

PAARNG serves as ecologic ally at Fort Indiantown Gap

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1 / 4

The Pennsylvania Army National Guard's (PAARNG) most important training site is also the site of one of Pennsylvania's most important ecosystems. Fort Indiantown Gap National Guard Training Center sits on 5,500 acres of grassland and scrubland habitat, 112 miles of streams, 294 acres of jurisdictional wetlands, and 11,000 acres of forest.

Home to PAARNG headquarters and host to more than 130,000 military personnel each year, Fort Indiantown Gap is one of the busiest Guard training sites in the nation. It also is the only live fire, maneuver military training facility in Pennsylvania as well as serving as a critical habitat to numerous plants and wildlife. At least 127 rare species live at Fort Indiantown Gap, proving a unique management challenge for the installation's Natural Resources Conservation (NRC) team.

But they've been able to rise to the challenge, meshing expertise, programs, and funds to meet all the requirements, doctrine changes, and ancillary missions. In fact, that dedication to being an ecologic ally has garnered the PAARNG Natural Resources Conservation Team a 2017 Secretary of Defense Environmental award.

"The Pennsylvania Army National Guard believes in managing the installation at the ecosystem level so all activities mutually reinforce each other to accomplish the highest quality habitat, and by extension, the highest quality of training opportunities," said Lt. Col Lane Marshall, garrison commander of Fort Indiantown Gap National Guard Training Center, PAARNG.

Fort Indiantown Gap's NRC team augments the installation's needs by coordinating with environmental specialists, foresters, and the Integrated Training Area Management (ITAM) office. Working hand-in-hand offers the best way to balance both training and environmental elements. Also guided by the Integrated Natural Resources Management Plan (INRMP), the NRC team continues to

meet the standard of excellence in compliance and to leverage necessary resources and funding.

In two years, the NRC team made strides in successfully propagating the rare and endangered Regal Fritillary Butterfly, whose only home in the eastern U.S. is the training ranges at Fort Indiantown Gap. Together with Hershey Park's Zoo America, a new technique was developed to rear the butterfly and help establish satellite populations throughout the state on Pennsylvania Game Commission lands. Using mosquito-netted carports outdoors at Zoo America, the NRC team deviated from conventional repatriating approaches and went from a handful of butterflies to more than 100 in the first year.

This repatriation project has procured nearly \$300,000 in funding, providing for research on 150 acres across four state parks and two national parks. The NRC team also has partnered with Dickinson College to propagate host plants and vegetation, such as violets, that the butterflies rely on.

Fort Indiantown Gap's NRC team also has begun monitoring the federally endangered Northern Long-eared Bat as well as other threatened or endangered species on the post including the Spotted Turtle and Wood Turtle. Along with the research staff from Temple University, they are identifying trends and factors that may affect the local species' health and stability.

The NRC team uses fire as one of its land management techniques because they've found fire promotes population growth. Burning 2,000 to 3,000 acres each year helps establish and maintain native grasslands and meadows dense with native vegetation dominated by wild flowers, forbs, and grasses that provide high quality food and habitat for a wide array of insects, birds, and game. The NRC team enhances habitat recovery by planting seedling plugs to actively proliferate native plants. To create more diverse meadows, the NRC team harvests seed with Ernst Seed Company for cleaning and packaging, and in return, the company keeps a portion of the seed to encourage native plantings throughout the region.

To further protect its investments and preserve the nearby agriculture, forests, and wetlands of the Kittatinny Ridge from development pressures and wind turbines, Fort Indiantown Gap's NRC team participates in the Army Compatible Use Buffer (ACUB) program. Through ACUB, NRC partnered with the Ward Burton Wildlife Foundation to acquire 8,500 acres of land for conservation easement and is designing a forest management plan with The Nature Conservancy. Under continued ownership by Harrisburg Capital Regional Water Board, this undeveloped habitat adjacent to DeHart Reservoir is one of the largest green spaces in the state. Several more thousands of acres are expected to be added over the next 20 years to continue to ensure the PAARNG's viability of training and conservation efforts.

"Our Natural Resources Conservation team has been exemplary in its establishment of partnerships to support mutual conservation goals," said John Fronko, environmental program manager for the PAARNG.

To raise public awareness of the diverse ecosystem at Fort Indiantown Gap, the NRC team offers numerous environmental education opportunities throughout the year. This includes butterfly and bird tours and events such as Moth Night, which draws more than 600 visitors each year. The NRC team also annually hosts activities and presentations for local, regional, state, and national conservation groups and science foundations.