



United States Department of Agriculture
Forest Service



Urban Connections

Intent of Use: Connect with urban audiences and groups.

Applicability: Forest Service wide

Key Words: *partnerships, visitors, conservation education, forestry, water, youth*

Description of Practice:

Region 9, our most densely populated Region, relies on its Urban Connections (UC) program to make inroads into its cities in order to connect youth and adults with local green spaces, national forests, and the environment.

Urban Connections boasts nearly a decade of success. UC Coordinators live and work on-site in Boston, Chicago, Detroit, Minneapolis/St. Paul, and Milwaukee. They seek out community activists, such as State and City forest and parks staff, youth groups, schools, and churches in order to partner with them on activities and programs that educate participants about the importance of a healthy environment. Another focus is the sustainability of resources in their communities and forests.

Experience has taught the Region a lot about reaching out and sharing natural resource messages with urban audiences. According to Daryl Pridgen, Urban Connections program manager for the Region, patience is the leading attribute to the success of this program.

“It takes time to build relationships,” Pridgen says. “You won’t have a 300 person email list on day one; person by person, you will build up a good network.”

The practice of networking is a key to gaining more than just a foothold with urban audiences. Urban Connections coordinators:

1. Provide value-added information—it must be relevant and accurate in order to resonate with this audience.
2. Ability to Inspire—this involves others. We can’t do things alone.
3. Make good on their commitments—because it’s all about reputation management
4. Integration—all branches and community activists are the key to keep a pulse on what’s going on and share relevant information between communities.
5. Focus on visibility and accessibility—the job is people-centric & info-centric, with social media as an essential component.

Along the way, Pridgen has also learned how to translate the value of urban outreach into results the Forest Service can understand and leverage. He also uses regular Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) analyses to evaluate the program.

Urban Connections is a year round, top-tier to grassroots effort to build a national forest constituency. In addition to working with leadership representatives, UC coordinators participate in on-the-ground activities—they are camping with urban teenagers, serving with volunteers at career fairs, and pulling weeds in local parks. Volunteers, teachers, parents and kids all recognize our coordinators in their cities, and observe the value the Forest Service brings to them.

Many strong partnerships are celebrated in the Region 9 cities connected through Urban Connections, including those between the Forest Service and:

- Massachusetts Department of Conservation & Recreation, *Boston, MA*
- Boston Youth Environmental Network, *Boston, MA*
- Shedd Aquarium, *Chicago, IL*
- Fishin' Buddies, *Chicago, IL*
- Eden Place, *Chicago, IL*
- The Henry Ford-Greenfield Village-, *Detroit, MI*
- Greening of Detroit, *Detroit, MI*
- Keep Greater Milwaukee Beautiful, *Milwaukee, WI*
- Betty Brinn's Children Museum, *Milwaukee, WI*
- Wilderness Inquiry, *Minneapolis, MN*
- Wellstone Center, *St. Paul, MN*

Critical Success Factors:

- Be patient.
- Be accessible.
- Be where the constituency is.

Benefits:

National forests benefit from urban visitors and a constituency who understands and appreciates what's going on in the woods. Sharing this knowledge creates an informed public on both city and rural environmental and natural resource issues.

Ideas for Wider Use:

Urban Connections practices are useful in cities across the country.

Costs:

Staff salary and benefits make most of the cost.

Web resources:

Region 9's Urban Connections' homepage, at
<http://www.fs.usda.gov/detail/r9/workingtogether/?cid=stelprdb5207958>

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