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Leadership Learning Communities, Scientific Sustenance, and Adventures in Inspiration Feedback Loops in Baltimore, Maryland

Katherine J. Lautar
Baltimore Green Space, katherine@baltimoregreenspace.org

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In 2012, three groups of neighbors from different Baltimore, MD communities reached out individually for assistance in cleaning up, protecting, and/or improving their community forests. In response, Baltimore Green Space (BGS) launched the forest stewardship network which included both neighbors and experts in forestry. The forest stewardship program hinges on cultivating resident interest, fostering collaborations, and conducting leadership development with community members, which involves over 300 neighbors in forest environmental engagements each year in 10-12 forest patches. BGS uses the term “environmental engagement” to describe a wide range of offerings that help to either educate the community about the environment and/or engage them with the environment. Our work with forest stewards inspired original research, which concluded that 20% of Baltimore’s Tree Canopy is in forest patches outside of parks—subsequent research was conducted in 100 of those forested spaces. A partnership with University of Maryland, Baltimore County and the US Forest Service continues to grow this dataset. These patches provide distributed access to natural environments in neighborhoods and are located throughout the city, excluding the most developed area in downtown Baltimore.

Keywords

urban land stewardship, environmental education, community engagement, urban forested natural areas, forest patch

INTRODUCTION

In 2012, three groups of neighbors from different Baltimore, MD communities reached out individually for assistance in cleaning up, protecting, and/or improving their community forests. In response, Baltimore Green Space (BGS) launched the forest stewardship network which included both neighbors and experts in forestry.

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Image 1. Springfield woods

CONTEXT

Baltimore has a history of leaving land vacant, and some of those spaces now have 100-year-old forests. Neighbors often engage in battles to keep these spaces safe from development

In 2012, there was limited legitimate scientific research regarding the nature of the valuable ecological resources in urban forests. BGS was operating in a general climate that often claimed that urban forests are filled with invasive species, trash, and "madness", and that neighbors did not care for them.

At the time, the city had no system to support the community in forest stewardship, so BGS developed our own programs. There are now additional programs offered by TreeBaltimore and Baltimore City Forestry such as the Weed Warriors and TreeKeepers programs that also support forest stewards.

GOAL

At the forest stewardship program's inception, the goal or intended outcome was to provide both the community and forest with the technical support needed for the forest to thrive and serve the community. BGS intended to provide leadership development opportunities so forest stewards would understand how to care for the forest and could teach others. BGS also needed to evaluate the value of forest patches in Baltimore through scientific research in order to establish forest patches as important ecologically and valuable to the city's health and wellness.

APPROACH USED

Create a Space for Dialogue Between Forestry Experts and the Community

Image 2: Salamander Star

Our approach focuses on community leader interest and need. The basis of our work is guided by outcomes from forest stewardship meetings where community leaders discuss interests and goals for their community's forest. These meetings provide a forum where forest stewards teach and learn from one another as well as from experts. They look to our program and expert partners for guidance regarding forest health and care. Whenever possible BGS identifies forest steward needs and turns them into programming. Additionally, staff spend enough time with forest stewards and their forests to identify gaps in ecological understanding and tailor workshops to fill those gaps.

Our program also uses science as a hook as well as a driver for education and advocacy. Our Fantastic Forest Forum, which showcased the work of partner scientists and steward leaders, had 150 people in attendance. Our scientist team shares scientific results with stewards,

including high-level information they would share with other scientists. The forest stewards and scientist team are inspired by and inform each other's work. They form an inspiration closed feedback loop.

Earn Trust by Listening to and Meeting the Needs of the Community

BGS programs operate in the sweet spot of supporting steward needs and dreams. Sometimes stewards need help to clean up dumping, and other times they have dreams of hosting a fairy walk. Our programs support and encourage both. This means BGS enters uncharted waters with forest stewards and staff have shared adventures, which build confidence and team understanding. Neighbors are the best at creating events that their communities love. For example, a forest steward wanted to host a haunted forest event for years. BGS had to negotiate liability concerns before hosting this with the local forest steward. The result was 65 people and 15 "monsters" showed up in the forest at night. This exceeded attendance for previous events, including ones held during the day.

Organize and Empower the Community

Our staff has a background in community organizing, so they door knock with community leaders and model community outreach strategies. Staff also model behavior in the community that ensures partners look to the forest steward as the leader of the space. Forest stewards also know BGS expects them to lead others once they are trained in new skills. Staff lead and then co-lead events with stewards until they feel comfortable leading events themselves.

RESOURCES

Baltimore Green Space is a small nonprofit, with 2.5 staff members. Most funding is provided by local foundations and individual donations, with some federal funding. When our forest stewardship program began, BGS had no funding line specifically for community forest patches. BGS leveraged our greening, university, United States Forest Service, and Baltimore City Office of Sustainability partnerships to bolster and serve the program. BGS utilized the Baltimore City Forestry Division tree canopy data to support our work as well.

KEY RESULTS

- Leveraging our work with researchers and community members, community forests patches have been added to Baltimore City high level planning documents, including climate change resilience plans and sustainability plans.
- This work led to a level of community investment that allowed us to preserve our first community forest, Fairwood Forest, and over 150 people came there for the celebration.
- Through our partnerships, BGS learned that the majority of forest patch canopy is composed of 80% natives species, they contain healthy soils and the organic matter you'd expect to see in rural forests, and forests of 2.5 acres contain forest interior dwellers. This

new understanding of high-quality forest patches has repositioned them to be understood as critical to the ecology and for community use.

- Our work with and for the forest stewards has led to an improvement in forest conditions and increased access and use of community forests. Over 300 community members engaged in forest care and ecological education adventures.
- BGS forest stewardship programs are changing the way that the US Forest Service and other members of the scientific and ecological community think about urban forests. Urban forests were traditionally viewed as unlikely to support forest interior dwellers, lacking human interest, containing a high volume of invasive trees and poor soil quality, and assumed to be generally low quality. BGS produced evidence countering each of these myths, and established that urban forests can be a point of engagement for large numbers of neighbors. These spaces are windows into the wider wild spaces and city resident support of forest patches locally has the potential to garner more support for the wider wild lands.

Image 3. Fairwood Group

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

"Protect the Forest Patches that Protect Baltimore" https://www.baltimoresun.com/opinion/op-ed/bs-ed-op-1018-forest-patches-20171016-story.html

"Baltimore's Forest Patches: Emerald Assets for Ecosystem Services" https://baltimoregreenspace.org/wp-content/downloads/ForestPatchesWeb.pdf

"Forest Patch First Aid" https://baltimoregreenspace.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/ForestPatch_Spreads.pdf

Forest Ethnography: An approach to study the environmental history and political ecology of urban forests. 2019, Urban Ecosystems, Laura A. Ogden, Carissa Aoki,

J. Morgan Grove, Nancy Falxa Sonti, William Hall, Dexter Locke, Steward T. A. Pickett, Miriam Avins, Katie Lautar, and John Lagrosa. https://www.nrs.fs.fed.us/pubs/57869

The capacity of urban forest patches to infiltrate stormwater is influenced by soil physical properties and soil moisture. 2019, Journal of Environmental Management, Tuana H. Phillips, Matthew E. Baker, Katie Lautar, Ian Yesilonis, Mitchell Pavao-Zuckerman https://arizona.pure.elsevier.com/en/publications/the-capacity-of-urban-forest-patches-to-infiltrate-stormwater-is-