

A construction worker wearing a red hard hat, safety glasses, a green jacket, and a blue plaid scarf is working on a wooden structure outdoors. He is using a power tool, possibly a chainsaw or a similar cutting tool, and is wearing protective gloves. The background shows a wooded area with trees and a wooden fence. Another person is visible in the background, also working on the structure.

ENGAGING DIVERSE COMMUNITIES FOR THE LONG-TERM

A PROJECT WITH GROUNDWORK USA



GROUNDWORK
USA

GROUNDWORK USA: A BRIDGE BETWEEN COMMUNITIES AND NATIONAL PARKS

Groundwork USA was launched in the 1990s through a partnership between the National Park Service and US Environmental Protection Agency. It is a network of locally-based nonprofits working in low-resource communities, linked to one another and a national support organization, with the goal of raising local capacity to overcome environmental challenges by building connections between residents, local government, civic organizations, and businesses and improving the landscape through participatory, on-the-ground projects. Local Groundwork affiliates represent a trusted presence in communities that would otherwise lack connections to national parks.

Youth engagement is central to the Groundwork mission: local and national programs involve young people in paid environmental work within their communities and prepare them to pursue natural and cultural resource restoration. Taking place in disinvested communities, the work involves neglected land and streams and neighbors who experience the economic and health deficits that accompany a degraded environment. The message to youth in such places has been, “Don’t touch the soil, don’t swim in the water.” Groundwork USA helps youth who previously felt alienated realize they can effect positive change. In the process, they develop connections to these places and enthusiasm for protecting resources in their own backyard.



GROUNDWORK USA YOUTH AMBASSADORS

Local Groundwork employment programs serve as portals to experiences in national parks that are both transformative for individual youth and effective at introducing their communities to the parks. A notable example, which helped shape the approach taken in the Gateway Love Your Park project described in this guide, is the Mountains to Main Street Program. A collaborative effort of

Groundwork USA and Grand Teton National Park, the program brings together youth ambassadors from diverse communities across the country to plan creative ways of introducing community members to nearby national parks and keep them coming back. The ambassadors are chosen because they are familiar with their communities' challenges and passions. Mountains to Main Street has provided a vivid demonstration of a concept Groundwork USA brought to the Gateway National Recreation Area project: by introducing a park as a resource for addressing personal and community needs, a well-planned project can create an authentic lasting bond with people who may not otherwise have found the park welcoming or relevant.

OVERVIEW

Visitation to the national parks increased significantly during the 2016 National Park Service centennial. The growth is cause for celebration but has been accompanied by two challenges. First, support for park infrastructure has not kept pace with increased visitation and the backlog of deferred maintenance keeps growing. Second, park visitation does not fully reflect the diversity of America – many Americans are not experiencing the parks as either visitors or stewards. The National Park Service (NPS), the National Park Foundation (NPF), and other national park partners have been tackling these twin challenges, by working to increase engagement with communities reflecting the scope of our nation's diversity.

In 2018, to increase and diversify volunteerism, bring service corps to life, enhance support for national parks, the National Park Foundation launched a pilot volunteer network for diverse park partners. As part of the initiative, NPF collaborated with Groundwork USA, a network of local organizations that, as described above, carry out community-based development and improvement of green spaces in low-income city neighborhoods and build meaningful connections with public lands farther afield. Local Groundwork organizations, or “Trusts,” are deeply rooted in their communities.

The purpose of the Groundwork USA volunteer network pilot project was to demonstrate the effectiveness of a program model that draws on relationships in local communities and experience in meeting youth “where they are” through service corps work in national parks. Groundwork USA and its local affiliates engaged diverse youth and volunteers at sites throughout Gateway National Recreation Area in New York City. Using best practices such as reflecting on community needs, creating rewarding paid employment experiences that leave participants with a sense of belonging and ownership, and building relationships, Groundwork USA sought to make long-term connections between Gateway National Recreation Area and a broader, more diverse community, create local lifelong champions of national parks, and address the park's vast deferred maintenance backlog.

ALIGNING WITH NATIONAL PARK SERVICE PRIORITIES

For the Gateway volunteer pilot project, Groundwork USA enlisted three nearby local affiliates: Groundwork Bridgeport (Connecticut), Groundwork Elizabeth (NJ), and Groundwork Hudson Valley (Yonkers, NY). Groundwork staff met with the Superintendent of Gateway National Recreation Area, park managers, and volunteer coordinators at three park units ~ Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge, Fort Wadsworth, and Sandy Hook ~ to develop a list of potential projects that reflect National Park Service priorities. Groundwork USA then challenged each Trust to engage three categories of local youth: youth in Trust programs, volunteers from other community-based organizations known to the Trusts, and volunteers identified by staff of the park units.

