



BUILD IT AND THEY WILL COME

Something odd is happening in Delaware. Although, the fact that anything happens in Delaware strikes some folks as odd. At mid-day, in plain view, a barge chugs out into Delaware Bay and dumps a load of aging New York City subway cars into the ocean. According to state marine officials, this waste disposal operation has transformed an underwater desert into a marine oasis.

More than 650 aging New York subway cars are now strewn across the ocean floor off the Delaware shore, where they provide underwater housing of outstanding quality. Word of the luxury condos spread quickly; blue sponges and mussels staked out their turf on the walls of the subway cars, flounder snuggled into the silt that settles on the roofs, and sea bass set up housekeeping inside the cars. The landscaping features native plants, giving the artificial reef a more natural appearance. Sea grass grows in and around the subway cars, carpeting the ocean floor and gently swaying in the currents.

Unfortunately, the upscale residents who have settled at Red Bird Reef have become targets for some unsavory types. Open-ocean fish such as tuna and mackerel are known to sweep through the area, gobbling up some of the residents. And more unpleasantness has erupted on the ocean surface. Commercial fishermen have descended on the reef, eager to benefit from the abundance of fish and, in the process, have tangled with recreational fishermen. The *New York Times* reports that Red Bird Reef supports 10,000 angler visits a year, compared with just 300 in 1977.

Delaware's success in repopulating barren stretches of the bay did not go unnoticed by neighboring New Jersey, which has recently requested 600 of the retired subway cars. New York does not charge for the cars and also covers delivery. New Jersey's request was a poke in the ribs for New York, which announced it would soon stop giving away its aged subway cars, having realized that they are one of the state's valuable resources.

While many other items such as shopping carts, refrigerators, and washing machines have been used to build artificial reefs, subway cars offer several advantages. They do not shift easily in storms, can accommodate many types of marine life, and those with stainless steel exteriors are especially durable. Most importantly, marine life in the area has increased 400-fold per square foot since the creation of the artificial reef.



JUNK IS BIG BUSINESS

EBay still generates more revenue, but 1-800-Got-Junk is no slouch, with 300 locations in four countries and expected revenues of \$150 million this year. This company lends a personal touch to the overwhelming task of sorting and hauling away your junk. In some cases, it rescues people who are nearly drowning in their own stuff.

Brian Scudamore founded the company in 1989 with the high-minded goal of professionalizing the trash hauling business, according to National Public Radio. More than that, he saw a need and no one to fill it. In an increasingly materialistic world, lots of people go through life collecting stuff. When that stuff becomes heaps and mounds covering work benches, spilling out of boxes, burying desks, tables, and countertops, Got Junk is ready to lend a helping hand—for a price, that is. After the death of her brother, a Seattle woman paid \$1,200 to have his house and yard cleaned and all items disposed of in preparation for a listing with a real estate agent. The workers cleaned out the house in a single afternoon and even swept the garage before they left.

In a typical scenario, skilled employees in neat uniforms tackle the yard first, sorting through piles of lumber, old wood, broken lawn furniture and rusted garden tools. They unburden the garage of weed eaters, compressors, and tackle boxes, then move on to the attic and basement where they remove stacks of old magazines and newspapers, rolls of yellowed wall paper, and the baby's crib from 1945. Workers not only set aside valuable items, but determine what items can be recycled. The company estimates that as much as 60 percent of what appears to be trash can be recycled, resold, or reused. Of course, there are always exceptions such as urns of ashes, a truck load of denture molds, 18,000 cans of expired sardines, and a diffused bomb from World War II.

Yard sales are deeply embedded in American culture, but for those who haven't been able to park in the garage for five years, a visit from 1-800-Got-Junk could be well worth the price.

PURPLE LOVE GRASS VS. GERANIUMS

A 10-acre parcel of tall-grass prairie near Peoria, Ill., was just an afterthought for owners Jerry and Teri Whitledge. The couple operates ten retail stores called The Flower Shop and is a major Illinois wholesale distributor of bedding plants and perennials.

The Whitledges bought the property to expand their existing business. The *Peoria Journal Star* reports a four-stage plan was put in place to build a warehouse and distribution center, a retail store, fields for large-scale flower production, and finally a few display gardens to showcase tall-grass prairie. That afterthought has now become the cornerstone of a growing business in native prairie plants and entire tall-grass prairie landscapes.

Seeds planted just six years ago have already produced a robust and functioning prairie ecosystem. A pond on the property that was once thick with algae is now crystal clear. Water that once gushed out of drainage tiles from neighboring farm fields is completely absorbed by the burgeoning prairie. Meadowlarks and bobwhites, birds listed by the Audubon Society as declining in number, are settling into the protective switch grass. Other birds, including pheasants, blue herons, prairie sparrows, wrens, barn swallows, blue birds, and killdeer, are also adopting this small patch of tall-grass prairie.

The birds are a delight to the Whitledges, bringing life, color, and song to land that was once a mono-culture. The birds also have healthy appetites, which has been a blessing in disguise. While most residents of central Illinois suffer through the summer swatting mosquitoes, Jerry and Teri are relatively free of the pesky insects.

The Whitledges' land not only attracts birds, but also lots of people from nearby towns. The more they learn about the grasses, forbs, and flowers, the more they appreciate the prairie that once spread across millions of acres, providing wildlife habitat, soaking up the rain, and protecting the soil with six-foot-deep roots.

Originally meant only as displays, the tall-grass prairie gardens have become a valuable educational tool. More and more people are abandoning their flashy zinnias and geraniums in favor of the subtle hues and ecological benefits of heliopsis, purple love grass, and other prairie plants. What Jerry thought would never happen has happened. Tall-grass prairie has gone commercial.

