

## Catawba Sustainability Center: A Landcare Incubator

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On a crisp October day, a stream of students were walking towards the barn at the site of the old Catawba Dairy Farm. Some were wearing hardhats, others waders. Some were carrying shovels and brooms; others were toting nailguns and safety goggles. Coming from a range of disciplines and departments across the campus of Virginia Tech, these students were joining forces with local community members on this Saturday morning to begin the transformation of the old abandoned farm into the newly envisioned Catawba Sustainability Center.

The farm, located at the head of the Catawba Valley between Blacksburg and Roanoke, historically served as the dairy for the Catawba Hospital located across the road. Deeded to the university in the 1980s, the property has sat largely untouched for about a decade. Watching with concern as the valley changed and the buildings at the old farmsite crumbled, a few members of the community came together to form Catawba Landcare, a local group with the mission of protecting the landscape and communities of the Catawba and North Fork Valleys. Catawba Landcare, working with Virginia Tech, has created a vision for the future of the old farmsite, a future which includes opportunities for the community, for the university, and for the region.

Engaging with partners both in the community and at Virginia Tech, the vision for the Catawba Sustainability Center is to provide three distinct services – education and outreach opportunities, a

landcare enterprise incubator that includes training, and community engagement activities, all of which are consistent with the principles of landcare which Catawba Landcare has formed under (social, ecological, and economic vitality), and the principles of sustainability and engagement towards which Virginia Tech is increasingly moving. The Catawba Sustainability Center, through these three facets, will be available to the university and the community as a living classroom and a facility to support the development of more sustainable rural communities and “green” job opportunities. For more information on landcare, visit [www.landcarecentral.org](http://www.landcarecentral.org). Catawba Landcare’s website is at [www.catawbalandcare.org](http://www.catawbalandcare.org).

As a research, education, and training site, the Catawba Sustainability Center will be made available by Virginia Tech as an experimentation and demonstration site for innovative sustainable practices in numerous fields including green construction, natural resource management, sustainable agriculture, tourism and hospitality, and business development, among others. A number of university-affiliated projects are already taking place in conjunction with the Center, including the design of an education center by an architecture class, the development of a whole-farm plan by an agroforestry class, the evaluation of the condition and feasibility of rehabilitation for the historic dairy barn by a master’s student in the school of building and construction, the test-planting of several acres of warm-season

grasses by the Conservation Management Institute for the development of decentralized biomass energy networks, planting sites for value-added riparian buffer plants, and trials of nontimber forest products such as black cohosh, snakeroot, and goldenseal by the US Forest Service. The site will be made available as a training site for green-collar jobs and workforce development programs, for demonstration and training of innovative best management practices for landowners and landcare practitioners, and to teach school groups and community members about the environment and sustainable living.

The landcare enterprise incubator at the Catawba Sustainability Center provides space and support to emerging entrepreneurs seeking to integrate conservation and economic development opportunities. Drawing on expertise and innovation from Virginia Tech and state and local agencies, and modeled on a hybrid of business and farm incubators, the landcare incubator nurtures the development of small businesses and enterprises that embody the principles of landcare and sustainability. It also serves as a demonstration site for the dissemination of such enterprise ideas and lessons to a broader audience, in an effort to scale these efforts up beyond the community level to a regional level. For example, bioenergy is a growing interest for the Catawba Hospital, a locally based mental and geriatric institution. This spring, with support from USDA, the Conservation

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*Landcare continued from page 6*

