Abstract—Nuristan ranks among the least prosperous and educated provinces of Afghanistan. In 2008, the Nuristan Conservation Corps (NCC) was initiated to provide work, education, and training for 90 fighting-age males. Participants in this 1-year pilot program received basic education and natural resource management job skills training. Irrigation infrastructure was built on 26 ha (64 acres) and 62,500 tree saplings were planted. Successful planning and implementation of this project built trust among local leaders, resulting in the facilitation of further community-based natural resource management projects. The NCC serves as a model for similar conservation and development corps efforts being considered elsewhere in Afghanistan.

Introduction

In virtually all measures of environmental health, employment opportunities, and educational resources, rural Afghanistan ranks among the lowest on earth. Soviet invasion, followed by three decades of war, have degraded the Afghan landscape and deprived generations of young Afghans basic opportunities to maintain, let alone improve, their agricultural livelihoods. The collapse of both formal and informal education systems has hampered the transfer of basic skills and institutions needed to rebuild a productive society. In this environment, young males are vulnerable to the financial temptations of crime, including serving as fighters in anti-government elements. The Conservation & Development Corps model provides a framework to both stabilize Afghanistan and reverse the decline of its natural resource and human capital. This paper describes a conservation corps program that serves as the model for similar efforts. The U.S. Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) that operated from 1934 to 1943 was tremendously successful, providing work and training for millions of unemployed young men (Merrill 1981; Sloane, this proceedings). Tangible outcomes included road construction, implementation of soil and water conservation practices, and planting of literally billions of trees. Today, hundreds of conservation and development corps programs (federal, state and local) are carrying on the CCC tradition in the United States, employing tens of thousands of co-educational young people working on a wide variety of natural resource, infrastructure development, and other community service projects. Among the many programs inspired by the CCC is the U.S. Federal Job Corps, established in 1964 and now operating at 124 Centers nationwide, including 28 Job Corps Civilian Conservation Centers operated by the U.S. Forest Service (Dawson and Bennett, these proceedings). The vast majority of current conservation corps programs operate in the United States, but with some adaptation the concept has been applied with varying success in other countries (Sloane, these proceedings).

Since 2004, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) has been supporting the U.S. and Allied military action in Afghanistan (Operation Enduring Freedom) with agricultural advisors assigned to Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) throughout the country. PRTs have roughly 90 personnel and work in Afghanistan for approximately 1 year before being replaced by a new team. The USDA Agriculture Advisor is one of three civilian members of the team, the other two coming from the U.S. Department of State and U.S. Agency for International Development. By far, the largest component of the team is military personnel—Army, Navy, and Air Force. PRTs strive to bring enhanced security to an area while simultaneously delivering capacity building and reconstruction activities to bolster the Afghan government and improve living conditions of the Afghan people. The work is enormously complex and challenging, and progress is painfully slow.

The senior author, Danny Markus (hereafter referred to in the first person), served as an Agriculture Advisor from April 2008 to March 2009 in the province of Nuristan, a remote and rugged area in Northeastern Afghanistan. Among other activities, I helped design and implement the Nuristan Conservation Corps (NCC) program described in this paper.
Developing the Nuristan Conservation Corps Idea

The initial idea for creating a conservation corps program in Nuristan, Afghanistan came from a military civil affairs officer on the Nuristan PRT, Major Rory Aylward, and it soon became my top priority. I worked closely with other PRT staff members, in particular two Afghan nationals I was authorized to hire, Ajmal Nuristani and Shakerullah Hashimi, to determine the feasibility of the project and how it could be implemented. A crucial first step was testing the level of interest and potential support for such a program at national, provincial, and district levels of the Afghan Government, and especially in the local community. The Nurguram District Governor helped organize a shura, an advisory council meeting of sorts, made up of respected community leaders, during which the idea received enthusiastic support. Over time, I and my Afghan co-workers, made additional presentations to the Provincial Governor and the National Government representatives in Kabul, including the Afghan Minister of Agriculture. The response from these audiences typically was “yes, this is a great idea that should move forward and you will receive our full cooperation.” The Greening Afghanistan Initiative (GAIN) provided support in the form of equipment (forestry tool kits) and other in-kind support (e.g., sacks of wheat and cooking oil provisions for NCC member families). However, repeated attempts to gain support and collaboration with an ongoing national program called the Afghan Conservation Corps (ACC) were not successful.

