

Changing Landscapes

Land use planning curriculum for natural resource professionals

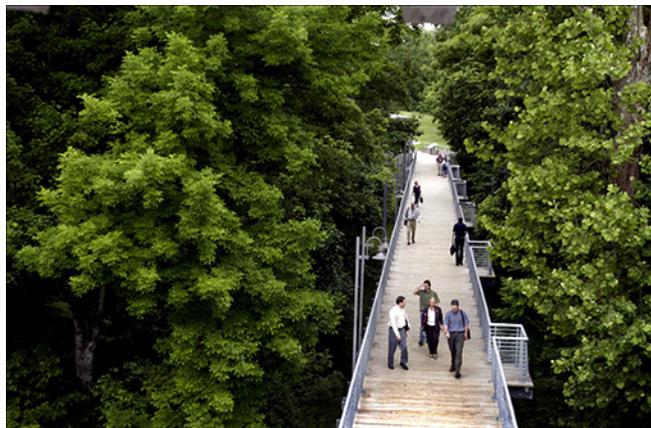
P rinciples, people, and policies

L and planning and pressures

A pproaches

N atural resource planning tools

A2: The Power of Green in Community Development



Our emotional connection to nature can be a powerful motivator for integrating natural resources into community planning and development.

Overview

This factsheet defines the relationship between green infrastructure and community development. It discusses current thinking related to community, community development, and civic environmentalism. It highlights how our emotional connection to nature and other ties to the environment can become powerful motivators for integrating natural resources more fully into the planning and community development process.

The Importance of Nature in Comprehensive Planning

In the 1860s landscape architect Frederick Law Olmstead recognized the economic, social, and environmental benefits of nature to municipalities and elevated the importance of parks and open spaces in his community planning designs. His concepts were later built upon by landscape architects and planners such as Ian McHarg, who advocated the importance of designing with nature and environmental planning in the 1960s.

It's important to consider natural resources in comprehensive plans and regulatory tools such as zoning ordinances because of the ecosystem services that nature provides to communities. Today the idea of "green infrastructure" is used to champion the importance of ecosystem processes and services in community planning. This concept maintains that planning and funding for ecological well-being is as critical to individual and community health as planning and funding the traditional grey infrastructure of streets, sewers, and utilities. In 1991, sociologist Kenneth Wilkinson offered this thought:

"Social and individual well-being cannot be achieved except in ways that also promote ecological well-being. Ecological well-being, which in the literal sense means the well-being of the house of civilization, refers explicitly to natural and other conditions that support and sustain human life. It is not accurate or appropriate to treat the environment as though it is somehow separate from the social life it supports. An active interdependency characterizes the relationship between social life and its surroundings. References to human and environmental separation cannot be justified on any grounds today, as they might have been in the past."



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Incorporating green infrastructure when planning a community is as critical to individual and community health as planning streets, sewers, and utilities.

Community

There are many definitions surrounding the concept of community as a fabric of local life, involving such things as family; supporting institutions (school, church, health care, local government, financial institutions); shared territory; social interaction; a common life; collective action; and a healthy environment. Community has been defined as an aggregate of people sharing a common interest in a particular locality. Those spatial and interactional qualities suggest the idea of “experience reinforced by space.” Thus, community is not a place; it is a place-oriented process. In this process, the locale’s environmental qualities play important roles in the health, interaction, and capacity of community.

For many sociologists, the foundation of community is social interaction—individuals and groups working together to pursue their common goals. From an interactionist’s perspective, social interaction is what creates the fabric of community and allows the emergence and development of community.

Community Development

People concerned with the development of community are interested in land use, transportation, public safety, public health, education, enterprise development, leadership, and environmental quality—all components of comprehensive planning. They are also interested in positive and useful interaction among residents, institutions, and the environment. Although economic goals are often important, community development is more than economics. It must include experiences from the successes and failures of residents working to strengthen themselves and their community. The ability of local government and organizations to empower and maintain cooperation and communication can help people and communities gain this experience.

Community development also depends on people developing a shared concept of improvement of a place. A place is improved in economic and other realities when its people are empowered through skills and experiences, especially when they work toward common goals. A healthy, accessible natural environment and the planning and management issues that surround it support progressive community development work. For those reasons, it’s important to include “green” considerations in community development.

