

**Dana R. Fisher, Erika S. Svendsen, and James Connolly**, *Urban Environmental Stewardship and Civic Engagement: How Planting Trees Strengthens the Roots of Democracy*.

New York: Routledge, 2015, 131 pages. [Order info](#).

## Overall

This is a careful and highly informative study of participants in tree planting and stewardship during New York City's One Million Trees Campaign, which was part of Mayor Michael Bloomberg's PlanNYC efforts to make the city more sustainable. It presents a nuanced understanding of how stewards became involved in deeply place-based work and how they mixed and sequenced other forms of civic and political engagement in complex ways. For many, stewardship is not segmented off as an innocuous civic activity, but is part of a mix of other forms of engagement in neighborhood associations, community boards, environmental organizations, school boards, religious congregations, unions, protest, and politics (voting, petitioning, public forums). This is especially true for the most committed stewards who have engaged in repeated plantings through the campaign, as well as other stewardship organizations.

## Authors

Dana Fisher is Professor of Sociology at the University of Maryland and director of its Program for Society and the Environment. She has written widely on civic activism, social movements, and the environment. Erika Svendsen is a social scientist with the U.S. Forest Service and co-director of its NYC Urban Field Station. She is co-founder of STEW-MAP: The Stewardship Mapping and Assessment Project, which is a research methodology, community organizing approach, and partnership mapping tool for enhancing knowledge and capacity for shared stewardship. James Connolly is the Associate Director of the Barcelona Lab for Urban Environmental Justice and Sustainability.

## Research methods

Survey and observational data during planting events in 2010, as well as observation at MillionTreesNYC advisory board meetings, research subcommittees, and symposia; and follow-up interviews. A random sample of 454 volunteers, aged 18 years and older, who participated at 15 sites during the 2010 spring and fall planting days (April 24 and October 23). The sites were in the boroughs of Queens, Brooklyn, Staten Island, and the Bronx, but not in Manhattan.

## Broad perspective

Local environmental stewardship, such as planting and maintaining trees in urban settings, takes place as individual volunteer activities, through organizations, and/or through paid programs of professionalized service. It is an essential part of the larger enterprise of creating sustainable cities in the United States and around the world. In New York and other cities, this increasingly occurs through "hybrid governance," intertwining city agencies, nonprofits large and small, and

other institutions, and is given direction through broad participation in advisory board meetings, workshops, conferences, and online and social media outreach. Stewardship as civic innovation can become embedded within public agencies and constitute shared public work.

## Context

This study occurs in the context of New York City's PlaNYC2030, which began in 2007 under Mayor Michael Bloomberg and included 127 initiatives for a vision of a green city, among which MillionTreesNYC was prominent. Bloomberg teamed up with actress Bette Midler, who had founded the New York Restoration Partnership (NYRP) in 1995 and had already announced a trees campaign in 2006. It then proceeded as a public-private partnership of the city and NYRP, with various institutions – schools, universities, hospitals, public housing complexes, religious institutions, and social service organizations – making land available for planting. Bloomberg Philanthropies and David Rockefeller provided funding for planting on privately owned land, and corporate donors such as Toyota and Home Depot joined in as well. More than one hundred nongovernmental organizations signed on for planning, mobilizing volunteers, and providing small grants.

The project was framed as ecological, economic, and environmental justice. The ecological focused on the role of trees and urban forests in ecosystem services: reducing urban heat island effects, providing sinks for carbon capture, cleaning air through respiration and filtering water runoff through transpiration. The economic framing was anchored in a sustainable and beautified city that could attract and retain a dynamic workforce. Environmental justice could be enhanced by addressing racial disparities in neighborhood tree canopy cover and access to wooded outdoor areas for walking and recreation.

Broader historical precedents, as well as more recent institutional changes, set the stage for MillionTreesNYC. Urban forestry was partly rooted in shade tree commissions that had helped to spur planting earlier in the century, and the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) served as a “tree planting army” of several million under President Franklin Roosevelt across various landscapes, including some urban parks. Organizations such as the National Urban Forestry Council and American Forests helped to leverage the civic environmental ethos of the larger environmental movement. Within the U.S Forest Service (USFS), which was part of the Department of Agriculture, focus on urban forestry increased significantly, supported by the Federal Cooperative Forestry Assistance Act of 1978. The Forest Service created an Urban and Community Forestry Program, which then became part of the Forestry Title of the 1990 Farm Bill.

Many other cities – Portland, Seattle, Chicago, Austin, Denver and others – began to make tree planting and other forms of restoration in urban forests central to their strategies of sustainability. Mayor John Hickenlooper of Denver was the first to announce a million trees campaign in 2006 and Los Angeles followed soon thereafter. Some cities drew upon Forest Service professionals in various research stations. The New York City Urban Field Station of USFS was a key partner in MillionTreesNYC.

