

Belle Isle Nature Zoo - Detroiters Working for Environmental Justice - Friends of the Detroit River
Healing Our Waters-Great Lakes Coalition - Huron River Watershed Council
The James and Grace Lee Boggs School - Michigan Colleges Alliance Third 90 Network program
Michigan Department of Natural Resources - Michigan United Conservation Clubs
National Wildlife Federation - Organization for Bat Conservation

Contact: Jordan Lubetkin, National Wildlife Federation, Lubetkin@nwf.org, (734) 904-1589

Groups to Highlight Greater Detroit Conservation Efforts for New National Wildlife Federation CEO Collin O'Mara

DETROIT (Aug. 1, 2014) – Connecting children to wildlife and nature at a time when kids are spending more and more time indoors. Restoring local rivers and harbors that have been degraded for decades. Helping communities that have been exposed to higher levels of pollution. These conservation challenges—and solutions to remedy them—will be highlighted during an all-day tour today around greater Detroit and Ann Arbor.

“People across the nation are working together to tackle wildlife conservation and environmental challenges through partnerships, innovation, and perseverance—and this tour provides a compelling snapshot of the good work being done in cities like Detroit that benefit people and wildlife,” said Collin O'Mara, president and CEO of the National Wildlife Federation, which sponsored the tour. “Solutions exist—and we're embracing them.”

Tour partners include: Belle Isle Nature Zoo, Detroiters Working for Environmental Justice, Friends of the Detroit River, Healing Our Waters-Great Lakes Coalition, Huron River Watershed Council, The James and Grace Lee Boggs School, Michigan Colleges Alliance Third 90 Network program, Michigan Department of Natural Resources, Michigan United Conservation Clubs, National Wildlife Federation, and Organization for Bat Conservation.

The tour starts in Detroit's Belle Isle, the largest city-owned island park in the country and bigger than New York City's Central Park.

“Michigan DNR has been working with numerous partners to get people outdoors, provide education and restore Belle Isle to its natural splendor,” says Michigan Department of Natural Resources Parks and Recreation Chief Ron Olson. “We've seen a lot of successes already, and that's the beauty of these partnerships. We're all working to build respect, appreciation and protection of our natural resources.”

At the park, children will learn about and engage in nature photography as they explore habitats on the grounds of the Belle Isle Nature Zoo as part of Wildlife Nation, a new on-line social community at www.wildlifenation.org that aims to help reverse the troubling trend of kids spending more and more time inside. Kids now spend on average less than 30 minutes per day outdoors in unstructured play and are inside in front of electronic screens more than 7 hours each day. Wildlife Nation helps adults get kids outdoors and connected to nature and wildlife.

“It’s really important that we are creating a future in which kids develop and retain a wonder, respect and appreciation for wildlife,” said Julia Liljegren, regional education manager for the National Wildlife Federation. “Experiencing nature with a caring adult is a really powerful way to foster a lifelong love of nature and wildlife in kids of all ages. Nature is everywhere so kids can enjoy the wonders of wildlife whether they live in a large city, a suburb, or rural community. Through Wildlife Nation adults of all kinds are coming together to get kids back into the great outdoors.”

The Third 90 Network combines teams of Detroit high school students with Michigan Colleges Alliance college faculty and undergraduates to conduct environmental research on Belle Isle. “For many of these kids, the experiential components such as water or soil testing, tree coring, or classifying macroinvertebrates have a lasting impression and inspires their interest in science, sustainability, and even environmental careers,” said Bob Bartlett, the president of Michigan Colleges Alliance.

Children will have the opportunity to see wildlife native to Detroit, thanks to a live animal demonstration by the Organization for Bat Conservation, which will have on hand native species such as a bat, skunk, and great horned owl.

“Connecting kids with nature and wildlife is critical to raising a generation that will be healthy, confident, and economically sustainable,” said Rob Mies, executive director of the Organization for Bat Conservation.

A walking tour of Belle Isle’s restored Blue Heron Lagoon follows, which will highlight successful efforts to reconnect the lagoon to the Detroit River. The project has provided a home for turtles, small fish, snakes, and frogs to grow and thrive—habitat improvements that can help get the Detroit River removed one day from the list of the region’s most toxic water bodies, so-called Areas of Concern.

“The restoration of Belle Isle’s Blue Heron Lagoon is a tremendous success,” said Sam Lovall, from Friends of the Detroit River. “It’s one of many steps that we’re taking to restore the Detroit River so that it can be better used and enjoyed by people and wildlife for generations to come.”

The project is one of more than 2,000 federally funded Great Lakes restoration projects over the last five years to restore habitat, clean up toxic pollution, fight invasive species like Asian carp, and reduce runoff from cities and farms. Since that time, more than \$1.6 billion has been invested in projects around the eight-state region as part of the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative.

“Restoration projects are producing results in Detroit and communities around the region, but there’s more work to do,” said Jennifer Hill, field director for the Healing Our Waters-Great Lakes Coalition. “We need to keep restoration on track and fully funded. Scaling back our nation’s commitment will make projects more complicated and costly the longer we wait.”

“The Healing Our Waters-Great Lakes Coalition helped us tackle one of the newest aquatic invasive plants to hit Michigan, European frog bit,” said Michigan United Conservation Clubs Grassroots Manager Drew YoungeDyke. “Thirty-two volunteers joined our On the Ground program and AmeriCorps member Taylor Renton to remove over 2,000 pounds of it from the Alpena Wildlife Sanctuary in July.”

Environmental justice issues will then take center stage, as the tour visits some of Detroit's largest source of air pollution, including the Marathon Oil Refinery, Detroit Wastewater Treatment Plant, and Detroit's Solid Waste Incinerator, the largest incinerator in the United States. Asthma rates among neighbors living around the facility are three to four times higher than the state average.

"We have a 20-year history of partnership with NWF," said Guy O. Williams, president & CEO of Detroiters Working for Environmental Justice. "It's very exciting to welcome Mr. O'Mara and showcase for him first hand what's at stake and at risk. We need to raise the awareness around solutions to our air and water quality challenges."

The tour concludes along the Huron River, where citizens, nonprofit organizations, and civic and business leaders are rallying around the restoration of the river as a way to improve the river health while revitalizing shoreline communities and inspiring recreational opportunities.

"The Huron River is worth celebrating thanks to the diligence of river stewards past and present," said Elizabeth Riggs, RiverUp! manager and deputy director for the Huron River Watershed Council. "Through RiverUp!, a broad public-private partnership is cleaning up contaminated properties and restoring fish habitat, fixing up recreation access along the 104-mile Huron River Water Trail, and building up Trail Towns in the five largest downtowns on the river. Residents and visitors to the region are benefitting from the renaissance of a working river that is becoming the new Main Street in our communities."

Said the National Wildlife Federation's O'Mara: "We all have a part to play to ensure that people and wildlife have clean air, clean water, and healthy places to live. Working together, we can do great things so that we leave our communities stronger and more sustainable for current and future generations."

###