With interest and support growing, I began drafting a proposal for a 1-year Nuristan Conservation Corps (NCC) for 90 young men between the ages of 18 and 25 who would receive a paid job, training, education, living quarters, and food. Eligible participants would be recruited from the Nurguram District (a district in Afghanistan that is comparable to a county in the United States, just as a province is comparable to a state), allowing for easy coordination by the PRT located there.

To meet local needs, conditions, and culture, some adjustments in the traditional U.S.-CCC model were necessary. Much of our effort was focused on the key items of reforestation and erosion control, while providing high security, specific job training, basic education (including indigenous religious instruction and practice), and lodging arrangements to a male only population of corps enrollees. As the USDA Agriculture Advisor primarily responsible for the project, I drew on my experience studying conservation corps programs as a graduate student at the University of Idaho in the early 1990s. The internet, even in remote Nuristan, Afghanistan, allowed review of current literature and other pertinent materials to supplement telephone, email, and personal contacts in refining the NCC proposal. Personal and email contacts with the Corps Network, the professional association of conservation and development corps programs, based in Washington, DC, proved invaluable in making useful contacts with particularly successful organizations. These programs generously provided critical background information and tools needed to effectively implement a corps program.

Although clearly a great starting point, capitalizing on this information from U.S. programs would require considerable adjustment for Afghanistan. Especially important here was contact with a highly respected non-governmental organization, the International Foundation of Hope (IF Hope), in Jalalabad, who offered advice and personnel from its talented team of Afghan professionals to fill some of the key NCC staff positions. An overriding concern for both the PRT and IF Hope was the importance of visible support from the Afghan national, provincial, and district government in bringing this program to the people. In the end, for the conservation corps program to be viable and enduring, it had to be an Afghan initiative in perception and reality. Our PRT’s role was to facilitate and provide support to help make success possible. This role also fit with mobility constraints on the civilian members of the PRT as security risks limited travel outside the walled PRT compound. This put great responsibility on Afghan members of the NCC team, who could come and go as they pleased, to effectively implement a corps program.

Securing NCC Start Up and Operating Funds

As interest in the NCC grew, we began to outline the necessary operational components and processes and the associated funding needs. By this time, the NCC concept had strong support as a potentially viable program of the Nuristan PRT and a $670,000 proposal was submitted, in collaboration with other PRT members and IF Hope, to be funded by the U.S. Military “Commander’s Emergency Response Program” (CERP). The specific goal of the proposed project was to launch the NCC as a 1-year pilot program that would produce four main outcomes:

- Jobs to address the very high unemployment rate of fighting-age males;
- A trained work force to address the backlog of natural resource conservation work (particularly reforestation) and community infrastructure projects;
- Improved future job prospects for NCC graduates through delivery of a basic education program and job skill training; and
- Better community relations through shared living and work experiences of heretofore strangers, with a natural tendency to distrust persons from other villages.

The proposal moved through the military and civilian bureaucracies in the United States and Afghanistan in 3 months, a very short timeframe under the circumstances. During this time, there were many opportunities to explain the proposal up the U.S. military and Afghan hierarchy to persons whose support for the project was important and who influenced its ultimate approval. Once funding was secured, a contract with IF Hope was executed to help implement the NCC and the hard work began.

Implementing the Nuristan Conservation Corps

Several major tasks, logistical issues, and cultural concerns needed to be addressed in order to implement the NCC.
Staffing

The first step of implementation was recruitment and hiring 90 NCC participants (corps enrollees) plus 15 support staff (administrators, supervisors, cooks, guards, drivers, and teachers). Word-of-mouth and announcements on the local radio station stirred up a lot of interest in this project in the surrounding community and this helped recruitment of some participants and their immediate supervisors. To ensure that a District-wide representation of young men would have a chance to participate, another shura was held and one elder from each of six valleys was asked to recommend roughly 15 young men from which the 90 corps members would be selected. Participants would be fighting-age males (18–25 years old) who were currently unemployed. The potential participants were subsequently interviewed to assess their suitability for the program. We were looking for eagerness and a willingness to commit to the program for a full year, so during the interviews, details about the NCC were explained and any questions answered. It turned out that nearly all those recommended by the village elders were selected to form the initial cohort of 90 NCC participants. Six supervisors, one from each valley, were also recommended by village elders and ultimately hired. These men would directly oversee the young men from their respective communities. In addition to the 90 NCC participants that needed to be recruited, approximately 15 support staff positions described in the proposal had to be filled. IF Hope filled some of the key support staff positions with current employees including three engineers/project managers, cooks, and drivers/security guards. All were Afghan men, not from the local area but from Jalalabad, 125 kilometers to the south. Problems arose when it came to finding qualified local teachers, so they were brought in from Jalalabad as well. To the extent practical and possible, the goal was to fill all positions from the local population, but we had anticipated and explained this difficulty and the compromise was not unduly disruptive to implementation of the program.

