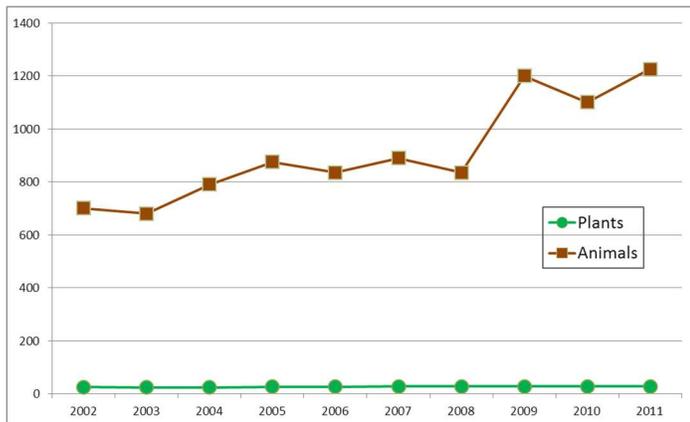


The Native Plant Conservation Campaign – a National Native Plant Society for the United States

by Emily Brin Roberson,
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It all starts with photosynthesis. Plants turn carbon dioxide, water and sunlight into life and oxygen. Without plants to produce food, shelter and air, other species simply cannot survive.

And yet plants are discriminated against in every aspect of laws, policies and budgets for science and conservation. Even conservation groups often ignore native plants in their advocacy and outreach.



Imperiled plants receive a fraction of the funding, staffing and protection provided for imperiled animals. Comparison of total endangered species spending for plants vs. animals 2002-2011. (Havens, K., A.T. Kramer and E.O. Guerrant, Jr. 2014. Getting plant conservation right (or not): the case of the United States. Int.J. Plant Sci. 175 (1): 3-10.

That is why I created the **Native Plant Conservation Campaign** (NPCC) – to fight for the native plants that give life, that sustain this planet’s stunning biological diversity, that make up our glorious natural landscapes and that keep us all alive - and also to support the extraordinary people who work to understand and conserve these amazing organisms.

The NPCC developed within the California Native Plant Society (CNPS). In the 1990s, I was on the conservation staff at CNPS. At that time CNPS was involved in one of the first lawsuits trying to force the

government to list imperiled plants under the federal Endangered Species Act (FESA). The stated goal of FESA is to prevent species extinction. So, as plants were added to the endangered species list, CNPS expected that they and their habitats would be protected.

Sadly, that was not the case.

It turns out that FESA gives only listed animals protection from death and extinction. Federally listed plant species are protected only in limited circumstances, primarily if they are fortunate enough to live on federal lands or in the path of a federal project such as highway maintenance. So FESA leaves many listed plants, among the most imperiled species on the planet, completely unprotected from willful destruction, even from the eradication of entire species. This ludicrous provision is known as the “plant exception” to the FESA. Because of it, listed plants are bulldozed for logging and development, crushed by off-road vehicles, grazed, trampled, dug up for collectors and otherwise destroyed without penalty (for details see the Equal Protection for Plants page on the NPCC website).

In response, I launched the Equal Protection for Plants Project for CNPS in 1999. Its goal was to organize support within the scientific and conservation communities for correcting the plant exception. We drafted an organizational sign-on statement calling for equal protection for plants under the FESA. The first groups we contacted were other U.S. native plant societies (so long ago that the invitations to prospective signers went via the Post Office!). The Equal Protection for Plants statement has been endorsed by 75 scientific, botanic and conservation groups, and counting.

We found that most U.S. states had native plant societies similar to CNPS. We also realized that, like the FESA, many of the obstacles we faced in plant conservation were national in scope. We needed a national native plant conservation organization to combat these problems. And so the NPCC was born. Native plant societies joined and the NPCC became a nationwide network. It was then moved to a national parent organization, the Center for Biological Diversity. We incorporated as an independent non-profit corporation in 2016.

Today, the NPCC has 49 Affiliate groups representing almost all 50 states and more than 150,000 plant enthusiasts. Affiliates are native plant societies,

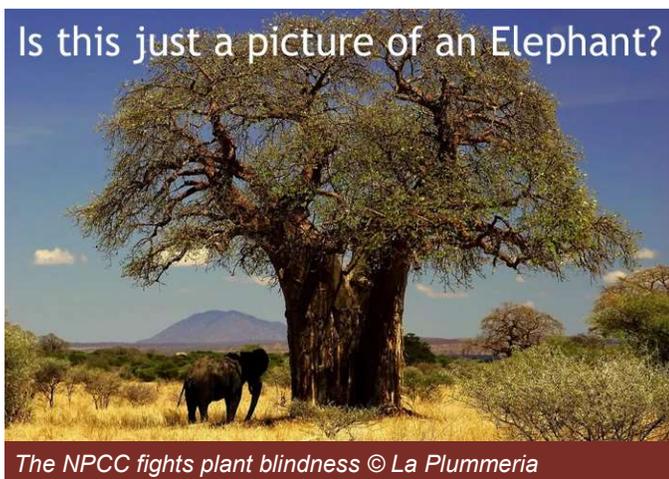
wildflower clubs, botanic gardens, and botanical societies. They range from small societies of a few hundred members to large gardens with tens of thousands of members. We have essentially created the national native plant society of the United States; it is likely the first such network in the world.

