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The Meskwaka Tree Project: Ten Years of Community Forestry Volunteer Development

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Abstract

Connecticut is highly urbanized, with dense tree cover, and this produces tree-versus-people conflicts that include public safety issues. Yet communities lack sufficient resources to develop community forestry programs. This article reports on the development, implementation, and outcomes of the Meskwaka Tree Project, an outreach education program for community forestry volunteers developed based on Roger's Diffusion of Innovations communications model. In 1992, the Meskwaka Tree Project began to equip community volunteers with the knowledge, skills, and contacts needed to create or improve community forestry programs and address public tree issues. Data shows that Meskwaka-trained volunteers helped conserve public trees and improved public safety.

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Background

Connecticut is an urban state that is ranked fifth most densely populated and yet is heavily (59%) forested. Residents derive many essential benefits from a sustainable community forest and public trees--air is cleaner, property is more valuable, violent behavior is reduced, heat island effect is mitigated, noise is deadened, and non-point source pollution is reduced. To supply these benefits, community forests and public trees must be well managed, but communities often lack sufficient financial resources necessary to employ well-trained professionals to sustain high-quality community forestry programs.

Public safety is the highest priority of local government, and trees are risks. All trees can cause damage to property and can injure or kill people if they fail, especially if they have not been maintained and are located where people and public trees come in frequent contact. But acceptable risk can be managed if cities and towns have well-developed community forestry programs.

Community Forestry Needs Assessment

In 1991 a statewide needs assessment was conducted by the University of Connecticut Cooperative Extension System to determine the quality of municipal community forestry programs. The survey audience included tree wardens, elected municipal officials, community forestry volunteers, and municipal employees (n=635). The survey determined that:

Public tree planting and maintenance is under funded.

Many public trees are old and decaying thereby increasing risk to public safety.

1. Inappropriate trees are selected.
2. Trees are incorrectly planted.

3. Young, newly planted trees are not cared for and are often damaged.
4. Municipal personnel often do not possess tree care knowledge and skills.
5. Citizen participation in community forestry is limited.
6. Local officials do not recognize the need to manage and care for public trees.

These problems clearly were rooted in public policy decision making at the community level. In response, developing well-trained volunteers to perform community forestry functions, including, if not emphasizing, public policy efforts, was identified as an appropriate response to developing high-quality community forestry programs.

Program Development: The Meskwaka Tree Project

Studies have shown that community forestry volunteers can enhance community forestry efforts, especially in communities deficient in financial and professional resources (Kuser, 2000; McCullough, 1995). To be successful, volunteers must be motivated and possess specialized knowledge and skills, with identifying motivated volunteers as the most important first step in developing volunteer-based programs (Brudney, 1990). Once volunteers have been identified and recruited, outreach education programs can be more efficiently and effectively designed and implemented (Tyson, 2002).

Communication models exist that can aid Extension program design, development, delivery, and assessment and communication scientists recognize that improved communications skills can produce desirable changes in the behaviors of target audiences for specifically identified purposes (Andreasen, 1995; Tyson, 2002). Roger's (1995) Diffusion of Innovations Model emphasizes the importance of assessing target audiences and contributes important ideas for sequencing the various stages of program development. In 1992, Roger's model was used to guide the development of a new statewide outreach education program called the "Meskwaka Tree Project"; the purpose was to train and support Connecticut community forestry volunteers.

Roger's model identifies recruitment as the first and most critical step in volunteer development. People interested in volunteering for community forestry activities were required to complete a thorough questionnaire regarding their past and current volunteer activities to help determine their willingness (motivation) to participate in public policy processes. Applicants who had demonstrated by example willingness to meet with municipal leaders, work with the media, and engage in public speaking, and who were will to volunteer for at least 1 year, were accepted into the program.

They then participated in the 3-day, 2-night Meskwaka Tree Project Weekend, where they gained knowledge and skills in tree biology, tree care, fundraising, media relations, community affairs, tree law, and marketing. Participants also met key state and local decision makers and subject experts. They returned home with the knowledge, skills, contacts, and support needed to initiate new community forestry programs or enhance existing ones.

Outcomes

From 1992 to 2001, over 202 community forestry volunteers from 69 Connecticut communities and three other states participated in the Meskwaka Tree Project. A follow-up assessment of these participants was completed 10 years after (2002) the start of the program. The assessment found that these volunteers have initiated or participated in a wide variety of community forestry efforts. For example:

- 38 communities have written and passed shade tree ordinances,
- 28 shade tree commissions have been established,
- More than 3,830 new public trees have been planted,
- 21 cities and towns have conducted volunteer organized shade tree inventories,
- Three nonprofit forestry organizations have been founded, and
- Seven municipal memorial tree programs have been created.

Total volunteer hours contributed average 5,240 annually.

Conclusions

The Meskwaka Tree Project has provided Connecticut municipalities with well-trained community forestry volunteers for 10 years. People willing to participate in public policy processes necessary for effective community forestry programming were identified and recruited from local municipalities and were provided with training in community forestry. These volunteers remained motivated and dedicated to community forestry activities in their communities, successfully accomplishing many tasks, and filled a need that otherwise could not be filled in most communities due to limited financial resources and professionals. The accomplishments of Meskwaka Tree Project volunteers also demonstrate the effectiveness of Roger's Diffusion of Innovations Model as an appropriate tool for Extension outreach.

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