Embracing Diversity

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Eric Gautier

Diversity in forests and among trees in an urban setting provides ecological strength and sustainability. Diversity of people on tree boards, planting projects and the other affairs of urban forestry also help assure success and sustainability. Embracing social diversity does not usually happen by accident and may take effort, but the results are a win-win situation with great dividends for urban and community forestry.

"Approach diversity management not only as an ethical responsibility, but also as a business strategy," counsels Glenn Llopis, consultant and author of *Earning Serendipity*. In the 'business' of urban forestry, making diversity part of everything we do should be as much of the conscientious planning effort as conducting tree inventories or selecting sites for a tree planting project.

But what is diversity? For many years, Arbor Day Foundation publications have stressed the importance of biodiversity, especially tree diversity in communities. In this bulletin we discuss social diversity. This kind of diversity is about the differences that are a natural part of society. They range from age and gender to religion or education and economic strata. Because of the limitations of our 8-page bulletin, we focus on the general concepts of diversity – specifically as they apply to urban forestry – and limit discussion to age, gender and ethnicity.

As the face of America changes, both embracing diversity and making renewed efforts to address underserved communities are essential to the future of trees and nature in neighborhoods and cities throughout the nation.

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The 'What' and 'Why' of Diversity

Everyone knows that no two snowflakes are exactly alike. Yet they are similar in many ways and as they gather on a snowy day the flakes can paint a most beautiful scene. A wonder of humanity is that no two people are alike, either. Yet, unlike snowflakes, we tend to surround ourselves with others like us rather than joining together. The result is often missed opportunities that diversity has to offer.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

In nature, any plant or animal can be classified by species, genus and family. The names are even put into Latin to reduce confusion and create universal understanding. In human society, classifying is not that easy. And as the world shrinks, it gets even more difficult. However, there are some basic terms that can help us begin to communicate more effectively.

MINORITY is probably the term used most often, but it simply means less than half. While it is still an important and accurate term, as demographics shift the word 'minority' becomes less descriptive than it was once.

RACE has been used to denote a group of people who perceive themselves and are perceived by others as possessing certain distinctive and hereditary physical traits. However, as the world community grows closer together and since there are no biological barriers between 'races,' this term is clearly losing its descriptive accuracy. Worse yet, some argue that uses of the term have been more destructive than useful and they urge that it be relegated to the scrap heap of outdated language.

CULTURE is a more acceptable term. According to sociologist J. A. Axelson, culture represents the behaviors and beliefs that characterize a particular group and these behaviors and beliefs tend to be transmitted from generation to generation. Culture includes things that reflect social norms such as how a park facility should appear, or how organizations or other social structures should operate.

ETHNICITY OR ETHNIC GROUP is closely related to culture and makes up smaller groups within the larger cultural group. Examples of ethnic expression include such things as language, food preferences, and holiday traditions. These traits, too, are passed from generation to generation.

WHAT DO YOU CALL SOMEONE?

Frustration is often expressed because a well-intended term one year may be considered an insult the next. All language and terminology evolves, so it is not surprising this happens when trying to communicate with someone outside our own culture. The best way to not offend is to simply ask what is preferred.

THE 'SO WHAT' FACTOR

Two main barriers to inclusion are: (1) harboring the attitude that prejudices are now behind us, and (2) that there is nothing to be gained by aggressively seeking to diversify.

The short response to number one is this often well-intended view of equality is simply not accurate. It is a nice goal, and it may be closer to being achieved in urban forestry than some other sectors of society, but ask anyone in a minority group and you will hear there is still a way to go. A look at most tree boards will show that their composition does not mirror that of the communities they serve. Marcelo Bonta and Charles Jordan, authors of *Diversifying the Conservation Movement,* a Land Trust Alliance special report, found that 33 percent of mainstream environmental organizations and 22 percent of related government agencies did not have a single person of color on staff. They pointed to another study that found that only 11 percent of the staff and 9 percent of the boards of green organizations studied were people of color. Importantly, this does not necessarily reflect one-way prejudice. It may also reflect a degree of disinterest or aversion on the part of potential participants. Either way, the challenge is clear.

As to what can be gained, the first thing is fairness. Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness is truly the right of all people. A more self-serving response is also worth considering and it is at the heart of 'sustainability.' This popular term means that a project or other undertaking needs to be ecologically, economically and socially sound. Tree planting in a community is an excellent example in that it can easily be shown that the trees will provide ecological services and usually make economic sense. But if the project is not supported by local people, long term tree care or other success is not likely. Specifically, the benefits of diversity in projects, on tree boards, and as employees include:

- A sense of ownership
- A broader range of knowledge based on background and social contacts.
- Important perspectives and opinions.
- An expanded pool of active participants and candidates for leadership.
- Greater opportunity for funding.
- Opportunities to create better understanding.
- A strengthening of bonds that serve the future of our nation and society.

