detroit and Griffin Gardens, connected residents with native plants, pollinator and wildlife habitat, seasonal garden stewardship, and opportunities to turn individual action into broader community conservation.

Grand Rapids, MI

The Grand Rapids **Sacred Grounds-Healing over Habitat** program has engaged **59 houses of worship and community sites** over nine years of community-led habitat and education programming. Participating sites transform outdoor spaces with native plant habitat to improve watershed health, mitigate local flooding, support wildlife, and expand equitable access to green space. This work also **contributes to the health of the Grand River watershed and Lake Michigan** while addressing environmental challenges affecting **frontline communities**.

Each Sacred Grounds-Healing over Habitat cohort participates in a shared learning and design process focused on native plants, community conservation, garden stewardship, and environmental leadership. Activities include orientation, site visits, community design charrettes, garden installations, and educational workshops. Technical partners **Plaster Creek Stewards** and the **Lower Grand River Organization of Watersheds (LGROW)** help participants translate community priorities into practical native garden designs.

Beyond the 59-site network, the program has reached **more than 1,200 community members** through workshops, trainings, and native plant giveaways, distributing more than 250 native plant kits to support habitat creation at homes and community spaces.

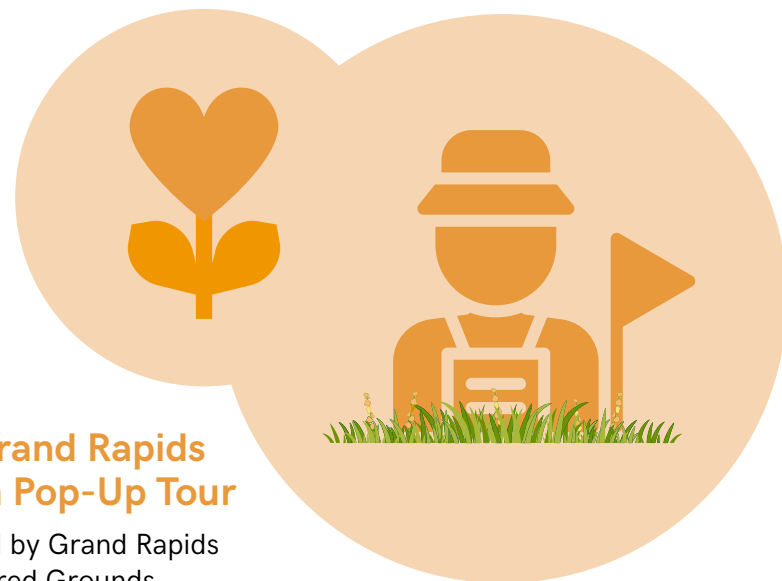


6 sites

joined
the newest
cohort
including
2 community
healing
organizations
and 4 houses
of worship

1st Grand Rapids Garden Pop-Up Tour

launched by Grand Rapids
Sacred Grounds



In 2025–2026, six sites joined the newest cohort: two returning houses of worship serving as demonstration sites, two new houses of worship, and two community healing organizations. These sites are participating in shared learning and design activities ahead of 2027 installations. The team also hosted garden maintenance and environmental stewardship and healing workshops. In August 2026, the program launched its first Grand Rapids Sacred Grounds Garden Pop-Up Tour, highlighting two sites and inspiring residents to incorporate native plants into their own communities.

As a part of supporting healing through nature and habitat, the Community Engagement team is piloting a new initiative to support habitat at correctional facilities, in partnership with Kent County Correctional Facility, Michigan State University Extension, and Lower Grand River Organization of Watersheds (LGROW). We will be installing a native plant garden onsite at Kent County Correctional Facility in 2027, along with providing an educational workshop on native plants for the incarcerated population.

LIGHTER TOUCH

Toledo, OH | Cleveland, OH |
and Northern Michigan

Lighter-touch engagement focuses on maintaining trusted relationships, connecting partners to resources and expertise, supporting emerging opportunities, and keeping communities connected to the broader Great Lakes conservation network.

Toledo, OH

In Toledo, **Sacred Grounds has grown** into an established local network of **36 program sites and partners** since 2017. During the 2025–2026 reporting period, Great Lakes Community Engagement provided lighter-touch regional support designed to **sustain connection** without duplicating the leadership and communication already happening locally.



Support has included resource-sharing, periodic coordination, and opportunities to connect Toledo partners with the broader Great Lakes network. This model recognizes the strength of an established community of practice: **local relationships and knowledge remain at the center**, while National Wildlife Federation helps maintain access to tools, peer learning, and regional connection.

