

Epilogue: The Power of Stewardship

Sarah J. Hines,¹ Lindsay K. Campbell,²
Nancy Falxa Sonti,³ Erika Svendsen,² David Maddox⁴

1. USDA Forest Service, Baltimore, Maryland
2. USDA Forest Service, New York, New York
3. USDA Forest Service, Baltimore, Maryland
4. The Nature of Cities, New York, New York

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Massive social-ecological disturbance and disasters have struck the United States within recent years. In 2017 alone, the country dealt with devastation, destruction, and displacement from three major hurricanes, a nearly unprecedented wildfire season, and senseless acts of violence and terrorism. The scope and scale of these disasters requires appropriate, large-scale coordinated emergency response and recovery efforts. Many of our colleagues have expressed, through their experiences in this book, that there is a need to acknowledge that longer-term mitigation and adaptation are critical to building long-term resilience. Both research and practice demonstrate that natural resource stewardship activities can play a role in helping communities to recover, heal, and become more resilient.

The role of community-based stewardship of natural resources in helping to prepare for, respond to, and recover from disturbances is already well-known to some communities—such as those recovering from tornado damage in Joplin, MO, and communities rebuilding from the devastation of Hurricane Sandy in New York City. The goal of this book is to build a compendium of case studies and perspectives that provide examples of communities that have both rebuilt and created capacity over time through innovative partnerships centered on community-based stewardship of natural resources. It has been our privilege to learn from the many authors in this book. In so doing, we hope to share this knowledge and these practices to a broader audience of practitioners, policymakers, and communities. They might use these lessons to prepare for disasters that we hope never strike and to rebuild if they do. We also hope to come closer together and engage, face-to-face in an effort larger than oneself, an effort that helps remind us of our collective humanity, dignity, and responsibility to take care of one another and all the places we call home.

Many of the stories found in this book have positive outcomes that emerge from great hardship and learning. But there is very important work to be done in disseminating the lessons learned from these efforts to communities beyond those represented in this book. There is also important work to be done in understanding negative cases—where disturbance did not lead to successful, resilient outcomes for communities. What are the characteristics that might explain these different outcomes? What are effective ways to spread learnings from places with successful outcomes to other communities, not yet affected by disasters?

This area is potentially a key role for some of the developing federal programs in mid- to long-term recovery. Whereas the emergency responders must act for immediate health and safety, the programs that support mid-term recovery can often assist by supporting processes of community building. How can we plan ahead for funding streams and programmatic responses that can be tapped for the inevitable, future disturbances that will come?

We are still on the path to a more generalized construct or theory of change for community-based stewardship as it relates to disaster recovery. For many of the communities represented in this book, the responses were built in an “emergent” or needs-based way. They created programs that suited their particular needs at the time with the materials, labor, and energy that was available. Is there a way to devise a process to make this easier in the future? Most likely, there is no magic formula, but precepts for better processes in community-based resilience are emerging through case study research, peer-to-peer co-learning, and sharing what we already know with a wide audience. In the meantime, here are a few of our core understandings from the many voices heard in this book and those still at work in the field:

- There are universal patterns of human response to disturbance that include the need to participate in one’s own recovery and to create a shared purpose.
- Re-greening efforts are relatively accessible to many communities and could be elevated as part of a program of long-term community disturbance response and recovery.
- We must leave room for stewardship processes to emerge as people often want and need to take action in their communities at the appropriate time—to remember and to reflect—but also to create and innovate.
- Look for signs of social resilience in unexpected places. We have found them through empirically observable stewardship practices such as place attachment, social cohesion, knowledge exchange, collective identity, and social networks.
- Center the need for equity and inclusion in the process of long-term recovery and restoration.
- Embrace multiple ways of knowing, including story, song, walking, and feeling.
- Building on existing institutional structures, such as the Extension Disaster Education Network and collaborative science-action arrangements like the Joint Fire Science Program, foster novel learning networks that span space, place, and sector to support the science and practice of stewardship.

- Food, shelter, and safety will always be critical, but social meaning is a sometimes less visible resource that is also required for a shared and sustainable future.

It is important to note that in these stories of loss and pain are the building blocks of greater resilience and resolve. We need to continue to build this body of knowledge and practice for the benefit of all.

But perhaps of equal importance, we need to believe that there is power in what some consider simple acts of stewardship. For within these simple acts are unseen forces like social trust, responsibility, and care that are nurtured and strengthened over time. After all, what gives every tree life and stability is a rather fantastic and unseen energy exchange called photosynthesis. Without it, there would be no street trees or forests. And so, we call for new ways to acknowledge the importance of stewardship in the aftermath of disturbance as it creates an exchange that is critical for our social resilience and for the continuation of our species.