

Background

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Research and experience have demonstrated that environmental stewardship, including a wide variety of community greening efforts, can play a key role in helping communities recover from disasters and disturbance. These include both natural disturbances—for example, hurricanes, floods, tornadoes, and wildfire—and human-caused disasters, such as terrorism and other forms of violence. Moreover, we recognize that, now more than ever in the age of the Anthropocene, all disturbances are rooted in both natural and social causes.

The immediate aftermath of disturbance events requires a swift response and mitigation that focuses on health and safety. Various government programs are devoted to this work within the USDA Forest Service (e.g., incident command teams, urban forest strike teams, burned area emergency response) and in other federal, state, and local agencies. However, mid- to long-term recovery efforts typically have a different constellation of needs, including rebuilding both infrastructure and communities. As communities pull together to recover and rebuild, the mid- to long-term recovery stages offer many opportunities to adapt, learn, and cultivate community resilience.

Greening and community-based natural resource stewardship can play a large role in longer-term recovery; research and practice have demonstrated that these stewardship activities are key to *enabling recovery* and *building readiness and long-term resilience to future disturbances*. Stories related to enabling readiness, recovery, and resilience through stewardship are the focus of this book.

What is “Community Greening” and Community-Based Stewardship?

Stewardship is “the activity or job of protecting and being responsible for something.”⁵ When we refer to environmental or natural resource stewardship, we mean, very simply, people’s efforts to take care of the natural world around us. These efforts may include caring for private residential land (e.g., people’s yards), but the focus of this book tends to be on the formal and informal activities that take place on nonresidential lands and public, shared places. The individuals who engage in these activities may be part of large well-funded organizations, or they may be unpaid volunteers, or self-appointed caretakers.

Natural resource stewardship includes activities such as tree planting and/or pruning, community gardening, removal of litter or invasive species, creation of public green spaces, and other community greening efforts. It can also extend beyond the land, and include activities that help conserve or improve water or air, or address environmental issues (such as

5. Merriam Webster Online, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/stewardship>. (accessed 11/16/2017).

pollution and forms of energy production) that have an impact on land, water, and air quality. Stewardship takes the form not only of hands-on work, but also of environmental education and community advocacy to shape and influence the governance and use of natural resources. A description of environmental stewardship used by Svendsen, Campbell, and colleagues (Connolly et al. 2013, Fisher et al. 2012, Svendsen and Campbell 2008) notes that these groups “work to conserve, manage, monitor, advocate for, and/or educate the public about their local environments.” It is important to acknowledge that stewardship groups are not only environmental in their focus. Many civic stewards focus on youth, seniors, arts, or civic engagement—and engage in stewardship practices in order to enhance community quality of life. Often, the act of stewarding involves members of the community meeting or getting to know one another more substantially.

The benefits of such community-based stewardship can be broad: facilitating medium and longer-term community disturbance recovery; strengthening social trust, enhancing civic participation, and fostering creative innovation; reducing vulnerability to future disturbances; and helping to address chronic vulnerabilities and socioeconomic inequalities in communities (McMillen et al. 2016, Tidball and Krasny 2014).

This book is designed to share ideas emerging from the research and practice of stewardship and resilience across the United States, including both Forest Service projects and projects close to the Forest Service mission. While many of the chapters come from the natural resources field, we expand our horizons to learn from voices in planning, design, and the arts—given that acts of participatory planning and community placemaking often include stewardship efforts. Our aim is to identify best practices, and explore new forms of collaboration. Each chapter is an exploration of a specific site, community-based project, or a national or international program to support such efforts. However, all chapters make an attempt to discuss lessons learned for other organizations and places. In this way, we hope to create a compendium of emerging best practices that are effective in strengthening the role of community stewardship in resilience and recovery.

Why is the Forest Service Interested in Natural Resource Stewardship Beyond National Forest Boundaries?

Since its establishment in the early 20th century, the Forest Service has been a conservation agency with a mission to engage in restoration and stewardship activities. However, when the Forest Service was established, 80 percent of U.S. residents lived in rural areas. Now, 83 percent of the U.S. population lives

in urban and urbanizing areas, where conservation and restoration are also greatly needed.