From New York to Los Angeles, neighborhood planting and pruning projects may be resulting in social benefits as much as they provide eco-benefits. Sue Pringle, a certified arborist who worked with Philadelphia's nonprofit UC Green once said, "We get neighbors to talk and work together. People were afraid." When folks with dissimilar backgrounds have a purpose to work and recreate together, they soon learn about what they have in common and stereotypes begin to crumble.

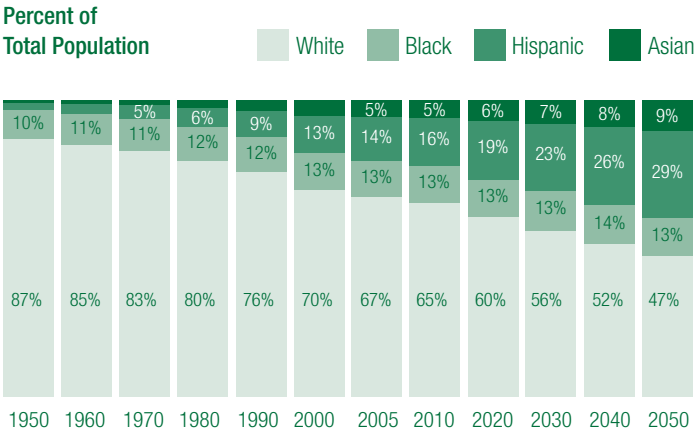
Gregory Jue

Including young people in tree-related events and urban forestry planning is a good way to gain new ideas and bridge the generation gap.

YOUNG PEOPLE ON TREE BOARDS

One of the benefits of diversity is to gain insights not otherwise part of the conversation. One major deficiency is the age gap. Whether it is music or dress, the older generation quickly losses track with what the younger generation takes for granted (and vice versa). In the world of trees, an answer is to make every effort to include a student or other young person on local tree boards. In at least one state, this concept is applied even at the highest level. The New York Urban Forestry Council, the advisory body that advises and assists the Department of Environmental Conservation on urban forestry policy matters, regularly includes a graduate or undergraduate student. Typically this young person is one who is involved with his or her home town tree board and participates in a Tree Campus USA campus board.

THE CHANGING FACE OF AMERICA, 1950-2050



The Census Bureau and other agencies that keep track of trends point out how the face of America is changing. This illustration, based on data from 1950 and projected to 2050, shows only one aspect of why diversification in urban forestry is increasingly important. Not shown are current imbalances related to gender and age.

Some Notable Efforts

Not only is the face of America changing, so are attitudes that address these changes. Equity and inclusiveness are becoming the goal in many organizations. We are able to present only a sampling of them here, but the intent is to stimulate what may be done in other organizations.

FORTERRA IN SEATTLE

Forterra is a regional nonprofit that seeks to create partnerships that produce vibrant communities and protect working landscapes. Environmental, social and economic needs guide their efforts as their staff and volunteers work on projects ranging from parks, natural areas and livable neighborhoods to transportation and rural forests. A key belief is that "broad inclusion garners broader success."

Staff at Forterra believes so strongly that diversity should be part of all their work that they hired an experienced consultant to guide them through an actual plan to help their efforts. The resulting 5-page strategic document was followed by the formation of a team with members from each of Forterra's departments with the charge to develop ways to implement the plan.

"It is not easy to reach out beyond your traditional base of support. There's a lot of work involved to build new relationships," says Norah Kates, Forterra's Green Cities Project Coordinator. From her experience, Norah offered several of the ideas on page 7.

'Green Redmond' was a project near Seattle to restore and maintain city parks and natural areas. Rather than waiting for volunteers to step forward, Forterra actively recruited young people in area schools and youth groups. One of several reasons was for the youth to be ambassadors, carrying environmental information to the older generation.

Hands-on leadership skills are developed through training and 'real world' participation that are built into a partnership between Arbor Day Foundation and Alpha Kappa Alpha.

DIVERSIFYING LEADERSHIP

Sarah Anderson, manager of Member and Partner Services for Alliance for Community Trees (ACTrees), believes "there's a budding culture of inclusiveness in urban forestry, and ACTrees member organizations are working to more accurately represent the communities they serve." A national nonprofit, ACTrees takes action to encourage its members to engage all stakeholders in greening their communities. ACTrees member organizations like Forterra and Urban ReLeaf are good examples. "It's valuable to have diversity among urban forestry leadership as well as the volunteers and stakeholders," says Sarah.