## Who are urban environmental stewards?

The authors examine various dimensions:

- *demographics*: in the surveys, somewhat more than half were women, with an average age of 33.5 years old (although the percentage among the most committed stewards was roughly 60 percent men). Self-identified Whites comprised approximately 57 percent, Hispanics 19 percent, Blacks 14 percent, and Asians 11 percent. These figures reveal a modest over-representation of Whites and a significant under-representation of Blacks and Hispanics proportional to their overall representation in the city's demographics. Respondents tended to be well educated, with significantly more having graduate and undergraduate degrees, or currently enrolled in college, than the population of the city. When controlling for education, however, minorities were over-represented.
- *politics and civic engagement*: participants identified a predominantly liberal, with a significant percentage of moderates, and a much smaller percentage of conservatives, which generally reflected the political leanings of New York City. Volunteer stewards reported being engaged in a broad spectrum of civic and political activities, more so than the American population generally. These activities included voting, signing petitions, attending public or school board meetings, protesting, and engaging in online political discussions. However, they were less likely than the general population to be involved in political parties or campaigns.
- *mobilizing volunteers*: occurred primarily through personal social ties (family and friends) and organizational affiliations (school, workplace, civic and environmental groups). Websites and email played a less significant role. Thirty percent attended with other members of an organization.

## Why do stewards become engaged?

The authors examine various dimensions:

- *values*: stewards across the U.S and in other countries are often motivated by deep commitments to the environment, to revitalizing their neighborhoods, and to responding to disasters or enhancing resilience in the face of threats. Some serve as a type of first responder. Some of the most active in stewardship are also those most embedded in other environmental organizations.
- *prior tree planting*: the vast majority (70 percent) of those surveyed during the two plantings of 2010 were novices to MillionTrees and 60 percent were novices to tree planting generally. Some 20 percent had attended 2-5 plantings during the campaign to that point and 8 percent had attended 6-19 such plantings, and some even more. The overwhelming majority (92 percent) had not been recruited through the formal MillionTreesNYC Stewardship Corps, possibly because outreach through the Corps was only one year old at that point.

- *local environmental and stewardship groups*: approximately one-third of the volunteers surveyed had prior experience through other local groups, such as the NYRP, the Botanic Gardens of the various boroughs, Green Thumb (a community gardening program of the Parks department), Partnerships for Parks, the Central Parks Conservancy (which is part of the Nature Conservancy), and the Bronx River Alliance (a river restoration group active on ecological, recreational, economic, and educational fronts).

Most of these groups received small grants to help integrate MillionTreesNYC into their programming, messaging, and training, which included planting and continued tree stewardship. About 13 percent of volunteer stewards were members of environmental groups not affiliated with the campaign. However, 72 percent of those who were involved in more than 20 tree planting in the previous five years were members of various local stewardship groups, and many had other organizational and professional ties that helped bring them in and keep them involved. Committed stewards were also more likely to be civically and politically engaged, thus adding considerably more coherent purposive and strategic motives for involvement in a multi-sector local environmental governance network.

However, 75 percent of first-time volunteers did not report knowing anyone from such groups, and most of these came through family and friendship networks. Participation may be a gateway to further involvement, but the time frame of the study limits generalization here.

## Stories stewards tell

The authors conducted follow-up telephone interviews approximately one year after the initial surveys were completed to explore their engagement more fully. Aiming for a stratified sample of an equal number of ten from each of the four major racial/ethnic groups, they succeeded in interviewing 10 Hispanic, 10 White, 7 Asian, and 7 Black respondents. Women constituted 71 percent of the sample and the average age was 35 years. Educational attainment levels were higher for Asian and White respondents than for the other two groups.

Among the themes that emerged from the interviews were the following:

- *commitment to New York City and to one's neighborhood*: stewards, including some from nearby suburban areas, expressed deep affection for the city, as well as for their local neighborhoods. One woman expressed how much Central Park meant to her in her jogging, walking, and photography, and since she could not contribute financially to the park conservancy, planting trees elsewhere in the city was a way of giving back something valuable. Engaging in such work could provide a sense of joy and pride.
- *inspiring commitment in children*: engaging their own and others' kids in something fun and tangible, yet with big purpose for the future.
- *maintaining involvement through other groups*: these included youth groups (such as the Boy Scouts) and park associations, as well as national environmental organizations.

Being contacted by such groups after the plantings was an important factor in staying engaged.

- *continuity with earlier community engagement*: having been involved through one's religious congregation to take care of "God's green earth," as well as prior engagement in beach and park cleanups through schools, were important. Some had years of protest activity while teenagers. Union membership was also important. One 49-year old African American had been a union member for 25 years and was active in governance of his local, as well as in protest activities.
- *continuity with other forms of civic and political engagement*: compared to the general population, stewards had relatively high engagement over a decade and more in voting, speaking at community forums and school board meetings, and contacting a government representative. Participation was especially high in community boards and neighborhood associations, as well as environmental groups.

Overall, the interviews reveal multiple and intertwining pathways of engagement. Strong union, church, and voting experience can lead to stewardship, and absent structured institutional anchoring, stewardship can lead to broader forms of engagement as democratic citizens. As union and church membership decline overall, stewardship activities become more essential.

## In conclusion

This insightful book presents a complex understanding of motives, mixes, and sequencing of tree stewardship with other forms of civic and political engagement in a large city, with potential lessons across a broader landscape of place-based action for sustainability and resilience in the face of climate change.

Reviewed by Carmen Sirianni, editor-in-chief of **CivicGreen**

Posted: 10/21/20