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New Ranching Certification Aims to Protect Grassland Birds

By Jess Powers

Last year, a widely publicized study by Cornell's Lab of Ornithology showed that bird populations declined by nearly 3 billion in North America since 1970. Habitat loss, outdoor cats, collisions with glass, pesticides—and now, wildfires in the west—are the biggest threats to migrating birds. A new conservation ranching certification by the National Audubon Society attempts to create the “largest, regenerative, bird-friendly supply chain in the country.” It incentivizes stewardship to address the loss of prairie and grassland habitats and the bird species that depend on them.

Scientists consider birds to be excellent indicators of climate change. This is due to their adaptation to a variety of habitats, food sources, temperatures, and their migratory behavior. Extensive records exist of their ranges and numbers, including those tracked by amateur birders contributing to “community science.” For many, when it comes to preserving bird habitats through food purchasing, bird-friendly coffee first comes to mind.

What is Shade-grown Coffee?

The various certification processes for coffee can be confusing to the consumer. They include organic, fair trade, direct trade, shade-grown, bird-friendly, and Rainforest Alliance Certified. But these are not merely marketing ploys.

Most of the product in the coffee bins at the Coop is Equal Exchange. About 95 percent of their coffee beans are shade-grown, explains Petra Claiborne, our lead coffee buyer. On their website, the company clarifies that they promote agroforestry practices and farmer cooperatives. They believe that the standards for fair trade and organic encompass shade-grown practices. A separate certification would pose an additional burden to growers, they note. This is similar to how some farmers, like Hepworth Farms, opt to remain integrated pest management (IPM) rather than certify as organic.

To understand why shade-grown matters, it is important to distinguish between the two cultivated species of coffee, Robusta and arabica. Robusta beans tolerate a dark roast and are used in most commercial coffee brands, in instant coffee, or for espresso. They're higher in caffeine content, oilier, and more bitter to taste. They are also less expensive. Green robusta beans are traded as a commodity, like soy or corn. Futures trading favors industrial agriculture and negatively impacts farmer livelihoods. The plant itself is sun-loving and



ILLUSTRATION BY DEBORAH TINT

grown in primarily in Africa, Brazil, and Indonesia. It requires open areas, clearcutting of forests—notably including gorilla habitats.

The second cultivated species of coffee, arabica, is a smaller, mountain dwelling shrub. It grows in cooler, more remote areas of subtropical cloud forest habitat, like those found in parts of Mexico, Jamaica, the Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Honduras, Ecuador, or Peru. “The cloud forest is one of the richest ecosystems on the planet,” says Gabriel Willow, an artist, naturalist, and Coop member for 16 years who leads birding tours, including at coffee plantations.

Since this shrub grows in concert with native rainforest or habitat, it is “full of birds,” he says. Migrating songbirds like warblers rely on such rich biodiversity during their journeys of thousands of miles.

Direct trade indicates economic and trade practices that protect the wellbeing of farmers as well as the environment. “It's all interconnected,” continues Willow, from trade agreements to immigration to ecology.

Willow points out that while the price point for bird friendly, or shade-grown coffee, is higher, it is worth buying. While he expresses doubt that we can “shop our way out of environment apocalypse,” coffee is something that many of us consume daily, with its own rituals. He opts for shade-grown because it doesn't damage fragile ecosystems and it's “positive for the ecology and community.”

Today, US based ornithologists are focusing their efforts on protecting grassland birds and habitats. Since dairy and meat are produced on that land, consumer choices preferences for grass-fed are critical to protecting those birds.

Why Conservation Ranching?

“There's a saying that ‘Anyone can love the mountains, but it takes soul to love the prairies,’” muses Marshall Johnson. He's the V.P.

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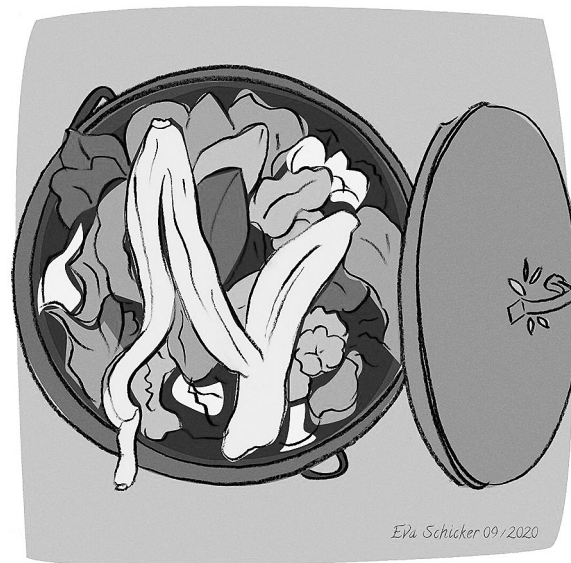
Coop and City Struggle To Save Composting

By Hayley Gorenberg

When we compost we pull huge amounts of organic waste out of the city's trash stream, convert food scraps to fertilizer and slash greenhouse gas emissions. Composting helps satisfy an urge to contribute individually to environmental wellbeing, and compost programs create “green” jobs. Many Coop members have committed to composting at home and on the Coop's compost work squad. And some of us, including my colleagues at New York Lawyers for the Public Interest (a vigorous member of New York City's Save Our Compost coalition), also advocate to improve the City's compost program during our “day jobs.”

