

“To those devoid of imagination, a blank place on the map is a useless waste; to others, the most valuable part.” This quote by Aldo Leopold highlights the importance and wonders of the great outdoors. This was especially important in Leopold's time when wilderness was considered wasteland. Today, with issues such as habitat loss and climate change becoming more prevalent, it is important to think of wilderness as a rich and biodiverse ecosystem. I understand how people may not always value wild spaces. When I was younger, I was annoyed that I couldn't play in my backyard since it was a forested steep canyon. As I've grown, I appreciate my backyard as a wondrous place that gets visits from cougars, bears, and many other creatures that make up a healthy ecosystem.

At the age of 5, I first became interested in nature when my mom and I went on a safari in India and decided that I wanted to protect the wildlife in my hometown. For my Kindergarten Science fair project, I worked with my class to turn my school into a National Wildlife Federation (NWF) Certified Wildlife Habitat. The 4 requirements are food, water, cover, and places to raise young. We added bird feeders and set up a simple birdbath. We also planted native vegetation to provide cover and places to raise young. The science fair project won the grand prize and I felt like I was a land steward.

The next step was to turn my personal backyard into a wildlife habitat, and once I did, I was curious to see if it would attract diverse wildlife. My father and I used trail cameras and we were thrilled to capture photos of raccoons, coyotes, foxes, bobcats, bears, deer, and even a cougar! I was amazed that our town has been peacefully coexisting with wildlife. From then on, I wanted to inspire others to convert their yards to be wildlife friendly. So, my grandmother and I worked with our local nature center to make our town a NWF Community Wildlife Habitat, the first one in New Mexico. My journey of stewardship included writing blogs and giving presentations for the nature center on a variety of topics to emphasize the importance of providing habitat to our local wildlife. With human population increasing and climate change, habitat loss is a problem. These backyard habitats provide safe corridors for wildlife, thereby maintaining healthy populations within a given ecosystem. New Mexico's high desert is amongst the first to feel climate change effects. I believe it is still possible to turn things around to help us and our wild friends. Simple acts such as planting milkweed for Monarch butterflies and lowering one's carbon footprint can make a big difference. Aldo Leopold said it best: “We abuse land because we see it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect.”