

ROUTLEDGE EXPLORATIONS IN ENVIRONMENTAL STUDIES



Urban Environmental Stewardship and Civic Engagement

How planting trees strengthens the roots
of democracy

Dana Fisher, Erika Svendsen and
James Connolly

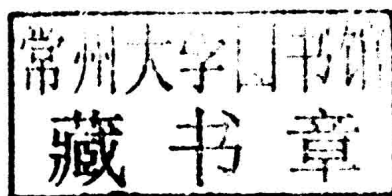
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Urban Environmental Stewardship and Civic Engagement

Once considered the antithesis of a verdant and vibrant ecosystem, cities are now being hailed as highly efficient and complex social ecological systems. Emerging from the streets of the post-industrial city are well-tended community gardens, rooftop farms, and other viable habitats capable of supporting native flora and fauna. At the forefront of this transformation are the citizens living in the cities themselves. As people around the world increasingly relocate to urban areas, this book discusses how they engage in urban stewardship and what civic participation in the environment means for democracy.

Drawing on data collected through a two-year study of volunteer stewards who planted trees as part of the MillionTreesNYC initiative in the United States, this book examines how projects like this one can make a difference to the social fabric of a city. It analyzes quantitative survey data along with qualitative interview data that enables the volunteers to share their personal stories and motivations for participating, revealing the strong link between environmental stewardship and civic engagement.

As city governments in developed countries are investing more and more in green infrastructure campaigns to change the urban landscape, this book sheds light on the social importance of these initiatives and shows how individuals' efforts to reshape their cities serve to strengthen democracy. It draws out lessons that are highly applicable to global cities and policies on sustainability and civic engagement.

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How planting trees
strengthens the roots of
democracy
*Dana R. Fisher, Erika
S. Svendsen and James
J.T. Connolly*

"There is the tree in the cramped space of curbside seeking the warmth of intermittent sunlight surviving with great hope. And there are the local people who are making a difference and seeking a wider empowerment in their civic life. This book tells a most necessary, but often overlooked, story for our times."

William R. Burch, Jr., Yale University, USA

"Fisher, Svendsen, and Connolly have written an important and engaging analysis based on first-hand experience of the tree planting initiative in New York City. The book documents how the simple act of planting trees at once serves as an act of environmental stewardship, civic engagement, community building, and public-private collaboration in support of the huge goal of planting a million trees, and ultimately building a more sustainable city and planet. Those who seek best-practice examples of active stewardship will find this book highly useful, not just for its careful analysis of results, but also for its honest account of the challenges that such 'hybrid governance' approaches must confront."

Kent E. Portney, Texas A&M University, USA

"Fisher, Svendsen and Connolly present a powerful testament to the catalytic function that environmental action can have to not just improve environmental quality but to galvanize the social interactions that shape the vitality and beauty of our cities."

Matthias Ruth, Northeastern University, USA

"Fisher, Svendsen, and Connolly's rich and rigorous study of citywide tree planting in New York provides an indispensable window on urban environmental stewardship as a practical, scalable, and inspired form of collaborative governance among public agencies, nonprofits, and engaged citizens. Yes, we can and must invest in the resilience of our citizens and our cities simultaneously, especially in the face of climate change."

Carmen Sirianni, Brandeis University, USA

To the tree planters of today and tomorrow, including our young saplings
—Conrad, Kieran, Margot, and Roan.

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This project benefited from many collaborations along the way. Our dedicated colleagues at the New York City Parks Department, the New York Restoration Project, a vibrant New York City civic community, and urban greening volunteers of all types inspired, informed, and improved this work. These professionals and activists draw out the spirit and humanity of the city by building nature into our everyday lives. We would specifically like to thank: Morgan Monaco, the former NYC Parks Director of MillionTreesNYC; former NYC Parks Commissioner Adrian Benepe; and First Deputy Commissioner Liam Kavanagh; as well as Susan Donoghue; Andrew Newman; Susan Kornacki; Fiona Watt; Bram Gunther; Jennifer Greenfeld; former New York Restoration Project Executive Director Drew Becher, and Vice President Darin Johnson for their camaraderie and help in creating an opportunity for our team to conduct this research in the middle of their tree planting seasons. We would like to offer special thanks for support and encouragement from the US Forest Service Northern Research Station, namely Michael T. Rains, for his understanding of the important role of urban natural resource management in raising the quality of life for city dwellers, and for encouragement from Thomas Schmidt, Lynne Westphal, Mark Twery, and a simply incredible local research team from the New York City Urban Field Station: Lindsay K. Campbell, Nancy Sonti, and Dexter Locke.