Until recently, NYC was making slow progress in adopting “zero waste” goals and making it easier and easier to compost our food waste. For example, some of the neighborhoods near the Coop were among the first to get curbside compost collection in 2013-2014, and had among the best participation rates in the city. Each year New York City creates about 1 million tons of organic food and yard waste. The organic material is a major contributor to climate change—especially when buried in landfills. And transporting it to distant landfills and incinerators creates air pollution and public safety hazards in communities with transfer stations, particularly in environmental justice communities overburdened with pollution for decades.

When pandemic budget cuts threatened to eliminate hard-won programs and the long-cultivated habits that sustain them, many of



Eva Schicker 09/2020

ILLUSTRATION BY EVA SCHICKER

us swung into action. Save Our Compost panels (for example, <https://nylpi.org/nylpi-hosts-virtual-town-hall-on-campaign-to-save-our-compost/>) with local workers and elected officials drew lots of views, and the combined pressure of more than 22,000 New Yorkers advocating for composting led to the City Council's restoring \$2.8 million (about 10% of the previous budget for organics recycling programs), specifically to restart food scrap drop-off sites.

But that's not enough to take us forward to meet climate goals and to restore green jobs. Brown bin neighborhood programs bit the dust. And quite painfully, some of the most successful, high-volume sites, like the Grand Army Plaza greenmarket outpost, were crossed off the list for restoration. According to Grow NYC data, the food scrap drop off site at the Grand Army Plaza greenmarket was among the largest in the City, with almost 900 weekly participants and 7,000 pounds of food scraps recycled per week. But now Coop members in Park Slope or Prospect Heights will have to travel to Carroll Gardens or Fort Greene to find a city-funded site, or locate a local community

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

Grassland Birds

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of Audubon’s Conservation Ranching Initiative and Executive Director of Audubon Dakota. “Grasslands and grassland birds were declining faster than any other birds and landscape in North America—including the Amazon,” emphasizes Johnson. In fact, the 3 billion birds report demonstrated that grassland birds were declining by 53%. That is nearly twice the rate as the next species (shorebirds at 28%), which also utilize grassland habitats.

Grassland birds “sing on the wing,” marvels Willow. He encourages readers to listen to the songs of the bobolink, the upland sandpiper, and the eastern meadowlark. “The bobolink goes down to Patagonia—one of the longest migrations,” he continues. “And imagine that it comes back and those grasslands are now a Walmart parking lot.”

Johnson explains that the ranching certification, in research and devel-

opment for about eight years, came to fruition with the realization of the sharp decline in grassland birds and two other ideas. The vast majority of those prairie and grassland habitats are either owned or managed by cattle ranchers. According to the US Department of Agriculture, two fifths of the land in the US is farmland, with the majority of that dedicated to commodity crops. As of 2012, 45.4% of the 915 million acres of farmland were used for permanent pasture. As bird conservationists, Johnson says, this was a reality that could not be “escaped or ignored.”

And finally, he says, “[Audubon’s] membership has incredible power.” In fact, National Audubon Society began in 1895 with well to do women who were committed to ending the use of bird feathers in women’s hats, fasteners, and other garments. The demand for plumes threatened bird populations. The group changed public sentiment and ushered in policies to end the practice. John-

son believes Audubon is positioned to use “market mechanisms to affect changes for birds.”

How is Conservation Ranching Different from Managed Grazing?

As Margie Lempert, lead meat buyer, detailed in “Why Grazing Matters in Coop Meat Buying” (August 29, 2019), managed grazing is a sustainable farming method where livestock graze on pastures in controlled rotations. These are then rested for a period to allow the regrowth of high-quality legumes and grasses. Healthy, well-managed pasture plants such as alfalfas, dandelions, clovers, and grasses create wildlife habitat—including those needed by birds. They also replenish the land, reduce soil erosion, filter water, build soil organic matter, sequester excess carbon from the atmosphere, and encourage plant biodiversity. The Coop’s meat buying program works with farmers who use these practices.

Johnson says that conservation

ranching sets the bar even higher. Ranchers commit to standards in animal welfare, environmental stewardship, habitat management, and forage and feeding. There is no cost for farmers to take part in the program, and to date, 2.5 million acres of historic grassland ecosystems are enrolled.

