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**PETER BERTHELSEN  
CLASS OF 1980**

What do solar panels and honey bees have in common?

At first glance, not much — though both are great for the environment. But Peter Berthelsen, a Nebraska wildlife conservationist and small business owner, sees an opportunity for an unexpected relationship. After all, he’s spent a 30-plus year career building all kinds of connections: between people and plants, wildflowers and water conservation, insects and songbirds — and solar energy and bees.

As part of his new business, Conservation Blueprint, Berthelsen works with solar development companies to create habitats for honey bees and monarch butterflies at solar panel sites. Instead of planting grass that will need to be mowed or trucking in gravel, Berthelsen designs mixtures of native wildflower seeds to plant on the land, determining which plants can grow best in the shade of the solar panels while creating a pollinator paradise, brimming with nectar and pollen.

“That’s the key to successful partnerships — bringing together multiple interests,” Berthelsen says. “At first you might not connect solar panels and pollinators, but it’s easy to combine those, providing solar panels and pollinator health benefits. In my opinion, it’s really a cool combination.”

With habitat loss being the biggest threat to ever declining populations of pollinators (who are responsible for one out of every three bites of food you take) Berthelsen has dedicated his career to providing homes and forage for butterflies and bees. To accomplish this, he recently broke from the security of a steady gig to start his own business — and he’s never been happier.

Growing up, Berthelsen was the bug kid. In third grade, his teacher brought an aquarium filled with monarch caterpillars to class; he watched as the insects transformed into chrysalises and erupted into bright orange butterflies before his class released them into the schoolyard. He was hooked. “There’s virtually nothing I can remember from the third grade, but I do remember that,” Berthelsen says. “I think that experience had a formative impact.”

Berthelsen decided in 10th grade he’d go to college to study wildlife management. Today he and his wife own a 65-acre ranch, where they cultivate pollinator habitats, harvest wildflower seeds, and provide educational tours to demonstrate sustainable farming practices — a far cry from his suburban upbringing.

Berthelsen began his professional career in 1983 by working temp jobs. He bounced around between government organizations like the U.S. Forest Service, Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, and the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department before landing a job with nonprofit organization Pheasants Forever.

He ended up staying for 27 years, working with corporate, government, and private partners across the country to create and preserve habitats for pheasants. “I loved every minute there and thought I would never leave,” Berthelsen says.

Years into his work with Pheasants Forever, Berthelsen spotted a business opportunity. “In their mission to develop wildlife habitats and work with private landowners, I saw overlap with pollinators,” he says. “There’s a very clean overlap between what you want for pheasants, quail, honey bees, monarch butterflies, and grassland songbirds. And those overlapping opportunities broaden to include sustainability and water quality, and soil health — pollinators are the glue that connects every single one of those interests.”

He realized there might be a market for working with landowners to design custom habitats crafted to keep pollinators happy and healthy — with the mission of supporting the whole ecosystem. But even with an idea he suspected could both earn a living and make a real difference, Berthelsen put it on the backburner for years.

“I am a very cautious person,” he says. “It took me a while to flip the switch.” In his resignation letter, Berthelsen equated his foray into entrepreneurship to going ice fishing: “It’s early in the season, and I’m not sure how thick the ice is.”

He feared falling through the proverbial ice — but today, his only regret is not taking the plunge sooner.

“I can’t wait to get to work every single day,” he says. “I get to interact with all kinds of different people who have an interest in doing things to benefit wildlife habitat and the environment. I feel like I get to make a difference in something that I am passionate about — how can you do better than that?”