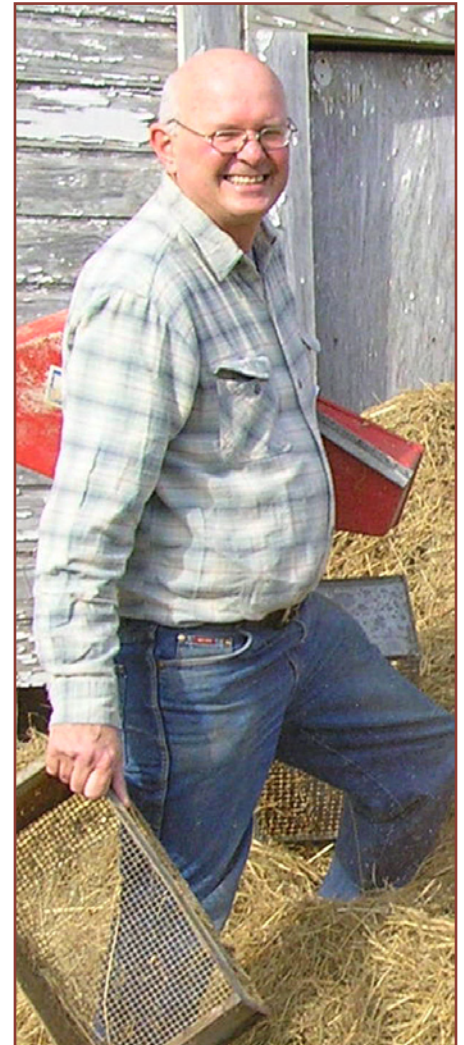
Management Institute will establish nearly 50 acres of warm-season grasses at the Sustainability Center. These grasses provide numerous environmental benefits including improved water quality, carbon sequestration, and wildlife habitat. The best part is that these grasses will likely also provide a new economic opportunity for the rural landowners in the region. The Sustainability Center's warm-season grass sites will serve as a bioenergy demonstration site for landowners in the region. The Sustainability Center will help build a community-based bioenergy network among landowners in the region that will also serve as a model for other regions. A local beekeeper has already expressed interest in scaling up his operations using the incubator, and a local forest landowner cooperative is considering relocating to the facility, with other possibilities arising constantly.

Community engagement is another important element for the Catawba Sustainability Center, which was made evident by the more than sixty people who turned out on that brisk Saturday morning to take the first steps towards this vision. Side by side, cattle farmers, professors, students, and professionals shoveled hay and manure, pulled weeds, and cleaned out buildings for hours. One group of students mapped the streambanks for erosion. Another team completed a soil survey for test planting sites. Still others worked to reinforce the crumbling barns. People were there from the community of Catawba, who wanted to see the farmsite put to productive use, but the vision inspired by the Catawba Sustainability Center had also attracted people from Roanoke, Virginia Tech, and even visitors from Mississippi and Australia who were

interested to see what landcare looks like in SW Virginia. After a long morning of work, everyone gathered in the basement of the Baptist church for lunch, which was provided by a few members of the community. Sitting together, people who may never otherwise interact were sharing a meal and the vision of what the Sustainability Center could provide their community. Community outreach and engagement is happening.

The Catawba Sustainability Center is providing a vision for what enriching engagement could look like and why it matters. The students were not there because it was part of an assignment and they were being graded. These students volunteered their time and labor to help make this vision a reality. Students through the environmental sustainability extensions of Leadership Tech, who range across disciplines, saw this project as a means of promoting sustainable practices and living to the larger community, as well as a way of creating possible research opportunities in the future. Students from the Constructor's Consortium of the Building Construction department saw this as an opportunity to use and refine their skills in stabilizing a historic and culturally significant building. A recent survey conducted by the Student Government Association indicated that 90% of students at Virginia Tech felt sustainability is an important issue, a trend that was demonstrated by the range of student backgrounds and interest areas that were represented at the work day for the Catawba Sustainability Center. The creation of a facility where sustainable practices and approaches can be developed and diffused to the larger community is an excellent response to student demand, and will provide long-range benefits for Virginia Tech, for the students we graduate,

and for the region and nation we serve. For more information on the Catawba Sustainability Center, contact Christy Gabbard at [cgunnels@vt.edu](mailto:cgunnels@vt.edu).



*John Robinson, a professional Landcare coordinator from Victoria, Australia, chipped in with the Catawba Sustainability Center work-day. He spent a month with the landcare groups in Virginia as part of the 2008 Victoria-Virginia Landcare Fellowship program, sharing information from Australia and learning about how the groups are forming in the U.S.*