The conservation ranching program is currently focused on the plains grasslands. But is expected to expand to the south and east, where it may include dairy.

With legislation such as 1918’s Migratory Bird Treaty Act no longer being enforced, Johnson argues that it’s more important than ever for consumers to vote with their dollars. “Acid rain, we solved that. Burning rivers—the Cuyahoga—we solved that [through policy].” He continues: “Those times, in many cases, are behind us. We need to use all manners of tools, including how we eat and the choices we make in the marketplace, until we can return to an equitable political alternative.” ■

Composting

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garden with capacity to process their food scraps.

At the Coop, member Sherry Showell has helmed the compost squad for years, having joined it soon after she became a Coop member in 1996. She took a break from turning compost piles only when she hit the seventh month of her pregnancy. When I started on this compost story, PSFC Membership Coordinator Annette Laskaris wrote, “Sherry is the compost guru. Hayley you want to talk to her.” Of course Annette was right.

“My hand has been in compost for a while,” said Showell, who gravitated to the compost squad after her family moved to

Brooklyn from Austin, Texas. “It was an odd thing for us to move to New York City to begin with, so just having a shift where we could work outside was really appealing to us. Just go down and get a shovel—things you don’t normally associate with living in a city.”

Showell worked on creating a “master compost certification” with city sites. And the Coop squad burgeoned. At first, the Coop’s compost went just to Garden of Union, with a squad of perhaps 15 people making about three weekly trips down Union Street balancing 18 buckets of compost at a time on wheeled Coop “U-boats,” and working to turn the pile over the weekend. As the Coop expanded, food scrap hauling expanded to half a dozen gardens and

then more, and the Coop’s compost squad grew to about 80. Teams picked up buckets every day and delivered to designated gardens. Prospect Park took Coop compost for years. The Botanic Garden took compost while some squad workers were also employed at the garden, and could stop by with a BBG truck and load up 40 buckets at a time.

With even more compost to spread around, the Coop explored using professional-level compost businesses, including micro-haulers like BK Rot and RoHo. “We needed a reset,” Showell said. “We needed someone who had a bigger capacity and could reset us to zero every week.” Paying to have the compost hauled posed a hurdle, and the Coop entreated Hepworth Farm to take the compost overflow. But Hepworth wouldn’t take the compost entirely for free, either, and Showell wants to get back to local processes.

Then the COVID-19 pandemic hit, and member labor largely ended. The Coop allowed the compost squad to continue, “because we’d be in and out of the Coop; we wouldn’t be hanging and shopping.” But organizing the squad was tough. A squad that “used to run as a fairly well-oiled machine,” administratively, began changing each month, Showell said. “People suddenly would be decamped to wherever for a while.” She kept up an email barrage to track availability. “For a couple of months I had a skeleton crew that was picking up. Community gardens pretty much shut down.” The Garden of Union capped the number of people allowed to enter, and Prospect

Park limited hauling. Despite Showell’s efforts, the squad, operating for FTOP credits, “petered out” in May. No Coop members are hauling compost now.

Showell hopes to renew talks with local haulers, and credits Hepworth Farms with helping Coop composting to continue. “Thanks for Hepworth’s being willing to do it. Otherwise it would be a disaster.”

Showell’s also considering recruiting new blood for the compost squad. She remembers organizing for compost advocacy in previous years, including with Coop member David Buckel, who ran the Red Hook Community Farm Compost Operation and died in 2018 by self-immolation in Prospect Park, leaving notes communicating his desperation over lack of movement to address the climate emergency.

Especially with compost programs slashed in the City and a coalition fighting to restore them, channeling some Coop energy into advocacy could make a difference. Showell remembers testifying to the New York City Council, taking advantage of David Buckel’s organizing prowess to coordinate covering a full range of points. “He brought it to another level,” she said. “He was a genius at organizing and bringing out the best in people. Mediocrity wasn’t an option with him. You had to make it your best.”

Cities like Seattle and San Francisco have shown that

with a serious commitment to public education and reliable, regular collection service, curbside compost collection can become as routine and cost effective as garbage and recycling collection. As New York City is forced to rethink our public spaces and our priorities during the linked economic and COVID crises, we should similarly focus on creating green jobs and reducing pollution through composting.

New York City Council Members Keith Powers and Antonio Reynoso have introduced the “Community Organics and Recycling Empowerment Act,” or CORE Act, to promote organics recycling. Supporters include Park Slope City Council Member Brad Lander, and advocates are pursuing the support of City Council Member Laurie Cumbo and others, seeking to bring back composting across the City—better and stronger than ever. ■

Hayley Gorenberg, a Coop member since 1993, is the Legal Director of New York Lawyers for the Public Interest (see NYLPI.org).