Another notable effort to groom future leaders is the Arbor Day Foundation's partnership with Alpha Kappa Alpha, the nation's oldest Greek-lettered organization established by African-American college-educated women. Under this agreement, tree-planting events are held at Historically Black Colleges and Universities that qualify for the Tree Campus USA Award. Among the criteria for this award is a requirement for a campus tree advisory committee, and at least one member must be a student. Students are also expected to be involved in planning for tree care, conducting an Arbor Day observance, and taking part in a service learning project. To promote the Tree Campus USA program at the nation's 101 Historically Black Colleges and Universities, the partnership provides internships to 9 students each year to spearhead recruiting efforts and help implement the program.

THINKING BIG IN TEXAS

About a decade ago John Warner, urban district forester with the Texas A&M Forest Service, recognized that landownership around Houston was changing rapidly. According to an article by Josh McDaniel in the Centers for Urban and Interface Forestry's *Leaves of Change* newsletter, "Latino, Chinese, and Vietnamese families from Houston were moving to the urban/wildland interface and buying 5 – 20 acre tracts of forest land." John realized that his agency was going to have to change its communication approach to reach these new landowners. John is reported as saying, "We knew how to communicate with traditional landowners. However, outreach to different ethnic groups was something new to us." Thanks to efforts by John and others in his agency, a number of effective ways were developed. These included:

- Bilingual conservation education programs for children, and workshops for Hispanic, Asian American and other non-traditional owners of property at the urban/wildland interface.

- Latino Legacy, established at Stephen F. Austin State University with funding from the USDA Forest Service, developed 'Amigos del Bosque (Friends of the Forest), a conservation education and community outreach team consisting of bilingual youth and Latino community leaders.

- Dr. Timberly Conway, USDA Forest Service conservation education specialist, brought Spanish-speaking specialists to Texas A&M Forest Service's signature environmental learning program – 'Exploring Houston's Backyard & Beyond.' This is a long-established program that takes inner city kids to a state forest for science education, discovery and investigation.

'Exploring Houston's Backyard & Beyond' program introduces inner city children to nature and how natural systems operate in urban and rural settings. Here Penny Bartley, forester with Texas A&M Forest Service (left) and Gwen Lanning, a volunteer with Texas Master Naturalists, teach the kids about water quality.

- Mirroring the successes of Dr. Conway's Latino Legacy, Texas A&M Forest Service supported and set up its own program to further expand on outreach opportunities in additional counties. Bilingual college students with an interest in natural resource management were hired, with the additional benefit of providing career pathways to advanced degrees and job opportunities.

- A 'Diversity Network' was created with a USDA Forest Service grant naming Florida Forest Service and Texas A&M Forest Service as the lead agencies. This collaborative effort is promoting the development of bilingual staffing, educational resources, cultural sensitivity training, and programming that enables each state's outreach programs to better reach diverse audiences.

Attracting more women to urban forestry or other natural resource professions begins with developing an interest in science and the outdoors.

GETTING YOUNG WOMEN INTERESTED IN SCIENCE

The Association for Women in Science is a national organization committed to helping women at every stage of their career achieve their greatest potential. But the first step to involving more women as professionals in urban forestry and other natural resource fields is to first get them interested in science. The University of Idaho is doing just that with a program named Women Outdoors With Science, or WOWS. This is a 10-day summer field science program for girls in grades 7 – 12. Science studies are intermixed with white water rafting, swimming and other recreational activities. The young women hear from successful scientists, help with restoration and other management projects, and create their own experiments. The program is housed at the university's beautiful McCall Field Campus, home of the year around McCall Outdoor Science School.

Some Notable Efforts

THE TREE MUSKETEERS is the world's first youth environmental organization. Founded in 1987 with the planting of a single tree by 13 Brownie Girl Scouts, this organization has impacted the lives of thousands of youngsters from diverse backgrounds. A unique feature of Tree Musketeers is expressed in their philosophy and implemented in all their projects: *All activities are youth-led with adults serving as a support system for young decision makers. Human development is integral, and we seek an extended definition of diversity in everything we do. We write, speak, act, and think with integrity.*

It may take many years for the canopy to mature, but the results of Kemba Shakur's ReLeaf projects immediately provide a sense of pride, jobs, and multi-cultural involvement in neighborhood improvement.