Green Infrastructure as a Social Element: Supporting the Importance of Place in Community

In addition to supporting the environmental, human health, economic, educational, youth, safety, and civility values discussed by many authors, the natural environment also plays a significant role in the healthy and successful social lives of people by providing shared and structured symbols. Historical buildings and landscapes, monuments, trees, and hills are examples of symbols that help ground people in their everyday lives. They create feelings of identification and belonging that are important to enjoyment and well-being. As development and other changes occur, those symbols provide residents with a consistent sense of place and comfort. The relationship between people and symbols can invoke pride, attract outside attention, and stimulate economic activity.

Trees, parks, and other components of nature become even more powerful as social symbols when people perceive them to be part of a neighborhood or other social function, especially those involving family, home, play, love, health, learning, and equality. Strengthening people’s relationship with their natural environment helps build a stronger connection to a place. Because community is a place-oriented process, the connection between people and nature can be a powerful force that supports ecologically sound planning. The value of trees and nature is an important consideration when planning community development strategies. Natural resource assessments are thus a useful tool for better understanding and planning for community development.

Strengthening people’s relationship with their natural environment helps build a stronger connection to a place.

Nature and Community Capacity: A Stepping Stone in Community Development

Community capacity is defined as the strengths and assets that community members, both individually and collectively, bring to a cause. It is related to the concept of organizational capacity, or the ability to do meaningful work. Building community capacity, or the ability of the people of a place to work together toward common goals, is one critical stepping stone in community development. As people’s public activity and experiences increase, so do levels of community capacity. The degree to which community members enjoy nature and interact with their landscapes and with each other is important in building community capacity.

Public landscapes are more effective at building community capacity and meeting the needs of local citizens when those citizens are involved in the decisionmaking and planning phases of designs and projects in those landscapes. Tree planting and other highly participatory environmental projects can promote social structure and organization even in the most deteriorated neighborhoods. They can build and maintain social interaction by creating and involving block clubs, neighborhood associations, church groups, and public and private partnerships. The degree to which people are informed and involved in docent programs, tree plantings, environmental planning, environmental restoration, and other volunteer work builds capacity and boosts the potential for community development by increasing public knowledge, networking, and experiences.

Many case studies of inner-city projects support using the green infrastructure of nature to build community capacity in community development efforts. Organizations such as Philadelphia Green, Trees Atlanta, Friends of the San Francisco Urban Forest, Los Angeles Tree People, and Tree Pittsburgh have repeatedly used environmental planning and projects, which also support healthy neighborhoods and communities. These efforts help rebuild the sense and capacity of community and ameliorate the effects of drugs, crime, violence, apathy, and despair in seemingly hopeless neighborhood settings.



*Tree planting can build and maintain social interactions by involving community members.
(Photo: Phillip Rodbell, U.S. Forest Service)*

The Simple Act of Planting a Tree

Andy Lipkis of Los Angeles Tree People shared this thought on the simple act of planting a tree: “Tree planting fosters community spirit and pride, bringing people together for meaningful purposes that can build the bridges and promote the understandings that bring the neighborhood together. The initial efforts of the tree planters compound themselves as others find in the trees a deeper appreciation. It is the beginning of the formation for city-wide transformation. The newly organized group can further push for bike paths; improvements in public transportation; and changes to make the area less congested, less polluted, and more livable. The simple act of planting a tree, along with more complicated environmental planning and restoration projects, have positive effects on the economic, social, and environmental elements of community. These types of actions are especially important in ignored and disenfranchised places where the battle cry of community capacity is ‘celebrate any success.’”

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The Role of Volunteers and Civic Environmentalism

In both urban and rural places, the history of civic environmentalism is reflected in the reaction of local people to top-down decisionmaking and governance approaches. Civic environmentalism has been credited with civic renewal, community problem solving, and participatory democracy. Additional ideas that help tie environmental planning into community development are often addressed by this relatively new concept.

Concepts related to civic environmentalism include 1) working to increase collaboration among local people and organizations; and 2) developing public works projects and plans that directly engage citizens in monitoring, improving, and restoring the places in which they live.

