

US Landcare Groups Offer Opportunity for SAF to Serve Society at the Local Level

The community conservation movement known as Landcare began in Australia more than a decade ago. Since then, the movement has reached the shores of the United States, where it has inspired concerned citizens to come together to solve local environmental problems. As a result, the Landcare Movement presents SAF with a significant opportunity to provide forestry and natural resources expertise at the local level.

Consider, for example, the situation in Grayson County, Virginia. A few years ago, a group of farmers and forest landowners in this southwestern part of the state near the North Carolina border began to meet, along with members from the New River Land Trust, to devise ways to protect land within the New River Watershed from development. In the process, they came into contact with Jim Johnson, associate dean of outreach and professor of forestry at Virginia Tech's College of Natural Resources, who, along with his colleagues at Virginia Tech, provided the group's members with information and technical assistance.

Last August, Johnson, an SAF member, went to Australia for the International Union of Forest Research Organizations (IUFRO) World Congress. While there, he attended a workshop on Landcare that was cosponsored by the US Department of Agriculture. Among the workshop's speakers was a principal in one of the local Australian Landcare groups focusing on forestry issues. When Johnson returned, he talked to members of the group in Grayson County and told them that what they were doing had much in common with the worldwide Landcare Movement.

Soon thereafter, said Johnson, the group adopted the "Landcare" paradigm and label for their effort and agreed to become one of the earliest Landcare groups in the United States.

"Since it began, the group's discussions about protecting the rural landscape within the country have led to discussions about other issues, including the control of invasive species, enhancing water quality, and even the development of niche markets specialty food products such as organic, grass-fed beef," he said. "The group also has become a local 'chapter' of a larger, regional effort know as



Grayson Area Information Network

Since its inception in Australia more than a decade ago, the community conservation movement known as Landcare has come to the United States and been adopted by community groups in places like Grayson County, Virginia, where farmers and forest landowners are working to protect the area's rural landscape from development.

'Appalachian LandCare.'"

To accommodate this larger effort's need for information and technical assistance, Johnson said that Virginia Tech has established a Landcare Center within the College of Natural Resources.

"The Landcare Center was established as a multidisciplinary place where groups associated with Appalachian Landcare can come to get information a wide variety of subjects that are associated with more than one academic discipline. As such, it brings together people from all parts of the campus—foresters, GIS experts, economic development

specialists, agronomists, agricultural economists, biological systems engineers, etc.,” he said.

As a testament to how far the Grayson County Landcare group has come, Johnson said that, in the coming weeks, members of the group will be attending a meeting of the “Landcare Pioneers,” where they will give a presentation about their activities to date. They also plan to send a representative to the International Landcare conference to be held in Australia in October.

The Landcare Movement began in 1986 when a group of Australian farmers teamed up with local conservationists to find solutions to common environmental concerns. This community conservation movement has now expanded to 12 nations around the globe, with over 4,000 Landcare groups participating in community-based natural resource management projects.

The mission of US Landcare, according to its website, is “to support private–public partnerships capable of delivering sustained improvements in economic, social, and environmental outcomes through land stewardship initiatives and to promote and enhance a national land care ethic.”

To accomplish that, the US Landcare intends to work within the nation’s existing conservation community—the public and private sectors, nongovernmental organizations, academia, and citizen’s groups—to promote public participation in conservation projects in urban, suburban, and rural environments and to facilitate local partnership projects across the country.

Johnson acknowledges that the Landcare program may seem similar to other programs and initiatives already taking place within the United States, such as soil and water conservation districts, resource conservation and development councils, stewardship groups, watershed groups, river basin roundtables, etc. He said, however, that Landcare is not intended to replace those kinds of associations. Rather, it is simply another kind of group that offers perhaps a slightly different approach from the groups that are already out there, particularly in terms of how Landcare groups function.

“Among Landcare’s guiding principles are grassroots leadership, meaning that the leadership for local initiatives must come from people who live specifically between the grassroots group and advance a political agenda or to get a candidate elected. Groups deal with issues and problems identified by local grassroots groups and usually providers of assistance, information, and funding; and inclusiveness,” said Johnson. “Landcare groups also must be apolitical and expend no effort trying to

within an area and not from a government agency or industry; voluntary participation; partnership, involve a mixture of economic and environmental issues.”

Ruth McWilliams, national sustainable development coordinator with the USDA Forest Service—one of the USDA representatives at the Landcare workshop during the IUFRO World Congress—noted that, although US Landcare is not a program of the USDA, she and her colleagues are interested to know how existing USDA programs can be of use to Landcare groups within the United States.

For example, the Landcare group in Grayson County was able to secure funding to protect some land within the New River Watershed by applying for a grant from the USDA’s Forest Legacy Program.

McWilliams said that she and her colleagues within the USDA are interested in Landcare because, as a national program with a cohesive network of local chapters that work with other local groups, it has the “potential to knit together all the various conservation efforts taking place on the local level and enhance collaboration between them.”

Johnson agreed that Landcare can help foster greater collaboration between groups and organizations with similar goals and said that it also can present groups like SAF with a fantastic opportunity to demonstrate their relevance as the opinions and scientific expertise of professional land managers is welcomed.

“At the local level, it would make sense for SAF to lend itself as a voice of good forest management, especially if the Landcare group is going in a direction that may lead to an outcome that it doesn’t anticipate and doesn’t want,” he said. “This is yet another opportunity for SAF to be relevant at the local level.”

For more information about US Landcare, visit www.landcareus.org.

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