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Aligning City Forest Management by Engaging Community Partners in New York City

New York City contains 10,000 acres of forested natural areas, 8.5 million residents, and dozens of organizations dedicated to improving the condition of natural areas. The New York City Department of Parks and Recreation (NYC Parks) manages the majority 7,300-acres of natural area forests through hands-on work and contracts overseen by the Division of Forestry, Horticulture and Natural Resources. Additional capacity to manage and steward NYC Parks' forest resources is created through nurturing community organizations by the non-profit Natural Areas Conservancy (NAC). Here I discuss how NAC's Conservancy Engagement Program is aligning forest management under NYC's forest management plan to care for the forest.

Keywords

urban natural area forest, urban forest management, urban forest restoration

INTRODUCTION

New York City contains 10,000 acres of forested natural areas, 8.5 million residents, and dozens of organizations dedicated to improving the condition of natural areas. The New York City Department of Parks and Recreation (NYC Parks) manages the majority 7,300-acres of natural area forests through hands-on work and contracts overseen by the Division of Forestry, Horticulture and Natural Resources. Additional capacity to manage and steward NYC Parks' forest resources is created through nurturing community organizations by the non-profit Natural Areas Conservancy (NAC). Here I discuss how NAC's Conservancy Engagement Program is aligning forest management under NYC's forest management plan to care for the forest.

CONTEXT

In 2012, NAC was created to work in partnership with NYC Parks to ensure the conservation of 10,000 acres of natural parkland and advance park management by focusing on science-based regional planning, ensuring healthy forests, and promoting coastal resilience. In 2014, NAC completed an ecological assessment of 7,300 acres of natural area forests in the NYC Parks system and contracted a social assessment of parkland by United States Forest Service social scientists. The resulting data was used to create the 2018 *Forest Management Framework for New York City* (FMF) a plan to guide restoration and management of the resource (see Pregitzer, et al. 2018).

The FMF goal to achieve 100% active management will cost \$385 million over 25 years and will result in healthy forests, expanded recreational opportunities for all New Yorkers, and financially supported forests citywide. To achieve the FMF goals, the work of all entities conducting forest management in NYC Parks, including 22 non-profit park conservancies and local community stewards, must be aligned and tracked. This effort is promoted through the NAC's Conservancy Engagement Program.

The NAC Conservancy Engagement Program is a strategy that resources non-profit practitioners and their community partners with the tools, data, analysis, and targeted recommendations needed to align and track their forest management work in the context of the citywide FMF. Each engagement program is tailored to the unique resources of the non-profit and the forest conditions found within the park that they manage.

GOALS

The overarching goals of the NAC Conservancy Engagement Program are to increase capacity, leverage the existing forest management work that city conservancies conduct, and align future work with the FMF in order to achieve 100% active forest management in NYC. NAC accomplishes this by creating specific park-level products that inform conservancies about their forest conditions through interpretation and analysis of data and by providing the planning tools that they will use to manage their forests in the future, as well as increase and leverage private sector funding to achieve those restoration goals.

APPROACH USED

The NAC's Conservancy Engagement Program is a grant-funded and free opportunity that was made available to non-profit organizations through a competitive Request for Application. Eligible applicants were park conservancies with management capability, a record of forest restoration (including local stewardship), and the ability to commit an average of three hours a week to the program.



Image 1. Wildlife Conservation Society staff at the Bronx Zoo to enter Rapid Site Assessment data in tablet provided through the NAC's Conservancy Engagement Program in Bronx Park Forest, New York City. Photo credit: Natural Areas Conservancy

During 2018 and 2019, six conservancies across four parks received intensive forest management support from March to October and participated in an iterative process of presentations, workshops, trainings, and data collection. As the first step in the program, NAC summarized and presented background materials on past conservancy and NYC Parks' management strategies, management and master plans, assessments, and social surveys to provide context to citywide restoration and management work. In addition to the background context, NAC presented forest condition results for each park based on analysis of the NAC's citywide ecological assessment data collected in 2014. The forest conditions trigger work intensity designations and their associated costs based on the strategies to conduct management. During workshoping of this analysis with the conservancies, organizational and park priorities

and objectives were incorporated into the discussions which resulted in additional buy-in for forest management approaches. NAC used the analysis and discussion results to provide management recommendations for each park, along with cost estimates to implement the work under various options based on current and proposed conservancy capacities.

