

# Nebraska Master Naturalist Program

**Mission:** *The Nebraska Master Naturalist Program will educate a volunteer network dedicated to promoting the conservation of Nebraska's natural resources.*

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## What is a Master Naturalist program?

A Master Naturalist Program is a volunteer recruitment, management and training program designed to train "master volunteers" to conduct conservation education, outreach, and service in their community. The program is modeled after the highly successful "Master Gardener" program and available in over 20 states.



The Master Naturalist program requires participants to engage in 60 hours of classroom and field training to become certified. Participants must take part in eight hours of advanced training and contribute 40 hours of service annually to maintain certification. The most well known program is the Texas Master Naturalist Program (<http://masternaturalist.tamu.edu/>) which has 39 chapters and has trained 2,750 volunteers. Since 1998, volunteers have provided over 450,000 hours of service (valued at \$8 million), enhanced over 75,000 acres of habitat and have reached more than 1.2 million youth, adults and landowners.

## What are the benefits?

**For Nebraska:** This program will become the statewide program to professionally train and support volunteers interested in doing conservation work in Nebraska. A Master Naturalist program provides the leadership and support to significantly increase volunteer capacity for organizations. In addition to its conservation value, the program can serve as a training ground for future conservationists and result in a more informed citizenry that will the state solve important conservation problems.

**For organizations:** In a 2007 survey of Nebraska conservation organizations, 93% indicated that they use volunteers. These volunteers are used for education programs (82%), conservation work (61%) and to do outreach and fundraising (49%). A little over half of the organizations surveyed, provide some form of volunteer training but nearly two thirds supported a centralized program (like the Master Naturalist Program) to train and manage volunteers.



A Master Naturalist Program could provide professionally trained volunteers to manage natural areas, do public programs, conduct citizen science or staff nature centers. Expanded use of volunteers by most organizations is limited by a lack of time and personnel to effectively recruit train and manage volunteers. A Master Naturalist Program could provide the needed infrastructure and capacity for public and private organizations to make far greater use of volunteers. In an era of tight agency budgets and difficult fundraising, volunteers could meet a critical need.

For more information contact:  
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Tracking volunteer hours through the Master Naturalist program would allow organizations to better use volunteer hours as match for grant programs such as the Nebraska Environmental Trust and State Wildlife Grants Program. The development of a Nebraska Master Naturalist program was specifically identified in Nebraska's Legacy Plan (state wildlife action plan) as a tool to build a more informed and active volunteer base that will enhance community-based conservation efforts in the state. A Master Naturalist Program would also meet a number of objectives identified in the Nebraska Environmental Education Master Plan.

**For participants:** Individuals will learn about Nebraska's ecosystems and biodiversity, acquire new skills and become networked with others who share a passion for the conservation of natural resources. Volunteers will learn from and work along-side scientists, land managers, educators and others as they carry out the mission of the Master Naturalist program. University faculty, biologists and educators from the natural resource community and local experts will serve as instructors and mentors.

Certification as a Master Naturalist is a credential that volunteers can use to access highly sought after volunteer opportunities or even paid positions. Most importantly, volunteers will be able to contribute something even more valuable than money, a part of themselves.



## What progress has been made?

In 2005 a task force was formed to discuss volunteer training needs and opportunities for conservation organizations and others. The group included representatives from the NE Game and Parks Commission, UNL Extension, UN Rural Initiative, Nebraska Department of Economic Development - Division of Travel and Tourism and Audubon's Rowe Sanctuary. Master Naturalist programs in nearly a dozen states were reviewed and an online survey of conservation organizations was conducted in early 2007 to obtain input on volunteer needs.

Two stakeholder meetings were organized during the summer of 2007 to inform partners and seek their support for bringing a Master Naturalist Program to Nebraska. From those meetings additional planning members joined the group representing Nebraska Wildlife Federation, Nebraska Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit, Omaha's Henry Doorly Zoo, Fontenelle Nature Association, Central NE Public Power and Irrigation District, The Nature Conservancy, Northeast Resource Conservation and Development, and Nebraska Alliance for Conservation and Environment and Education. Additional organizations continue to become involved in the proposed program. In 2008, the Task Force identified five organizational needs and established subcommittees to work on an organizational vision and mission, structure, curriculum, and funding. Efforts continue on a volunteer basis, with a strong commitment from all partners.

## What are the next steps?

Thanks to support from our partners and funding from the Nebraska Environmental Trust the program will begin development this summer.

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