Establishing Camp

Camp setup typically entails locating and building a residential camp, and addressing logistical issues of food, water, sanitation, safety for the participants, and cultural concerns of the community. As luck would have it, a vacant construction camp from an abandoned infrastructure project was already available with lodging for all participants and support staff (105 in all). Water and sanitary facilities were also in place. Food logistics and the head cook were provided by IF Hope, an organization with some experience in food service. Camp participants assisted IF Hope staff in food production duties on a rotational basis. Local food was purchased when available or trucked from Jalalabad. NCC participants were responsible for maintaining their quarters and keeping the grounds in good order. This included making their beds, litter patrol, and landscaping activities. Free time activities included volleyball, soccer, cards, and trips to the local bazaar. Medical care was provided by an Afghan Government-run clinic in a village 2 km from the camp. The adjacent PRT’s clinic was available for serious injuries or illnesses. Some measure of security was provided by fencing already on the site and by guards provided by IF Hope. An added layer of security was provided by the PRT who maintained a manifest of NCC participants and could check it against issued identification cards; they would also provide timely evacuation and safe haven within the walls of Forward Operating Base Kalagush (FOB), home of the PRT, in case the camp came under attack.

Cultural concerns were addressed through the experience of IF Hope and good communications with the local community. For example, religious training was provided to assuage local fears that Americans are trying to convert NCC participants to Christianity. To prevent bullying, including sexual assault, sleeping arrangements included segregation of participants by home valley and having a strong village leader as a supervisor who slept in the same room.

Training and Education

Critical to the mission of the NCC was the design and delivery of appropriate academic, religious education, and job skill training programs. The formal academic education focused on the following subjects: reading, writing, mathematics, religious studies, and physical education. Participants also received instruction of a rudimentary Natural Resource Management training program. Instruction included the environmental benefits of trees as well as the economic impact of various reforestation designs including windbreaks, woodlots, riverbank stabilization, hillside erosion control, and plantations to produce construction poles and other wood products. Silviculture instruction included understanding the importance of site selection and factors to consider before establishing a plantation, planting layout and design, planting methods, fertility management, pest management, forest protection, irrigation management, tree training and pruning, and sustainable harvest management. Students also learned the basics of working with communities to solicit stakeholder involvement and about the concept of sustainability.

Project Planning and Execution

Continued support of the program required selection of appropriate community approved work projects followed by effective design and planning. A tremendous amount of time and effort went into selecting an initial project that would produce a tangible outcome and offer useful natural resource conservation training. Since there was an obvious need for land stabilizing erosion control and watershed improvement projects, a relatively ambitious reforestation project within Nurghuram District was started. Engineers from IF Hope and the PRT designed and planned for 62,500 saplings to be planted in an unused parcel of land adjacent to the FOB and close to where the initial NCC camp would be located. A nearby river was tapped for irrigation water and three large water holding tanks were constructed. Saplings were shuttled from a nursery at IF Hope’s main headquarters and were successfully transplanted and placed at the site. The species of trees were eucalyptus (Eucalyptus camaldulensis), shisham (Dalbergia sissoo), pistachio (Pistacia vera), and a few others. These were chosen after extensive research and
consultation with the Afghan Forestry Directorate within the Ministry of Agriculture. At the end of the first growing season, survival was 73 percent; a remnant of NCC graduates who were kept on as stewards replaced 17,000 dead saplings at the beginning of the following growing season.

The NCC in Action

The NCC operated somewhat similarly to a conservation corps program in the United States, but with adaptation to local needs, conditions, and culture. Enrollees followed a strict and regimented schedule that was prominently posted throughout the camp. After waking up at 6 a.m., living quarters were tidied up and a morning meal was served. Nearly all participants made the short 1.5 km walk to the initial work site, with the exception of a rotating handful who would stay back to attend to various camp maintenance duties. Activities at the work site would continue until 12:30 p.m. when the group returned to camp for lunch. The balance of the day was spent engaged in educational activities. A brief period before dinner was left open for free time. There was some additional time devoted to instruction and studies after the evening meal. By 9 p.m., it was time to bed down for the night. Prayer time was observed five times each day.

