

VOICES FROM THE FIELD: A LANDSCAPE APPROACH TO COMMUNITY-BASED FOREST MANAGEMENT

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“When we focus on the heterogeneity in a landscape, we sense how intertwined its ecological systems are. An action here and now produces an effect there and then.” (1)

Background

Humans have long worked with the land and forests for their material, psychological, and spiritual well-being. Yet in modern times, this essential and multi-layered connection has been sorely strained if not altogether severed, resulting in a poverty of both a material and spiritual nature with profound and devastating consequences not only for the environment but for the human community as well.

At a landscape scale, to see the human community as a “natural” part of the landscape—indeed as much as any other ecosystem—provides us with a meaningful framework for understanding how working from within the human community can be a powerful component of broader ecological restoration. In other words, to restore to the human community its ability to experience itself as nature, embedded within the larger landscape, is a fundamental, indispensable act of environmental restoration.

With just this objective in mind, the Newforest Institute in Brooks, Maine has initiated two core community forestry projects—the Women’s Earth Project and the Urban-Rural Youth Forestry Partnership. The Women’s Earth Project engages local, mostly low-income women in active forest management in rural Maine. The Youth Forestry Partnership, on the other hand, brings urban and rural youth into long-term, ongoing relationship through cooperative forest

stewardship of both urban and rural community forestry projects. Both of these projects seek to strengthen the connection of individuals and communities to the health and vitality of the forest landscape. Underlying both these projects is our belief that, coupled with substantive knowledge of forest ecology, silviculture and permaculture, an enlivened awareness of our connectedness with the land cultivated over time has the capacity to effect real and measurable improvements in the health and sustainability of forest ecosystems.

The Opposite of Poverty is Beauty: The Women’s Earth Project

The Women’s Earth Project is intended to cultivate a relationship between rural women and the forests. Ironically, modern rural life has left management of forest systems to men and largely industrialized systems of management. Yet, everyday interaction of rural woman with the forests in an altogether healthy way is as basic and productive for the women as it is for the environment.

Our overall vision is threefold: first, to gather and capacitate a group of twelve women to successfully guide the silvicultural rehabilitation of a 275-acre parcel of high-graded forestland through a long-term, multi-generational management vision; second, to help create a community of women that can, in turn, become one of the driving forces of economic and spiritual



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well-being of the community; and third, to make the community forest project publicly available as both a model and teaching facility, as well as for broader academic research opportunities around issues of poverty, community economic development and community-based natural resource management.

This particular piece of land is a representative challenge—roughly 275 acres, the land experienced a liquidation harvest in 1999, so its current condition renders any timber harvesting negligible for another 15-20 years. While this kind of land is readily available in rural midcoast Maine and relatively affordable, the short-term economic needs of women on the lower end of the income scale make it impossible to rely solely on future timber harvests. In this case it will be important to consider how the range of non-timber forest products, and those agroforestry and permaculture practices that can contribute to economic gain in the short-term, while at the same time fostering its long-term silvicultural rehabilitation. The goal is to substitute the 20-year harvest cycle endemic to our area with a dynamic, adaptive management approach that promotes diversified, more sustainable economic gain while simultaneously promoting a healthier forest.

Our first step was to establish a 5-acre edible forest garden that will serve as an ongoing experiment. Modeled on the forest ecosystem, an edible forest garden is a perennial polyculture of multipurpose plants... an edible ecosystem, a consciously designed community of mutually beneficial plants and animals intended for human food production.” In southeast Asia such food forests have been called “gardens of complete design.” With its shorter-term yields and diversity of species, it may well prove to be an important economic component that is at the same time ecologically appropriate in making longer-term for-

est restoration projects more feasible for low-income communities. Our purpose here is to create a scalable model for community-based forest management which can be used more extensively throughout the region.

Our next step is to gather together the initial twelve women who will be part of the project. We are presently conducting informal surveys and finding overwhelming interest in participating in the project. Furthermore, the informal conversations have also shown that most of the women have an unprompted understanding of why women, and why manage the forest.

Once the initial group of women has been formed, we will begin co-planning a series of capacity-building retreats, preparing them individually and as a group to begin formulating a management plan next spring. As most of the women have little or no experience working the land or the forest, a multi-disciplinary advisory committee will be an important component in the success of the project, including extending the benefits of the program through time and across geographies.



Ultimately, the Women’s Earth Project seeks to address the many forms of poverty that ensue when individuals and communities are severed from meaningful relationships with the land. With a more holistic approach as our goal, in development economics terms we hope for the forest to help women move from the subsistence level to the livelihood level, taking their place as powerful healers in the community; indeed, ‘repairers of the breach,’ they shall call them, ‘restorers of ruined homesteads.’

*Toward a New Understanding of Forest Dependency:
The Urban-Rural Youth Forestry Partnership*

The Urban-Rural Youth Forestry Partnership is a new

program intended to establish a long-term relationship between urban and rural communities, with an initial focus between Jersey City, New Jersey and mid-coast rural Maine. Specifically, K-12 students at selected schools will work together to restore the health of both urban and rural community forests through their mutual efforts. Urban and rural youth typically share little in common except for forms of economic poverty which are common to both groups. Yet, by embarking on a shared enterprise of community forest management, the lives of both the urban and rural youth can be enriched to the same degree as the health of the urban forest and productive rural forest systems. In effect, restoration is the central goal of the project—of the health of the urban and rural forest systems, of the link between children and land, and of the ties between urban and rural communities. Children and their communities can thereby understand themselves as integral parts of a much larger landscape that transcends the typical urban-rural demarcation.

Recognizing the pressing need for understanding and strengthening the connections between urban and rural ecosystems, as well as those between children and nature, our aim is twofold: (1) to cultivate “land literacy”—that is, the ability to ‘read’ not only one’s natural environment but also those internal landscapes that allow us to connect most deeply with the natural world. The ability to experience oneself as nature will awaken in youth the spirit of care and creative leadership needed to bring about sustainable, visionary solutions to local as well as national and global environmental problems. (2) Expand the notion of forest dependency to all communities.

This year, with the 5th and 6th grade students at Morse Memorial Elementary School in Brooks, we are devel-

oping in seed form a project called “Home Again: The Hidden Story of the Forest.” Learning and applying some of the methods of silviculture as well as cultural-historical methods, the students are writing the “story,” backwards and forwards, of a 10-acre parcel of land at Newforest Institute. Starting with a brief study of the history of the New Forest in England, students will explore some of the long-standing complexities of the relationship between people and the land. Reading *The Charter of the Forest* (1217) as well as various versions of the Robin Hood legends, they can begin to make some connections between ecological and social

justice, understanding more deeply perhaps the important role the human community plays (for better or for worse) as part of the larger landscape. Then with the help of graduate students and professors from the School of Forest Resources at the University of Maine in Orono, the students will focus on Newforests 10-acre parcel, applying some of the tools of silviculture, using maps, soil samples and the like to reconstruct its land-use and ecological history and to then understand how different management choices lead to different outcomes in the forest.



Our intent is to model a long-term educational partnership between two traditionally underserved (i.e. both low income and, in Jersey City, ethnically diverse) communities whose socio-economic and other demographic similarities, despite their radically different physical landscapes, make for a compelling relationship that offers possibilities for significant shifts in ecological awareness, inclusive leadership development and cultural cross-pollination.

(1) Richard T.T. Forman and Michel Godron, *Landscape Ecology*, (John Wiley: 1986), p. vii.

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