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1 Urban environmental stewardship and civic engagement

Introduction

My husband told us not to go. The local news reporters were talking endlessly about the coming storm. People were waiting in lines, buying water, batteries, and bottles of wine and preparing for what appeared to be inevitable: Hurricane Sandy would hit the New York City area on October 29, in less than 48 hours. Nonetheless, the city-wide tree planting event that was part of the MillionTreesNYC initiative was still on. At 8 a.m. that Sunday morning, my youngest son, Kieran, and I drove the 19 miles from Brooklyn to Queens to plant trees along the waterfront of Fort Totten, a former US Army installation on a point in Little Neck Bay where the East River meets the Long Island Sound. In some way, I felt the excitement of “storm chasing,” albeit the only thing I was in danger of at that time was distracted drivers on the Brooklyn–Queens Expressway.

When Kieran and I arrived at the planting site, we joined a crowd of young teens and families who had come out to dig in the dirt, plant trees, socialize, and do a little good before returning home to join the rest of the city in preparing for the arrival of what meteorologists were predicting would be a “perfect storm.” Beyond helping Kieran learn the basics of how plants grow and giving him a meaningful experience in nature, participating in this tree planting event was an opportunity to be actively involved in making the city more livable. We were helping the environment, but also making this little corner of New York City greener and more welcoming. While the waves picked up and the water levels rose around us, we spent a couple of hours planting young trees in the rough terrain on the peninsula. As we worked, our fellow volunteers and park staff buzzed around us, whisking away empty planting containers and offering advice.

The event staff was knowledgeable. They came by to tell us about the benefits of what we were doing together: we were helping to improve water quality, water retention, and soil composition; we were taking part in increasing biodiversity; improving habitat for flora and fauna;

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and creating shade in this area of the park. The pending storm made the desire for a healthy and strong environmental buffer along the waterfront all the more important. Talk of flooding and nature's wrath seemed less threatening to us as we secured these seedlings in the ground.

When the event came to a close, we were reluctant to leave. Energized by our work and conversations amidst the coming of what would be a devastating storm, we walked along the water's edge with fellow volunteers and took in the changing conditions. The wind was whipping up, the sky was darkening and the water rippled with wave action. As a thank-you for our work, we were given soft scarves with "MillionTreesNYC" delicately printed on the border.

(Erika Svendsen)

The volunteers at Fort Totten participated in one of seven tree planting events that took place around New York City on that weekend in October 2012. The reflection above was written by one of this book's authors shortly after the event. She was among the 1,365 New Yorkers who volunteered to assist the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation (NYC Parks) in planting 18,460 trees in parks throughout the five boroughs on that weekend.¹ As a US Forest Service research scientist, her connection with urban forestry was perhaps somewhat more defined than that of others who participated, but her motivations for attending extended beyond her professional interests. She was there on that day as a volunteer with a desire to enrich her connection to nature and her community. Given that 1,364 other New Yorkers came out to plant trees, despite the severe weather, it is clear that she was not the only person with a desire for this type of civic engagement. As a parent, she wanted to pass her love of the city and nature on to her son. Given the other families that joined her planting trees at Fort Totten and other sites around the city, she was not alone in this regard, either.

The efforts at Fort Totten were a small step toward the overall goal of planting a million trees in New York City by 2017. Enthusiastic and sustained engagement from volunteers since the program launched in 2007 has put the city on schedule to achieve this goal two years early, and this engagement has only increased in the time since the 2012 planting day. In the final stretch toward planting the millionth tree, events have attracted up to 500 volunteers at each planting site. As well, a corps of "Natural Areas Volunteers" has been recruited to engage in long-term care for the areas where trees have been planted off-street, in the city's more naturalized parks and open spaces. These volunteers augment the work of thousands who have been trained as "citizen pruners" to care for trees along streets in their neighborhoods. As a result of these ongoing initiatives, the ranks of those stewarding the urban environment have grown rapidly in New York City, where thousands of volunteers have worked in various capacities over the

past seven years to help grow the urban forest. Further, these citizen foresters represent only one aspect of the wider movement of urban environmental stewardship, where residents in New York and many other cities around the world are caring for parks, gardens, waterways, wetlands, rooftops, traffic medians, and other green and blue urban spaces.

