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Engaging New York City Volunteer Stewards Through Shifting Forest Management Goals

The New York City Department of Parks & Recreation (NYC Parks) manages 7,300-acres of natural area forests by hands-on work of professional staff and volunteer stewards. Through NYC Parks' Stewardship program, trained staff engage over 8,000 volunteers annually, many of them working in natural area forests removing invasive plants, planting, and formalizing trails throughout the city. Here we discuss the evolution of Parks' community stewardship through a highly publicized tree planting campaign, the campaign's conclusion and its newest approach to forest management.

Keywords

urban natural area forest, urban land stewardship, volunteer engagement

INTRODUCTION

The New York City Department of Parks & Recreation (NYC Parks) manages 7,300-acres of natural area forests by hands-on work of professional staff and volunteer stewards. Through NYC Parks' Stewardship program, trained staff engage over 8,000 volunteers annually, many of them working in natural area forests removing invasive plants, planting, and formalizing trails throughout the city. Here we discuss the evolution of Parks' community stewardship through a highly publicized tree planting campaign, the campaign's conclusion and its newest approach to forest management.

CONTEXT

NYC Parks is the manager of 30,000 acres of municipal parkland, approximately 7,300 acres of which are natural forested areas (approximately half of the entire natural forested canopy in NYC). Parks' division of Forestry, Horticulture and Natural Resources is the primary group within NYC Parks that cares for these forests.

In 2007, the City launched MillionTrees NYC (MTNYC) reaching its goal in 2016 and engaging tens of thousands of volunteers. Half of the million trees were planted in natural areas to help restore complex forest structure. The primary way the public engaged with MTNYC was through massive volunteer tree planting events in natural areas—sometimes targeting neighboring community members and more often attracting large service, corporate, and other organized groups. During the last few years, MTNYC staff shifted community engagement from planting to stewardship, prioritizing recently planted sites and formalizing the NYC Parks Stewardship program.

As the Stewardship program matured we developed different approaches to volunteer engagement to nurture a sustainable volunteer network. Site selection went beyond recently planted trees to include other priorities including where volunteers lived, the visibility of sites and funding opportunities.

By 2018, the non-profit Natural Areas Conservancy (NAC), founded in 2012, in partnership with NYC Parks, published Forest Management Framework for New York City (FMF). This plan guides restoration and management by matching a work force appropriate to specific forest conditions. It identifies a specific role for community stewardship, requiring a shift in site selection and other program elements without changing the overall goals.

GOALS

The goal of the NYC Parks' Stewardship program is to engage New Yorkers' in the care of the city's natural resources and to build a supportive and informed public. The Stewardship team sets annual targets to assess and measure the success of these goals including; number of volunteers engaged, and hours dedicated by volunteers. We look at the rate of return volunteers and movement of volunteers from one time engagement to greater commitment in our Super

Stewards program. The staff also records acres impacted by the support of volunteers in upland forests which includes; invasives removed, trees and shrubs planted, and debris removed.



Image 1. Bayside: Green Neighborhood, Alley Pond Park, trail closure. Photo Credit, NYC Parks

APPROACH

Today, NYC Parks Stewardship supports natural areas volunteers via its four programming buckets:

Priority Projects, are selected by senior resource managers, may not have the visibility of Big Ticket projects, happen throughout the year and are important to supplementing the day to day work of our in house operation teams.

Big Ticket Events aim to attract large numbers of new volunteers at highly visible events. They are logistically complex and often involve corporate or other sponsors.

Super Stewards are advanced volunteers who receive specialized training, work independently, lead their own events, advocate and educate within their networks, and have direct access to staff to communicate issues and plan work on the ground.

Green Neighborhoods are selected for an intensive, 10-month period of engagement during which a range of stewardship events are held and volunteers are trained with the goal of building a contingent of Super Stewards to continue working in their own neighborhood.

These programming buckets allow for the agency's top down priorities and science driven approach to meet, harness and support the energy of New York's civically engaged communities. The structure allowed us to provide a bridge from MTNYC planting volunteers to long-term partnerships with groups (e.g. service, school, faith-based) and deep, place-based commitments of individual volunteers. The structure also allows us to evolve as we learn more and priorities shift. For example, we have:

- streamlined our Super Steward intake process.
- allowed Green Neighborhoods to cycle through more than one 10-month engagement period to establish long lasting partners.
- added mini-grants to provide financial support to volunteer groups.
- connected to partners and national platforms- National Trails Day, North American Spring Invasives Species Challenge, and NYC City of Water Day.
- added trail work after launching a citywide trail formalization and marketing initiative.

Our most recent challenge is selecting work sites that both meet our goal of engaging New Yorkers and follow the Forest Management Framework to utilize volunteers where work will most improve forest health.

RESOURCES

The NYC Parks Stewardship team's funding sources include city, private and grant funds. Six full time stewardship staff members are baselined with city funding. The rest of our staff, particularly the outreach team, comprised 2-3 seasonal staff and 3-4 AmeriCorps Members, are funded through a year to year commitment of NYC Service, a division of the Office of the Mayor focused on volunteerism and service. Parks' also applies for grants and receive donations from corporate partners. We have access to resources, such as plant material, capital investments in forest restoration or field staff time, that can be leveraged as match for these grants.

KEY RESULTS

Since its inception in 2015 Stewardship has engaged with over 30,000 New Yorkers who have committed 100,000 hours. These volunteers have collectively care for over 256 acres of natural areas, removing invasive vines and debris in addition to planting 93,350 trees and shrubs.

- Ongoing establishment of over two dozen partners big and small has been key, from our larger partners such as the Natural Areas Conservancy and NYC Service, to our small partners and Super Steward network.
- Resource managers better understand what forest management work volunteers of different sizes and skill levels can accomplish, with what kind of organizational support, which has helped managers plan, prioritize and set realistic goals.

FURTHER READING

<https://www.nycgovparks.org/reg/stewardship> or nyc.gov/parks/stewardship