SERVING THE UNDERSERVED

Kemba Shakur is one individual who decided to make a difference – and she has! While working as a prison guard at a high security facility, she came to realize that the inmates had greater exposure to trees and green space than did her neighbors in West Oakland, California. She also made the connection between the absence of trees on her block and the area's struggles with crime, unemployment and pollution.

Working with the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection and other partners, Kemba began planting trees – first in her front yard, and then on her block, in her neighborhood and eventually throughout the City of Oakland. In 1998 she founded Urban ReLeaf which has resulted in the planting of more than 15,000 trees, especially in low to moderate income neighborhoods. Kemba says, "We need to advocate for more trees. It may take 20 years to see the impact of our work on the tree canopy, but you can see the benefits of urban forestry on the community now. You transform blocks when you plant trees – it's immediate gratification. In these underserved communities, it doesn't take a lot to make a big difference."

Just as importantly, the mission of Urban ReLeaf in Oakland is to provide hope and job opportunities for at-risk youth. More than 4,000 young people have already been affected by the 'green jobs' program and the benefits spread like concentric rings in a pond. Here is an illustrative story told at the Arbor Day Foundation Awards Weekend in Nebraska City as Kemba received the 2013 J. Sterling Morton Award, one of the nation's highest honors in urban forestry:

Kemba and volunteers were planting trees in an Oakland neighborhood by a 12-year-old girl's house when the youngster asked about securing a job. Kemba told the girl she was too young, but to come back when she was older. But the girl kept coming back, so Kemba told her she could volunteer until she was eligible for full-time work at age 15. The youngster did just that and eventually went on to train other young people in tree-planting. Recently she graduated with honors from Clark University and is eyeing a career in environmental law.

Tips to Increase Diversity

From a number of qualified sources we have assembled a checklist that may help in efforts to increase diversity in your organization.

- ☑ Consider the current composition of your board or group and the demographic make-up in your area or target audience. Strive to be more reflective of the latter.
- ☑ Become acquainted with the leadership of the various cultural groups and work with and through these key individuals.
- ☑ Attend meetings of groups you want to work with and develop trust. Gain a respectful understanding and determine the wants and needs of the group. Don't push your agenda; rather, show how their involvement with you will help meet *their* needs. Listen closely and ask questions to learn what motivates the group.
- ☑ Be specific in figuring out who you want to reach out to, and why. Outreach to "the general public" often only reaches the mainstream culture. As much as possible, make outreach personal.
- ☑ Educate others in your traditional group about cultural differences. Invite the participation of speakers or panels from other social groups. Consider attending cultural competency training if available.
- ☑ Where language is an issue, communicate using multi-lingual publications and signs. Hiring multilingual urban foresters or others will help. Also consider adding a multilingual voicemail line.
- ☑ In a Michigan study using open ended questions it was found that inner city residents identified "environmental issues" as toxic wastes, air pollution, noise, and endangered wildlife. Trees and tree care were not mentioned. The lesson here is to link trees with environmental health in information campaigns.
- ☑ Be aware of differences within cultural groups. For example, Native American tribes differ considerably in how they view some issues. Don't make assumptions. Be sensitive to the traditions and views of the specific group with which you are working.
- ☑ Strive to create outreach materials that speak directly to the people you wish to engage. Customize it whenever possible. Close-up photos of smiling faces will seem more personal and compelling to people unfamiliar with your message and by showing diversity you send the message that everyone is welcome in your program.
- ☑ Food often gets overlooked in tight budgets, yet food is nearly universal in bringing people together. It can also be a great opportunity for people to express their culture and share it with others.

Growth Award
TREE CITY USA

There are several ways that addressing the need for diversity can help a community earn points toward the Tree City USA Growth Award. For example, a workshop on cultural sensitivity or diversity might qualify under Eligible Activity A10, 'Continuing Education for Forestry Managers and Tree Board Members.' A partnership with a nontraditional group to plant trees or participate in an Arbor Day celebration would likely qualify under B1, 'New Project or Organization.' For a complete list of requirements for either the Tree City USA or Growth Award, please visit **arborday.org/treecity**.

Urban ReLeaf

Bringing People Together

Volunteers are the heart and hands of urban forestry in many communities. Now there is a great way to link up willing volunteers with organizations in need of help. To access this helpful site, simply go to **arborday.org/volunteer**. You will find that organizations can use the site to post openings and needs. Potential volunteers can use the site to find opportunities in their area. There is also a list of suggestions about how volunteers can be used to help any municipality or organization, and volunteers can share their stories and even keep track of their services.

You are also invited to get connected with others of like interests through Arbor Day Foundation's social network channels. Here are some ways to join the conversation:

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