In contrast to other more passive forms of civic participation that involve signing petitions, submitting emails, or writing checks² (for a full discussion, see particularly Skocpol 2003), the MillionTreesNYC volunteers earned their scarves by spending a windy Sunday afternoon digging in the dirt alongside their fellow New Yorkers. For these volunteers, releasing a tangled and compacted set of roots into the sloped ground was one way of expressing their vision for the city. In the dawn of Hurricane Sandy, which hobbled the basic infrastructure of the New York City region, they worked alongside elected representatives, public agencies, and non-profit organizations, reinforcing the political implications of their work. Bonding with strangers and friends, they also beautified the city, improved the health of their local environment, and, as the storm would remind them, made their city more sustainable and resilient in the face of changing global environmental conditions.

Why dig in the dirt?

This book is about a popular and emergent form of environmental stewardship. Since the MillionTreesNYC initiative began in 2007, it has mobilized some 13,000 volunteers to help New York City achieve its goal of increasing the urban forest canopy, which the city defines as “our most valuable environmental asset made up of street trees, park trees, and trees on public, private and commercial land.”³ As has been previously noted, volunteers do more than just plant trees. Many also help to maintain the planted trees, and are involved in other stewardship efforts around the city. In addition to the Natural Areas Volunteer Corps, which works away from city streets in larger open spaces and parks, just over 10,000 street trees have been formally adopted by city residents through what was called the MillionTreesNYC Stewardship Corps. In 2012, this program was rebranded as the MillionTreesNYC TreeLC program, which aims “to support, organize and track local groups who can commit to adopting street trees on a long term basis, and inspire a broad cross-section of New Yorkers to care about trees in order to ensure the survival of our growing urban forest” (City of New York 2013: 2). The rising focus on urban greening that has characterized recent developments in New York and many other cities is clearly not just about trees. It also reflects a desire on the part of local residents to play a more active role in their cities and to shape the public agenda around issues important in their communities. There is an implicit claim related to these residents’ actions that quality of life in cities is, in part, dependent upon preservation of the local environment. Tree planting, in particular, is viewed

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by volunteer stewards as a positive and productive means of enhancing the local environment, one that is made accessible through programs such as MillionTreesNYC. In short, for many urban residents, tree planting is an act of civic engagement; one that works to shape public life in a very different way than the traditional forms of civic engagement, such as voting for a candidate, adding a name to a petition, or marching in the street to protest a policy.

In contrast to the many scholars who find that individuals have become increasingly disconnected from one another and detached from the world around them (McPherson et al. 2006; see also Putnam 1995, 1996, 2000; Bellah et al. 1996), these types of volunteer stewardship activities bring people together to accomplish a shared goal—in this case planting trees to improve the city and achieve a greener vision of urbanism. In fact, volunteer stewardship provides an ideal example of what Putnam notes to be a potential “countertrend” in his observations of America’s declining social capital (Putnam 1995, 2000). Although Putnam’s analysis focuses specifically on national environmental organizations that have paid members to look at how some Americans are staying connected (see, particularly, Putnam 2000: chapter 9), this book looks at the people who have taken time out of their busy lives to get their hands dirty, planting and caring for trees around the city as a way of getting involved.

As we discuss in detail in Chapter 2, the MillionTreesNYC initiative began in 2007 as part of a movement of urban re-greening initiatives around the globe. From Dubai to Denver, from Los Angeles to New Delhi, these large-scale tree planting programs include a mix of public and private partners. The programs differ slightly in terms of their timelines and levels of institutionalization, but all are built on the premise that urban trees have multiple social and environmental benefits. Perhaps the most important of these benefits is the shared notion that tree planting is an essential part of the sustainable city. For participants working with these initiatives, planting a tree in a park or on the side of a city street is not only about physically making the city greener; it is also a means of organizing for sustainability. In this context, tree planting can be a form of activism.

In all cases, the stewardship activities associated with urban tree planting are an essential aspect of the social infrastructure that supports urban sustainability. MillionTreesNYC is, perhaps, distinct in the extent to which it has engaged residents with the process of caring for their local environment, making it a robust case for demonstrating the issues associated with urban environmental stewardship. The program has created and sustained connections with thousands of volunteers and civic associations, not only in the planting but also in the longer-term care of trees and in the decision-making around management of the growing urban forest. For example, the location, timing, and extent of tree planting are determined by the New York City Parks and Recreation Department in consultation with not-for-profit, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), which also help organize