Starting with immediate National Park Service priorities, Groundwork USA developed projects that would address those priorities and also serve the goal of engaging diverse communities not yet connected to Gateway National Recreation Area. The elements of the approach are as follows.

IDENTIFY TARGET COMMUNITIES & FOCUS ON THEIR NEEDS

In planning a service project, Groundwork USA starts with two considerations: what does it take to get the work done, and how will the project connect with its participants in a way that meets their needs as well as the park's needs? To address both considerations effectively, Groundwork USA focuses on a particular audience and learns what that audience would want from the experience.



GROUNDWORK USA CONSTRUCTION CREW

Most project leaders can think of various reasons a person may be attracted to a service opportunity: wanting to meet others, being close to nature, protecting habitat, improving a trail in a well-loved place, or recording volunteer hours for school. Yet there are other reasons people join activities and

broadening the message about a service opportunity can be highly effective at attracting new groups. Motivations might run the gamut from exploring career opportunities, dealing with stress or trauma, hoping for reconnection following a family break-up, yearning to feel connection to a place, wanting to learn a trade, wanting to meet others in the same ethnic/cultural/gender/ability community, seeking safety, and so on.

In focusing on the needs of a community, it is important to think in terms of an effective service *program*, not just an attractive one-off project. The reason people first visit an organization or volunteer is often completely different from the reason they stay engaged. To be effective, one must understand both reasons. Sometimes service programs create opportunities to engage new participants, but then do not pay enough attention to what will keep them coming back. Not surprisingly, when youth feel they are working with people who care about them, their commitment is enhanced.

Focusing on people and their experiences as well as the physical task at hand is not only an investment in having volunteers return but also builds relationships with a more diverse circle of local, and not-so-local, residents. It can yield transformative personal experiences and instill long-term interest in a park.

LEVERAGE RELATIONSHIPS WITH PARTNERS ROOTED IN COMMUNITIES

A partner rooted within a community can make meaningful connections that may not be possible for a national organization to build on its own. Thus it's important to invest in partnerships with organizations anchored in a community that are already addressing community needs. How can a park volunteer coordinator focus on riparian habitat restoration or trail improvement and also address the needs of a family going through a difficult situation? Simply put, they shouldn't try. Rather than focusing on recruitment of individuals, they should invest effort in finding organizations anchored in a community who are already addressing community needs.

Finding locally rooted partners may initially require an investment of time. Having staff familiar with community-based organizations and the populations you want to connect with will help. Advice or leads may be found through organizations with local affiliates or chapters such as Groundwork USA, Outdoor Afro, Latino Outdoors, or experienced community engagement specialists at parks such as Saguaro National Park. Do your homework and sit down with local nonprofits and talk about how to work together. A good local partner will have trained staff, relevant skills, and ideas for making collaboration a success. Instead of inviting an organization to partner, ask what its mission is and explore how your park and its improvement might help advance that mission. In the Gateway volunteer pilot project, local Groundwork Trusts in three cities had experience working with diverse youth and could engage not only youth from their own programs but also volunteers from sources such as a local church, Bridgeport Caribe Youth Leaders, and multiple high schools.

As the Groundwork USA volunteer network pilot project at Gateway National Recreation Area demonstrated, there is ample opportunity to engage youth and adults from low-resource communities in service projects that activate long-term interest in national parks on the basis of the parks' relevance to community needs. A partner with local roots is a necessity given the importance of local knowledge, trust, and cultural competency.



CREATE REWARDING WORK EXPERIENCES

Successful programs lead to comments such as, “*I can’t believe we did that!*” and transform a young person’s sense of what is possible. Groundwork has learned that the projects most likely to effectively engage youth feature job skills training such as project planning, construction math, use of tools (including age-appropriate use of power tools, with professional supervision), woodworking, and welding.

The volunteer network projects at Gateway National Recreation Area included creating a new trail through dense brush to enhance the viewshed at Jamaica Bay, building a bird blind on the edge of a pond, and constructing a metal railing to create a safe way to view a historic battery at Fort Wadsworth. A partner organization with expertise working with youth on such activities can both

expand the scope of what park staff can accomplish in the near term and provide experiences that leave youth brimming with pride and eager for more in-park opportunities.