The mission of the NPCC is to promote the conservation of native plants and their habitats through collaboration, research, education, and advocacy. We carry out this mission in a number of ways.

Our **Network of Affiliates** is the core of the NPCC. We work with Affiliates to share information and expertise and to educate each other, the public, and policymakers about the importance of native plants. We hold conference calls and have launched an online discussion group to help Affiliates collaborate with and learn from each other, share successes and vent frustrations.

We also carry out our mission through programs and projects. NPCC's team of Advisors, distinguished botanists recruited from universities and other institutions help us make sure these programs are botanically sound.

The **Equal Protection for Plants Project** uses research and public outreach to raise awareness about the inferiority of legal protections for imperiled plants under the FESA and other state and federal conservation laws. We also combat the pervasive underfunding and understaffing of plant science and conservation programs. We fight "plant blindness", a



term botanists coined in 1996 to refer to "the inability to see or notice the plants in one's own environment." The Important Plant Areas (IPA) Program collects information about and images of botanically significant natural areas in support of the Global Strategy for Plant Conservation (part of the Global Convention on



The NPCC works to identify and protect Important Plant Areas like Butler Cirque, CO © Bayard Ewing

Biological Diversity). The Program will eventually produce a national database of botanical hotspots for conservation, research and education. In May of this year, we created the Important Plant Areas Partnership. It consists of the NPCC, Botanical Gardens Conservation International U.S., the Plant Conservation Alliance Non Federal Cooperators Committee, and CNPS. The Partnership advocates for the designation and protection of IPAs as integral to the conservation of our flora. We have been collecting information from Affiliates about IPAs in their regions since 2015.

The Right Plant, Right Place Project encourages the use of locally appropriate native plants in gardening and land management. We promote initiatives like the National Seed Strategy, CNPS Calscapes, **Operation NICE** (Natives Instead of Common Exotics) from the Native Plant Society of Texas, and the **Xerces Society's pollinator gardening program** that help supply local natives for planting projects.

The **Speak out for Plants!** Program offers materials and assistance to help people speak out for native plant science and conservation to policymakers and the media. The project spotlights the Ecosystem Services provided by native plants, such as water purification, wildlife habitat, storm protection, soil fertility, climate change moderation and food and water security. We also work to maintain the funding, integrity, independence and transparency of botanical and other scientific programs. To further these goals, we help people register to vote so that elected officials know that the plant community can and will hold them accountable.

One challenge we face is that plant and wildlife conservation groups have tended to work in near isolation from one another. Plants have simply been overlooked by many large conservation groups. So we

educate these groups about the importance of native plants and encourage them to include plants in their advocacy. (There is progress. These days, only occasionally is it necessary to remind them that plants actually exist.) We also help them to make use of the tremendous expertise and other resources in the plant community. In a partnership with the Endangered Species Coalition, for example, we are providing locally appropriate plants for pollinator gardens and helping local plant advocates educate elected representatives and the media about the threats to the FESA and other conservation laws from the current Congress and president.

You can help! Sign up for NPCC News on our [home page](#) to keep up with plant news and receive action alerts. Of course we appreciate donations. You will find a Donate button on the NPCC homepage. We also need volunteers for all sorts of projects from photography and fundraising to outreach and species management. The NPCC Jobs page offers descriptions of volunteer positions. Check out the 'Speak Out for Plants!' page for tools to help you communicate with the media and elected officials on behalf of native plants. Request our Save Plants Save the Planet Brochure or Ecosystem Services Infographic and share them at events. Register yourself and a friend to vote - and let us know. Tell us if you know of reliable sources of locally appropriate native plants in your area so we can add them to our resource list.



NPCC Advisor Professor Doug Tallamy gives popular talks on the benefits of gardening with natives, including supporting wildlife © Doug Tallamy

Native plants give us the air we breathe, clean and store water, buffer extreme weather, and create the soil that nourishes us. Native plant diversity offers staggering beauty while stabilizing our food supply and providing medicines that keep us alive. The goal of the NPCC is to establish sound native plant science and conservation as a foundation for land and species management. We will all live in a healthier, more sustainable, secure, beautiful and bountiful world when that becomes the case. To learn more, go to PlantSocieties.CNPS.org.