Feedback

The genius of the Conservation and Development Corps idea is the broad scope of beneficiaries. In Nuristan, this was certainly the case, but with a decidedly timely Afghan twist.

Benefits to participants—The basic education benefits of NCC training are perhaps best exemplified by improvements in literacy. At the outset of the program, the typical NCC participant went from writing a few characters to writing a simple letter. Work skills needed to develop a future labor force for Afghanistan included learning how to use a pick and shovel. This is especially significant in Nuristan because men had previously not used these tools in this society where animal husbandry was the male profession and crop production was the work of women. Initially, the participants were humiliated to be doing what they saw as women’s work, but soon came to take pride in their new skills and their ability to shape their surroundings. Engaging young men in productive work is especially poignant for a country plagued by war and banditry. Six months after completion of the project, one graduate noted that if he had not found work in the NCC, he would have likely turned to illegal means of support.

Benefits to elders and communities—After this project was completed as planned, additional shuras were conducted in surrounding villages to identify other work the NCC participants could complete. These efforts focused on shoring up community water delivery systems by helping to rebuild canals. Elders were especially pleased with the employment aspects of the project and the fact that young men could find a job locally. Perhaps more importantly, a measure of trust was achieved between perhaps the most insular Afghan tribe and the outside world. Development in Afghanistan has been fraught with projects that have eroded relationships by fail-

ing to meet objectives and expectations. In this case, both westerners and Afghans delivered as promised in a short period of time, opening the door to future collaboration.

Benefits to the environment—A Nuristan hillside is now covered with thriving tree saplings that will help meet local fuel needs within the next 3 years and take pressure off the sparsely vegetated neighboring hillsides, already stressed with over grazing and excessive fuel wood collection (fig. 1). A handful of NCC alumni now tend the plantation. Although a small step, this effort represents progress toward stabilizing the upper watershed of one of the most critical crop production areas of Afghanistan. Perhaps more significant still, this project represents early implementation of community-based natural resource management that is a basis for the Forestry and Range Management policy of the Afghan government.

THE NCC TODAY

The future of the Nuristan Conservation Corps depends on the future direction of Afghanistan and the role of the United States and its allies in helping stabilize the country and funding reconstruction efforts. As of October 2009, the NCC had concluded its first year of operation and is in limbo until additional CERP funds are allocated for another year of operation. The Afghan government, while seemingly interested in expanding the program by using some of its budgeted funds, has not yet done so.

While the future of the NCC is uncertain, the trust between local Nuristanis and U.S. personnel is paying off in the implementation of a new participatory and community-based forest development project. In spring 2010, 5,000 fruit and nut tree saplings will be trucked from Jalalabad on a newly paved road to the NCC camp. From there, they will be distributed to each of the six home valleys of NCC participants. Thirty-six NCC alumni (supervised by six NCC supervisors) will use their newly developed skills to assist in the planting and care of trees that will help sustain their neighbors and families into the future. Fortuitously, the irrigation system used to establish the plantation will be used to serve the Afghan government’s Nurkara District Agriculture Center scheduled to open in June 2010.

The Future of a CCC Model for Afghanistan

As with all ventures in Afghanistan, nothing is certain. However, the benefits associated with deploying the NCC approach throughout Afghanistan to address multiple problems are becoming widely recognized. As of spring 2010, several U.S. government development and military counter insurgency personnel have come to recognize the potential to use a CCC strategy to achieve stabilization and development objectives. Common themes include using fighting-age males to accomplish work projects desired by local communities. Technical curricula can be expected to vary somewhat but addressing illiteracy will be a universal goal. Some projects are likely to extend beyond the conservation corps mission of natural resources improvements, but the work plus life skills training will be a component of all these programs.
First time visitors to Afghanistan are struck by the fact that this country needs all aspects of development, all at once, to alleviate some of the most widespread illiteracy, poverty, and accompanying environmental degradation in the world. Coupled with the particularly closed nature of Afghan society and lingering security issues, the success of the NCC should be regarded as nothing less than miraculous. This should be very heartening to supporters of conservation and development corps programs everywhere in the developing world. We suggest that if it works in Nuristan, it can work anywhere.

References


The content of this paper reflects the views of the authors, who are responsible for the facts and accuracy of the information presented herein.