From the USDA Forest Service and Partners

Best Practices for Hearing All Voices in Our Urban Forests

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< Practitioners from Hawaii and NYC participated in the *Learning from Place* workshop, engaging many ways of knowing urban nature. All photos courtesy of Giles Ashford.

ʻAʻohe pau ka ʻike i ka hālau hoʻokahi.

All knowledge is not taught in the same school. (Pukui 1983)

We work in places of incredible diversity—of people and landscapes. Embracing this diversity in all its forms helps us to enhance the reach and relevance of our public programs and improve our management practices. How can municipal arborists and urban foresters meaningfully connect with and be informed by different ways of seeing, knowing, thinking, valuing, and approaching the work of caring for our urban and community forests? This article spotlights principles and pathways for successful community engagement, organizing, and two-way learning discovered through our research, and begins a conversation we hope to catalyze for future editions of *City Trees*.

We offer the key framing concept of *biocultural stewardship* to ground this essay. Biocultural stewardship is an approach to caring for the larger network of social and ecological relationships in a place, wherein natural and cultural resources are considered equal in importance and the stewardship of place is inseparable from the stewardship of people. The practice of biocultural stewardship is aligned with Indigenous and local ecological knowledge systems wherein human-nature relations are considered to be interconnected and reciprocal, often spoken in terms of kinship (Turner et al. 2000, Berkes 2012). Rather than seeing humans and nature as separate entities or seeing natural resources as commodities, both are seen and treated equally as family members (Kealiikanakaoleohaililani and Giardina 2016, Pascua et al. 2017).

With this in mind, we offer a few reflections gleaned from our research and engagement with urban foresters, civic stewards, Indigenous scholars and leaders, educators, and artists from across the country, and particularly from the authors' home places of New York City and Honolulu. This list is far from exhaustive but is a place to start. We have found that although we may be experts in arboriculture and forestry, we can learn from other ways of knowing our world of trees and landscapes. Shifting to a biocultural approach and fostering cross-cultural exchanges can help us grow stronger partnerships and public support, while expanding and deepening the meaning and impact of our stewardship work.

Our first reflection is that *community outreach and engagement* practices are most effective when integrated in project conceptualization and planning and are carried through the duration. We recommend that urban foresters engage community residents as peer experts from the beginning, asking where, what, and how to plant, rather than simply planting and later asking residents to care for the trees. When hosting community meetings, consider all dimensions of accessibility, including multilingual outreach and translation, sign language and captioning, childcare and food at meetings, having meetings at different times of day and days of week, and paying people stipends for their time in consultation and dialogue. (Planners can build these stipends into their project budgets and grant applications.) Most importantly, look to hire locally when staffing up for community liaisons, workers, research assistants, and interns. There is no better way to tap into and amplify local ecological knowledge than to hire locally and invest in your community. >>

Examples of Biocultural Trainings and Cross-Cultural Dialogues

These examples are drawn from the USDA Forest Service publication, Biocultural stewardship, Indigenous and local ecological knowledge, and the urban crucible.

Hālau ʻŌhiʻa: The creation of Kekuhi Kealikanakaole, Hālau ʻŌhiʻa is an intensive professional and personal development training program in Hawaiʻi life-ways designed for natural resource and conservation practitioners.

Learning from Place: The authors organized *Learning from Place*, a two-day exchange in New York City led by Kekuhi and framed with Hālau ʻŌhiʻa approaches, exercises, and concepts. The exchange enabled natural resource practitioners from Hawai'i and NYC to learn together, to be inspired, and to create new ideas to take back into their workplaces.

Stewardship Salons: Over the course of *Learning from Place*, the authors observed a desire to keep alive this conversation and creative exchange in a community of practice subsequently named *Stewardship Salons*. Held in NYC with colleagues from research, natural resource management, and the arts, with a rotating set of teacher-facilitators, the goal was to support the "stewards of stewardship" in learning from place and from each other.

Our second reflection is that we can learn from a *community organizing approach* to build a bigger tent for stewardship. We can find points of intersection and synergy with other fields, including allies in arts/culture, transportation, labor, food, health, and housing who all have a shared commitment to improving community quality of life, sustainability, and resilience. Seek out partners in unexpected places so that you can learn from their experience, share your own, and explore new questions that you wouldn't have otherwise asked. In doing this work, we can find areas of common interest, where the urban forest is a means to achieving broad community goals, rather than an end in itself. Building relationships of trust with partners in these sectors is a long-term investment in your program, rooted in shared values and priorities.

Thirdly, we can *create "brave spaces" for dialogue, discussion, and learning* across social and cultural differences. There are many different approaches to cultivating brave spaces or safe spaces; see Arao and Clemens 2013, for example. You can set up informal learning circles and other types of spaces as long as you have a consistent set of ground rules and fair procedures that all participants agree with. Consider creating non-hierarchical spaces that cross different career stages, sectors, and sources of expertise. These dialogues take time and space to organize. Don't feel that you have to do this alone—seek professional training, facilitation, and resources.

At the same time, don't see the lack of a master teacher or paid expert facilitator as a reason not to start. If you don't have a hired facilitator, consider rotating facilitation of the learning circle so that leadership is shared (see The Circle Way). In addition to learning from each other, find ways to learn from place, recognizing nature itself as a teacher. In so doing, spend time learning and sharing names, place names, and plant names from your place—including local, traditional, and Indigenous names.

Finally, recognize that engaging in cross-cultural dialogue and fostering biocultural stewardship is a lifelong process that can inspire real change, innovation, and equity considerations that transform our institutions. Fundamentally, the approach involves shifting our lens and power-sharing, giving ourselves space and time to take chances and break down barriers. We have learned through our research that this work can only proceed at the speed of trust (see, e.g. Covey 2006, Brown 2019); and as Uncle Keoki Apokolani Carter of the Hawai'i Forest Institute expressed, we are working on "tree time."

We close this brief essay with a call to action, inviting you to share your stories of doing this work, which may be used in a future *City Trees* Roundtable (for specifics, please contact *City Trees* Editor Michelle Sutton). In this way, we can learn from each other how to grow and sustain our urban forests through biocultural stewardship.

USFS Webinar on **Biocultural stewardship: Transforming our urban and community forestry practices** available as presentation slides and podcast here.

References

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