Parallel with the planning workshops and presentations were a series of staff trainings on the field monitoring protocols and forest restoration planning tools used by both NAC and NYC Parks to inform management. NAC trained conservancies in the Rapid Site Assessment (RSA) monitoring methodology that NYC Parks adopted as part of the FMF implementation. The RSA is conducted prior to management intervention on a proposed worksite to assess ecological conditions and direct the work through various strategies (for example, long-term monitoring, in-house crew restoration, and contractor work). The site is re-assessed in the future to monitor site conditions, assess the efficacy of the work, and determine any required follow-up management. As part of the training, conservancies are given the tools and equipment needed to collect the ecological data in their parks, including tablets and access to the ArcGIS Collector application through online geographic information system licenses and data plans, as needed. Conservancy staff are also trained on identifying the forest community type at each work site through the Forest Identification and Restoration Selection Tool (FIRST). NAC created FIRST through a Wildlife Conservation Society Climate Adaptation Planning Grant. FIRST is an online, automated, dichotomous key which results in determination of the current forest type and recommendations for planting lists of appropriate native woody species, based on the best-adapted trees typical of the forest community type, given climate change condition projections (see <http://naturalareasnyc.org/content/climate/first-tool/#/> accessed December 11, 2019). Conservancies will use the RSA and FIRST in their future forest management planning to align their management with the citywide FMF initiative.

Culminating the trainings, data collection, workshops, and presentations, the NAC presents a five-year management plan to the conservancies to advance forest health and resilience. Priority projects are highlighted and cost estimates for those projects are made based on the recommended management approach. After the program is completed, conservancies will monitor their forests in perpetuity, uploading their data into the larger citywide database of forest health and threat conditions in order to align the work of forest restoration practitioners across the city. This work is supported by annual planning meetings with NYC Parks and NAC.

RESOURCES

The NAC Conservancy Engagement Program was funded through grants from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, the New York Community Trust, and Tiffany Foundation in 2018, and in 2019 by a National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, Long Island Sound Futures Fund grant. During the program, NAC leveraged the time and funding of the six targeted park conservancies to create deliverables. NAC also relied upon NYC Parks support and NAC ecological assessment data completed in 2014.

KEY RESULTS

- Under the NAC Conservancy Engagement Program in 2018 and 2019, we have increased the capacity to manage forests in NYC by aligning and activating the work of 70 conservancy staff from six non-profit conservancy groups through guidance and actionable management plans. We have developed better-aligned forest management plans for 546 acres of forest across the city.
- Through advocacy efforts of NAC and other partner organizations, the New York City Council allocated an additional \$4M in expense funding to NYC Parks for fiscal year 2020, allowing for the deployment of two dedicated forest management crews to Forest Park, Queens and Prospect Park, Brooklyn, which was directly informed by the Conservancy Engagement Program recommendations for each of those parks



Image 2. Natural Areas Conservancy staff conducting field training in Rapid Site Assessment and FIRST tool in Riverside Park, New York, New York with the Riverside Park Conservancy prior to forest management, 2019. Photo credit: Natural Areas Conservancy

- The forest management recommendations that resulted from the Conservancy Engagement Program resulted in \$175K in grant funding secured for forest management and planning in Forest Park and Bronx Park. As a proof of concept, \$100,000 was allocated to NYC Parks by the New York City Council for a contract with NAC to extend the Conservancy Engagement Program in 2020 to two additional parks.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

<http://naturalareasnyc.org/content/forests/fmf-f6-hires-singles-reduced.pdf>

<http://naturalareasnyc.org/content/climate/first-tool/#/>

<http://naturalareasnyc.org/what-we-do>

LITERATURE CITED

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<http://naturalareasnyc.org/content/climate/first-tool/#/> accessed December 11, 2019