Whether in urban or rural places, the fundamental lesson here is that environmental plans, policy, and public designs are often rejected because they do little to increase a sense of place and provide for the needs of community when those initiatives are imposed on people without their participation. There must be collective participation by local people for successful community development.

Rural places often have many of the same community development concerns as urban places, but they can be much more dependent on forests and other natural resources. In rural places, there are often long-standing economic and other community attachments to timber harvesting, natural resource extraction, recreation, and other working landscapes. Depending on many economic and environmental factors, these connections can have both positive and negative effects on the health, stabilization, and enrichment of people and places. If not approached through genuine collaboration, the relationships among people concerned about the places they live can become very heated and combative, especially when the loss of natural resources has worsened the economic and social decline of the community.

The Role of Volunteers and Civic Environmentalism

Environmental planning and projects are increasingly applied to social objectives. Consider these concepts to better integrate environmental projects into community development:

- 1) Community development is about the development of human relationships; it is not just about things.
- 2) Projects must recognize and express the values and wishes of local people.
- 3) Community requires interaction, and interaction requires trust, communications, and cooperation.
- 4) Projects must involve a commitment beyond selfish gain.
- 5) Community development requires that attention be given to all areas of local life.



Rural places often have many of the same community development concerns as urban places.

Community Development in Communities that Depend on Natural Resources

There are many approaches that help stabilize and develop rural communities that depend on the utilization of natural resources, but education may be key to all of them. Such approaches include the proper stewardship of family and privately owned forests, practicing sustained yield forestry and wise use of other natural resources, greater local participation in forest and natural resource related policy, providing greater job-training assistance to youth, securing local leadership in community decisionmaking and affairs, and organizing for united action.

Case Study – The Philadelphia Green Story



Philadelphia has long faced urban renewal issues, poverty, disinvestment, and other problems of the American industrial city. To improve the quality of life and environment in Philadelphia neighborhoods, the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society (PHS) started the Philadelphia Green Program in 1974. PHS believed that communities could be restored and empowered by cleaning and greening programs that involved residents. PHS realized that tree planting and other civic environmental programs developed with the participation and approval of local people were a key element in urban renewal—that with a little bit of education and support, people would grab on to improve the places they live.

Philadelphia Green partners, developed through “Friends” groups and other organizations such as Tree Tenders, work with city and neighborhood organizations to address blight and economic decline by transforming urban waste land into accommodating open space. The program’s partnerships have worked to plant thousands of trees, manage existing and new vacant lots, develop and preserve greenspace, revitalize parks, plant and maintain community gardens, provide training to prisoners, and provide environmental education to teachers through the Green City Teachers Program. Faced with massive city budget cuts and hundreds of declining trees, the Tree Tenders Program was started in 1993 to help educate and involve volunteers in planting and maintaining public trees. Today, the Tree Tenders program has graduated over 3,700 volunteers. Another successful project is North Philadelphia’s “Ridge on the Rise” where locally organized artwork and tree plantings helped spark interest and investment in the area.

Philadelphia Green faces a number of challenges, including the “greying” of the garden community. People interested in trees and greenspace are getting older. The program is trying to revitalize its volunteer base through a Young Friends Group and the use of social media.

The civic environmental work of Philadelphia Green continues to play a crucial role in positive environmental, social, and economic change in West Philadelphia and other neighborhoods. Similar community development work is being done by Casey Trees (<http://caseytrees.org/>) in Washington, DC, Sustainable South Bronx (<http://www.ssbx.org>) in New York, and the Los Angeles Tree People (<http://www.treepeople.org>).

Relevant Factsheets

P1 – *An American History of Planning* – Shows how planning and regulatory policy have promoted economic, social, and environmental aspects of community development.

P5 – *Principles of Ecosystem Services* – Healthy environments provide ecosystem services. These services support social systems such as parks, open space, and economic growth, all important factors in community development.

A1 – *Using Smart Growth Principles to Plan Sustainable Communities* – These planning principles support economic, environmental, and social aspects of community development.

N2 – *Comprehensive Planning for Natural Resource Conservation* – Natural resource conservation in community development is a major goal of comprehensive planning.

Resources

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Acknowledgements

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