



Community Environmental Projects as a Gateway to Greater Citizen Participation

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In late 2015, the City of New York fulfilled the promise of the “MillionTreesNYC” program by planting its millionth tree. While the program was designed primarily to make the city greener and more resilient to floods during storms like Hurricane Sandy, the project also served as a predominantly positive experience for thousands of volunteers, who then went on to become more involved in civic life in their communities. Since the vast majority of those volunteers came from white, middle-class and affluent backgrounds it is hard to determine if the lessons of New York can be applied to other sectors of the population to increase civic engagement, especially among minorities and lower-income Americans.

Benefits beyond the Environment

The “MillionTreesNYC” program is a public-private partnership that was created between Mayor Michael Bloomberg’s administration and a private nonprofit group, the New York Restoration Project. Of course, trees have many environmental benefits, including absorbing carbon, beautifying neighborhoods, creating shade, and preventing soil erosion. Yet we find another benefit: the initiative also encouraged New Yorkers to get more involved in environmental projects of all sorts and become more engaged citizens overall.

To date, little research has been done on the connections between green initiatives and enhanced citizen participation. In our recent book, *Urban Environmental Stewardship and Civic Engagement: How Planting Trees Strengthens the Roots of Democracy*, my co-authors and I present findings from a two-year study of more than seven hundred volunteer stewards who got involved in the Million Trees initiative. The findings we present in our book are consistent with those from my research on other environmental projects in New York City, Philadelphia, and Washington DC, which are known for their diverse populations. Nevertheless, the participants in all of these projects tended to be whiter, more highly educated, and more female than the cities overall.

Expanding Benefits to Historically Less-Advantaged Communities

Beyond voting and religious activities, environmental stewardship was, according to these volunteers, the most important first step toward other kinds of civic engagement. Our study not only considers participation on the days volunteers plant new trees; we follow up with volunteers a year later and find that planting trees and other types of environmental stewardship have encouraged them to be more active citizens across the board. Planting trees with other members of the community provides a gateway into greater levels of civic engagement.

Driven by the desire to give something back to their communities and share an ethic of participation with the next generation, these volunteers see environmental stewardship and civic engagement as deeply intertwined. Environmental stewardship fosters and complements other kinds of civic engagement.

- As “Sharita,” a 54 year-old African-American who lives in Queens, puts it, “I guess I started really doing them [tree plantings] because my daughter got old enough and I wanted to take her I just felt it was important to do something for the environment and this is a small thing I can do that isn’t just...recycling. This is something a little more hands on.”
- “Sonia,” a 19 year-old college student, observes that “normally when I do volunteer activities I work with people, but I’ve been trying to get into the environment. So, I’ve just been... educating myself ... about why it’s important to take care of a park and ...plant trees.”

Mutually reinforcing links between environmental participation and other forms of engagement are not restricted to tree planting projects. Preliminary research finds similar trends among volunteers working on urban farms and participants in environmental protests. Clearly, researchers and philanthropists alike should

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give more consideration to the ways environmental volunteering can redress civic deficits.

Strengthening the Strong?

People who participate in environmental activities are disproportionately white and highly educated – and they are already significantly more civically engaged than the general population. Across the partisan spectrum, people who volunteer some of their free time to take care of trees and other natural resources are also more likely to attend town or school meetings or make their voices heard at community boards; and they are more likely than most Americans and others in their communities to sign petitions, participate in protests, engage in political discussions on the Internet, and vote in elections.

Given the mutually reinforcing links between environmental volunteerism and civic participation for whites, women, and better educated people, can similar dynamics unfold across the lines of race and class? Will planting trees and digging in gardens have the same civically encouraging effects for everyone? Can communities of color and low-income communities become more civically and politically engaged in part by mounting efforts to clean up and improve their neighborhoods? What can be done to spread the benefits of participation in environmental projects more broadly, beyond those already privileged and engaged? By more fully exploring variations by race and class, researchers can learn much more about the specific benefits of environmental projects – not only for communities, but also for individuals, who may get more exercise, eat healthier foods, and spend less time online.

Across the United States and around the world, cities and communities are mounting creative efforts to plant trees, protect watersheds, promote energy efficiency, and implement environmental improvements. The environmental benefits of these efforts are already quite well understood. Now it is time to learn much more about the ways green community projects can deepen citizen participation, improve individual wellbeing, and enhance the strength and vitality of democracy in America and beyond.

Read more in Dana R. Fisher, Erika Svendsen, and James Connolly, *Urban Environmental Stewardship and Civic Engagement: How Planting Trees Strengthens the Roots of Democracy* (Routledge, 2015).