

Hixon Center for Urban Ecology Student Research Fellows

Motivating and Sustaining Urban Ecological Stewardship at the Neighborhood Scale

Case Studies in Three Baltimore Neighborhoods

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Problem:

In an increasingly urban world, social and natural scientists have come to recognize cities as ecosystems with interactions and interdependence as complex and dynamic as natural ecosystems. Social ecology researchers are using new methods to characterize how social dynamics impact vegetation structure in cities, at the landscape scale. Among many questions they are asking how the motivations, pathways and capacities for vegetation management vary among households and communities at the landscape scale. Despite the importance of this wide lens view, researchers also recognize a need to understand the processes and motivations for vegetation management at the neighborhood level.

Understanding individual and community motivations for stewardship projects also has critical policy significance at a time when local urban afforestation efforts are on the rise. Baltimore, along with a growing number of cities around the country, has recently adopted an urban tree canopy goal to increase the social and economic benefits provided by urban vegetation. The Baltimore urban forest management plan suggests that the city will rely heavily on citizen participation in urban forest management and highlights the need for capacity building in the city's community forestry programs to engage citizens city-wide.



Neighborhood stewards amongst pot plantings on their block in East Baltimore

Approach:

Using the ethnographic methods of semi-structured interviews, oral history and participant observation, I gathered qualitative data from community members and institutional informants on past and present urban ecological stewardship projects in three communities of Baltimore city. By contributing a richer understanding of what motivates urban stewards to initiate neighborhood-scale projects and what resources they depend upon to sustain them, I sought to supplement the on-going research findings of the larger-scale Baltimore Ecosystem Study and the Stewardship Mapping and Assessment Project as well as providing in-



Stewards in the Pigtown neighborhood, in the playground garden they created

formation to local government and non-profit groups seeking to foster citizen participation.

Discussion:

Interviews with neighborhood stewards revealed a diversity of individual motivations for initiating neighborhood-level stewardship projects, with significant areas of overlap. I was able to create a typology based on the primary initial motivations identified by interviewees, consisting of four basic types: personal interest in plants or gardening, clean-up and beautification, reclamation of territory and the desire for community involvement. These initial motivations may be seen as 'points of entry' for community projects from which a much wider array of values, ideals and desires surrounding stewardship, empowerment and community development seem to emerge. Peripheral and unexpected benefits realized over the course of a project's life were often cited as motivations for sustaining activities or beginning new projects, blurring distinctions between initial categories. Horizontal social networks between informal community groups was also revealed to be important both in sustaining existing projects and allowing for the emergence of new ones, with community umbrella organizations and larger non-profits playing an important role in network-formation.