The mission statement of the Forest Service remains unchanged, but as demographic shifts occur, the Forest Service understands that “caring for the land and serving people” involves stewardship where people live. Also, the Forest Service is congressionally mandated to help steward all the nation’s forests—not only the National Forests, but also forests on state, local, and private lands, including our urban and community forests. Therefore, just as the Forest Service restored the ecologically degraded landscapes and watersheds of a century ago, so it also seeks to enable restoration and stewardship in urban areas through Research and Development and State and Private Forestry programs that provide scientific information, technical assistance, and financial support.

Finally, as disturbances such as hurricanes, floods, tornados, wild-fire, and acts of terrorism and other forms of human-caused violence seem increasingly common, communities are searching for ways to recover and rebuild in meaningful, durable ways. Engaging in natural resource stewardship activities becomes a way to make both the ecological and social fabric of a community stronger and more resilient.

Why do Communities Engage in Natural Resource Stewardship and What are the Benefits?

Stewardship is a form of empowerment. It is a means by which individuals and communities contribute to the beauty and health of their environment. It can also bestow a sense of purpose, providing an outlet for the natural human instinct to help, nurture, care, and love—both for the natural environment and for the people around us.

While stewardship activities help neighborhoods and infrastructure recover physically, the act of coming together, working side-by-side, and creating change helps individuals and communities recover emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually. In some cases, stewardship can help communities become stronger than they were before the trauma (McMillen et al. 2016, Tidball and Krasny 2014).

Especially in communities that have experienced hardship, economic divestment, or natural disasters, stewardship can be a way that residents connect, beautify, and restore the landscape. It is a way for people who may not feel they have a voice, to make a statement and have a tangible, visual impact and to stimulate public life. The benefits of stewardship in these areas extend beyond those who directly engage: many in the community experience a sense of pride and ownership, even if they were not involved in the

initial planning or execution. And neighborhood-level efforts can catalyze citywide changes. We also find that the benefits of engaging in stewardship activities extend into the future. Just as time spent together can build and strengthen a friendship, communities can be built and strengthened in much the same way. This creates both individuals and communities that are more resilient to future disturbances.

Key Messages from Chapters and Organization of the Book

The chapters of this book contain case studies, research, and national and international examples and programs. The chapters describe a variety of disturbance types, from fire, to storms, to terrorism. Some of the chapters are from practitioners directly involved in community-based recovery and resilience. Some of the authors are the leaders of national programs that support recovery and resilience activities in the Forest Service, other federal agencies, and nongovernmental organizations. Others are researchers who bring social science perspectives to processes of community recovery and re-greening. What unites the chapters is a focus on community stewardship and how it helps people both recover from disaster and create readiness for and resilience to the next disturbance.

The **Forewords** and this **Background** are designed to place this book in context. The Forest Service cares deeply about the power of community-based stewardship of natural resources, and the agency recognizes its role in helping navigate the complexities of stewarding all of our nation's forests and grasslands for the benefit of current and future generations. Similarly, the TKF Foundation, which has been a major supporter of this work and helped to make possible the *Cultivating Stewardship, Recovery, and Resilience Workshop* that served as the precursor and inspiration for this book, recognizes the value and healing power of connecting people with the landscape. As such, these two organizations make natural partners in the pursuit to illuminate better practices and encourage resiliency through stewardship.

The **Case Studies** section intends to capture the state of the science and practice around the design, stewardship, and community use of green space in response to different acute and chronic disturbances. These chapters focus primarily on the response and recovery of communities to various stressors, but also contain examples that speak to readiness. Throughout all cases, there is an emphasis on cultivating resilience.

The **Synergies** section includes programs, partnerships, and networks at multiple sites that are helping to prepare communities and foster stewardship responses. Finally, the **Epilogue** summarizes key points and take-home

lessons and emphasizes the importance of disseminating the lesson learned from these chapters to communities beyond those represented in this book.

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