The Gateway Volunteer Network pilot project showed how a well-managed service project becomes much more than hard work. The Groundwork Bridgeport Program Coordinator writes:

“The task of blazing ¾ mile of trail to Terrapin Pond was labor intensive, requiring youth to handle poison ivy, remove hundreds of tree and shrub saplings greater than 2” in diameter and dealing with excessive amounts of insects and mosquitos. . . . There were heat advisories during both camping trips. “

Yet when participating youth were asked which work activity was most memorable and rewarding, they cited the trail work:

“I felt like building the trail helped visitors see new parts of the place and the view at the end was beautiful.”

“I loved trail building!”

“[The best part of the program was] when we went to Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge to build a trail.”

One of the most demanding parts of the Gateway National Recreation Area project, the Terrapin Pond trail work proved to be the hands-down favorite.

TREAT YOUTH WITH RESPECT

Success in service projects is achieved in part by treating youth as colleagues rather than inexperienced volunteers. Real work requires respect and recognition for the individual providing a service. Groundwork Trusts engage youth as paid employees, identify meaningful projects that make a visible difference, undertake training in diverse skills, challenge youth to come up with solutions, provide opportunities to work side-by-side with professionals, and discuss projects in their larger environmental and societal context. Groundwork USA provides youth with uniforms – typically, shirts with collars. Park managers assist by bringing professionals to work with the youth, having a senior manager greet the team, and using language that conveys regard for the youth as professionals-in-training. For example, at Yellowstone National Park, where many Groundwork youth have returned to work for the Youth Conservation Corps or in seasonal ranger positions, a park ranger once welcomed a Groundwork group by saying: “Thank you so much for coming. We really need your help.”

Open communication and real-time consultation and adjustments in working style can prove to be valuable parts of the experience. In the Gateway Volunteer Network pilot project, Groundwork and NPS staff at one point brought work to a halt and discussed language that youth and observers felt was disrespectful. The working relationship between NPS staff and Groundwork USA subsequently grew closer. The youth witnessed an instance of open communication and shared commitment by park management to on-the-job learning.

The importance of treating youth as colleagues cannot be overestimated. As the developmental psychologist Erik Erikson pointed out, a central issue of adolescent life is the search for a personal identity. A service project that takes identity exploration into account will more likely result in people seeing themselves as part of the parks community and increase the likelihood that people will remain engaged in future park projects and programs.

Having corps members and volunteers return to a park, and explore other national parks, starts with using such approaches to build relationships. Youth who return to Groundwork Green Team programs throughout their high school years report that it is not just training and job opportunities that motivate them, but the relationships they develop with staff. Becoming familiar with corps members and volunteers, where they are from, and what interests them – and, importantly, remembering their names – is critical. At the conclusion of the Gateway Volunteer Network pilot project, a participant wrote, “It was a very worthwhile experience and one we would want to repeat. We also gained the respect and admiration of [NPS staff,] who . . . invited us back next summer for more collaboration on work projects.”

CONCLUSION

It is essential to engage youth from diverse backgrounds and their communities with national parks. Service projects are an opportunity for learning, job-skills training, connecting with nature and history, giving back, and building enduring relationships with the national parks community. Partnering with local organizations rooted in the community is an effective – and indeed necessary – method for creating that opportunity.

Senegalese environmentalist Baba Dioum once gave a speech to the International Union for Conservation of Nature in which he said, “In the end, we will conserve only what we love, we will love only what we understand, we will understand only what we are taught.” We can deepen love for a place by creating a feeling of being loved by that place. As the Gateway Volunteer Network pilot project demonstrated, service projects present opportunities not just for learning about oneself and one’s potential, but for bonding with the people and place where we had that experience.

“I’ve never worked so hard in my life than those four hours. I was sweating so hard that my shirt was wet to the bottom. My team and I were working hard . . . This is why I say that this type of job brings me satisfaction. All those hours that we put in and the final result is what brings me satisfaction.”

“After a while you see the results and how that actually impacted, and you actually feel proud that you did that so it makes you want to do it again.”

“[We] weathered difficulties with the work, ourselves, the job, and the rain and we still surpassed it and grew as people, as teams, and as Groundwork [corps] members.”

-- First-Time Gateway Corps Members



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