ILLUSTRATION BY EVA SCHICKER

Eva Schicker 09 2020

STATEMENT ON THE COOPERATIVE IDENTITY

DEFINITION

A cooperative is an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly owned and democratically controlled enterprise.

VALUES

Cooperatives are based on the values of self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity and solidarity. In the tradition of their founders, co-operative members believe in the ethical values of honesty, openness, social responsibility and caring for others.

PRINCIPLES

The cooperative principles are guidelines by which cooperatives put their values into practice. The International Cooperative Alliance adopted the revised Statement on the Cooperative Identity in 1995.

They are as follows:

- 1. Voluntary and Open Membership
- 2. Democratic Member Control
- 3. Member Economic Participation
- 4. Autonomy and Independence
- 5. Education, Training and Information
- 6. Cooperation Among Cooperatives
- 7. Concern for Community

REFERENCE: ICA.COOP

BACK TO WORK

HELLO COOP:

I am not sure where to send my comments so I'm sending it to these two email addresses.

My husband mentioned that the Coop is having monetary problems. I thought that if we can get Coop members to return to doing their Coop shifts the Coop could:

a. Reduce or eliminate the wages they are currently paying non-members to work. This additional cost was not in the yearly budget, right?

b. Members working their shift may be more incline to remain and shop after their shift, thereby increasing the number of shoppers.

I don't know what was the result of the earlier "Back to Work" survey, but I answered that I would be willing to go back to work.

Sincerely,

Cassandra McGowen

Editor's Note: All paid temp staff are Coop members.

ANOTHER MEMBER IDEA FOR REVENUE GENERATION

TO THE EDITOR:

The Coop is facing an immediate need for increased sales or cash. As opposed to asking for donations or raising prices, there is a clear, viable and simple option to increase revenues.

The solution is to offer a prepacked box where members do not have to wait in line to get their staples.

Each box would be \$100 and let's say the Coop sold 150 boxes per day, that's \$105,000 per week (or it could be \$50 x 300). This is much simpler than the delivery option or having the staff custom pack orders. Members are buying their groceries elsewhere, whether it be the supermarket, online delivery services or farmers markets. With a little hard work and creativity, the Park Slope Food Coop could get those sales back without

the onerous lines.

There would be a walk up area (by the receiving area) where their payment is taken immediately and box is handed over. The key is to eliminate customization and obstacles to making this work. All the while the normal waiting for full shopping would still exist.

Each day a different set of prepacked boxes would be ready for sale, rotating by day so the Basics is offered Sunday, Tuesday and Thursday and the other options are on the remaining days. Or the boxes could be made on the days where there are more deliveries for those products.

Sunday: Basics—2 gallons milk; OJ, eggs; bacon; bread; cheese; canned tuna, canned tomatoes, etc.

Monday: Snacks—cookies; chips; nuts; chocolate bars; etc.

Tuesday: Basics

Wednesday: Veggies—assorted veggies and fruits, dips and chips, etc.

Thursday: Kids Box—snacks, juices, milk, cookies, etc.

Friday: Meats—assorted chicken, sausage, cheese, etc.

Saturday: Fruits and veggies, etc.

The particulars would obviously be driven by the Coop's understanding of the highest selling items and the average transaction size. This is not an attempt to move the items that don't sell. Keeping the same box each day ensures a fairly seamless picking and packing of the box. Furthermore, specific hours could be set each day for box pickup driving the sales to a condensed time window, 8 a.m. to 11 a.m. for example, allowing the boxes to be picked and packed before the Coop opens. The program would learn which boxes and items are most popular and adjust accordingly.

Increasing prices and asking for handouts should be done if all options have been exhausted. I don't think they

have. Getting more food into the hands and mouths of members, at affordable prices in my mind is a much better solution. It's not a band aid. Take a survey to see if members would be open to getting most of what they want in a two minute transaction. Yes the employees would have to pack the boxes, but packing 150 boxes a day in an orderly manner should not be so difficult. And closing the revenue gap and keeping prices low would be beneficial for everyone.

*Regards,
Don Reed*

AN OPEN CALL FOR... BLACK VOICES

Showcasing Black Creativity at the Coop
at a Time of Critical Dialogue and Transformation



THURSDAY, OCTOBER 22ND
7:30 to 9:00 pm via Zoom

This evening, co-curated by PSFC's Fun Committee and the Diversity and Equality Committee, invites literary, musical, theater, dance and visual artists to take part. Performers and presenters can share their own poetry, monologues, choreography, photography or film and essay excerpts, for example, as well as admired (and credited) works by others.

While attendance by all is enthusiastically welcomed, participation as a presenter is reserved for Black Coop members. The evening will feature adult participants for an adult audience.

If you'd like to showcase work, please fill out the form at this link by October 8th: <https://bit.ly/3hmANvk> email psfcfun@gmail.com. General audience can RSVP now at <https://bit.ly/3kyYRgH>