Sacred Grounds Toledo programming also demonstrates an important measure of program growth. Success is also measured by supporting a committed community network as it develops the relationships, confidence, and infrastructure to continue serving its members with **increasing local ownership**.

Cleveland, OH

In Cleveland, Great Lakes Community Engagement provides lighter-touch support **shaped by local capacity**, existing partnerships, and emerging



opportunities. Rather than operating a full Sacred Grounds cohort during this reporting period, our role has focused on **maintaining existing relationships, sharing relevant resources, connecting partners** with National Wildlife Federation expertise, and **identifying opportunities** that align community priorities with habitat and environmental learning.

Northern Michigan- Au Sable Institute



In Northern Michigan, our team partners with the **Au Sable Institute of Environmental Studies** as a satellite partner for **Sacred Grounds**, providing a locally led model for expanding community conservation. For six years, the National Wildlife Federation has supported the Au Sable Institute in delivering Sacred Grounds programming, reaching **more than 15 houses of worship** across Traverse City, Mancelona, Kalkaska, Bellaire, and other

communities to establish native plant habitat and engage residents in **environmental stewardship**.

Building on this partnership, NWF and Au Sable are piloting a **capacity-building cohort model** to engage additional houses of worship while **strengthening local leadership**. NWF will provide virtual training, program resources, and technical support to equip congregations to implement projects at their own locations. This lighter-touch approach expands Sacred Grounds while investing in local capacity and creating a model that can be sustained and potentially replicated in other communities.

NETWORK BUILDING

With each city bringing its own unique strengths and stories, we have been excited to facilitate more opportunities for network building through the Sacred Grounds-Healing over Habitat network. The Community Engagement team sends out a **biannual Grounded and Growing network newsletter** to celebrate sites across the Great Lakes region, provide updates on upcoming opportunities and initiatives, and create an **intentional feedback loop** to hear directly from sites on their needs, challenges, and successes.

In 2026 the Grand Rapids and Detroit Sacred Grounds partnership teams had a **partnership exchange** where the Detroit team shared lessons learned from their design processes with the Grand Rapids team. We are building on this exchange by hosting **virtual webinars** open to the broader network, creating additional opportunities for participants and partners to connect, share knowledge, and learn from conservation efforts happening in other communities.

Beyond the Great Lakes, we are also working to strengthen connections with Sacred Grounds participants and partners across the country, including the Mid-Atlantic and DMV regions. These connections will help **build a stronger national network** where locally rooted programs can share practices, resources, and lessons while continuing to respond to the unique needs of their own communities.



PARTNERS

Community engagement succeeds because no single organization carries the work alone. Partners contribute technical expertise, outreach, plants and materials, volunteer coordination, environmental education, evaluation, and long-term stewardship support.



PARTNERS Continued

Michigan

Ohio



Detroit, MI

- Friends of the Rouge
- Sierra Club Michigan Chapter
- Detroit Bird Alliance
- Keep Growing Detroit
- Xerces Society for Invertebrate Conservation
- Sidewalk Detroit
- Earth Economics

Grand Rapids, MI

- Plaster Creek Stewards
- Lower Grand River Organization of Watersheds
- Michigan State University Extension
- Kent County Sheriff's Office
- American Rivers

Northern Michigan

- Au Sable Intitute

Cleveland, OH

- Cuyahoga Soil and Water Conservation District
- Meadow City Native Plant Nursery
- Greater Cleveland Interfaith Alliance (GCIA)
- West Creek Conservancy
- Nu Point Community Development Corporation
- Forest city Ecological Services
- Food Depot to Health
- Pre4Cle
- Journey on Yonder
- Organic Connects

Toledo, OH

- Toledo Lucas County Rain Garden Initiative
- Wild Ones Oak Openings Region Chapter
- Historic Woodlawn Cemetery
- Monroe Street UMC
- Lucas County Commissioners

FUNDERS

We are grateful to the public, private, and philanthropic partners whose support makes community-rooted conservation possible. Their investments help communities access design assistance, native plants, restoration resources, workshops, evaluation, celebrations, and long-term stewardship support.

Current Funder List

- National Fish and Wildlife Foundation
- J. Ferrantino Charitable Foundation
- DTE Energy Foundation
- Wege Foundation

Full Funder List

- Cleveland Foundation
- St. Luke's Foundation
- Great Lakes Fishery Trust
- Leinweber Foundation
- Stranahan - Greater Toledo Community Foundation
- Dominos
- The Frey Foundation
- The Char & Chuck Fowler Foundation

Where Your Support Takes Root

