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Helping the smallest species can have the greatest impact.

Doug Tallamy's Homegrown National Park presentation

Best-selling author Doug Tallamy's presentation on August 24 began with a slide "Nature's Best Hope...is YOU!" Drawing on the title from his recent book, Tallamy gave a full-house HERTH audience hope for the impact that each of them can make. He began with an overview of the current environmental condition and our biodiversity crisis. "We are at a critical point of losing so many species from local ecosystems that their ability to produce the oxygen, clean water, flood control, carbon storage, that is, the ecosystems that sustain us, will become seriously compromised. Bird and wildlife populations are in decline because the native plants they depend on are fast disappearing. If these losses continue, we cannot maintain our current standard of living on Planet Earth," said Tallamy.

To illustrate the interdependency of insects with plants and the diversity of animal communities, he explained the significance of caterpillars in the food chain. With a sense of humor and colorful slides of the close-up life of common habitats, Tallamy laid out the sequence of everyday food chains. One observation was that sometimes helping even the smallest species can have the greatest impact, be it caterpillars, insects, or birds.

Dr. Tallamy, one of the nation's foremost insect specialists, has an ability to connect people with sound science. Through Homegrown National Park (HNP), a program he co-founded in 2021, he is inspiring millions of Americans to transform their backyards into ecological networks, presenting an opportunity to practice stewardship, experience unity, and have some fun. Citizens can participate in HNP via a map that shows each person's contribution to planting native plants by state, county, and zip code. With a mission to regenerate biodiversity and ecosystem function one person at a time, HNP invites Americans to be part of the largest conservation project ever attempted.

HNP advocates a simple approach to the ecological crisis: *go natural and go native*. Tallamy explained "If Americans replanted half of their lawns with native plants, shrubs, and trees, we would have more wildlife habitat than all the national parks combined." This can be done with landscapes that support a diverse



Doug Tallamy autographs one of his books after his presentation at HERTH. Photo by Rick Kane

community of pollinators; provide energy for the local food web; manage the watershed in which they live; remove carbon from the atmosphere. Gardeners can start simple and small by using a "keystone plant," which is a plant that is the most productive for insects.

This was Tallamy's second visit to Elk Rapids, following "Saving the Environment, One Backyard at a Time" in 2017. His influence as a best-selling author and nationally known speaker has impacted gardening and popularized native plantings. Many plant nurseries now feature entire sections of native plants, trees, shrubs, and classes for instruction.

Tallamy has also turned his attention to young people, recently creating a young reader's version of "Nature's Best Hope." On the first page he asks the young reader to go to a window and look out at their yard. "Do you see anything moving?" he asks. "Probably not, but you should, because your yard is a part of the natural world. Nature is not something you drive far away to see in the wilderness." He describes simple projects youngsters can do in their yards, as well as the science to go with it, and makes the important point that nature is to be enjoyed, not to be feared. And if you have no yard? No problem – use a flowerpot!

Many attendees echoed the importance of more school and student engagement. "I want to promote his work in reaching kids. I love the version he wrote for young readers, and we need to get this book into our elementary, middle schools, and public libraries," said Melissa Zelenac, Director, Antrim Conservation District.

Tallamy's impact is immediately apparent when speaking with young professionals in our area, including

those who are involved in conservation programs and forestry departments as well as plant growers.

Ellie Johnson, district forester for four neighboring counties, attended and brought along a co-worker. "Dr. Doug Tallamy's research is so powerful because it gives simple, concrete recommendations to property owners who want to contribute positively to the complex environment around them. I discuss his work with folks in my service area all the time whenever they ask me questions on how to be good stewards of the natural world. Being able to hear him speak in person was quite a treat, and a good reminder that I am guiding landowners with solid scientific findings."

Angie Bouma, senior conservation ecologist at GTRLC, said "Dr. Tallamy's message of the importance of including locally native plants in landscaping resonates with audiences across the country, and you could feel the level of interest and attentiveness at the GreenER event. Encouraging community members to take a deeper look at landscapes through an ecological lens promotes thoughtful stewardship of our shared ecosystems."

Among community members expressing their appreciation was local resident Tom Baird. "Dr. Tallamy's presentation was a real awakening. At the following meeting of our condo association, the owners were excited about the possibility of replacing ailing plants with native shrubs and trees."

Cheryl Bachman, avid gardener, and co-vice chair of the ERGC, loved the photographs, the science, and his sense of humor.

Julie Chambers, founder of A Few Friends for the Environment, drove up from Ludington to hear him and meet him in person. Gardener and scientist Rick Kane said, "I am truly amazed how following Dr. Tallamy's tips for home landscaping can tremendously impact native species diversity, and how neighbors working collectively can truly create a mini-national park in your yard."

Karen Simpson, Elk Rapids village president, added "I loved the presentation. He had a wonderful way of making such an important and difficult issue seem simple and easy for anyone to try."

ERHS Eco Club co-chair Belle Keely summed up the evening. "Dr. Tallamy's presentation was enthralling. He explained how even the simple integration of multiple caterpillar species to the depleted ecosystem around his home not only allowed for the complete rejuvenation of his yard, but also for hundreds of different species of plants, insects, and birds to thrive like never before. It was an important look at how the little things in life – like those caterpillars – actually hold the entire thing together."

Doug Tallamy is the T.A. Baker Professor of Agriculture and Natural Resources, Department of Entomology and Wildlife Ecology at University of Delaware, where he has taught insect and ecology classes for 42 years, authored 112 research publications, five books, received numerous awards, and co-founded HomegrownNational Park.

Text and photos submitted by the Green Elk Rapids Committee. Local HNP Map in progress: greenelkrapids.org

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