MULTI-CULTURAL COMMUNITIES
ADDRESSING THE NEEDS OF ALL

CHAPTER FIVE

Trees benefit everyone equally and tree projects can be the builder of bridges between cultures.

Lester Brown of the World Watch Institute once wrote, "Tree planting fosters community spirit and pride, bringing people together for a meaningful purpose that can build bridges and promote understanding..."

In a living example of Brown's vision, it was trees that brought together people of diverse ethnic backgrounds in a Long Beach, California, tree planting campaign that won a 1993 National Arbor Day Foundation Project Award. The project demonstrated bridge-building cooperation among 28 local organizations that included city bureaus, civic organizations and neighborhood associations. It was reported that during this project people of different ethnicities from the same neighborhood worked together side by side toward a common goal for the first time ever. The project even found its way into local school curricula and resulted in educational tree materials being printed in English, Spanish and Khmer.

To build any strong, sustainable urban forestry program a different approach is needed today than has been used traditionally. The foundation for today's program must not only be ecologically and economically sound, it must also be embraced by all segments of the society it is intended to serve. To succeed, urban forestry must reflect the social makeup of the local community. It must be understood, supported and guided by all.

The social composition of each community is different, and knowing what it is locally is your first step in the right direction. A little crystal ball gazing helps, too. For example, urban forestry researcher John Dwyer has pointed out that by the year 2025, the U.S. population is expected to increase by 50 million, of whom 17 million will be Hispanic American, 14 million African American, 9 million white, and 10 million from other ethnic or racial groups. Social scientist Julia Parker, writing in *Women in Natural Resources*, quotes demographers that predict that by that same year people of color will constitute half of the United States population.

Can a sustainable urban forestry program ignore these statistics? Put another way, can urban forestry be sustainable without the inclusion of all cultural groups in the community, or for that matter, people from all ages and income levels? Clearly, the answer is "no." Diversity is just as important for the health of municipal government, a tree board, or volunteer organization as diversity of tree species is to a healthy community forest.

The benefits of social diversity include:

- A broader range of knowledge based on background and social contacts

- Important perspectives and opinions

- A sense of 'ownership' that leads to more support and less vandalism

- An expanded pool of participants and candidates for leadership

- More opportunity for funding

- Opportunities for working together and creating better understanding

- A strengthening of bonds that serve the future of our nation and society

Terms Intended to Help Communicate Sometimes Don't Work

To address and overcome the problem of inclusion in urban forestry, terms are necessary to communicate about under-represented stakeholders and potential audiences. The time-honored term *minority* may be the most commonly used, but it is quickly becoming obsolete. As demographics change, the descriptive ability of "minority" grows weak. Here are some insights from sociologists that may be useful in the search for substitute words:

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 also 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 are 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 might include language, food preferences, holiday traditions, etc. These traits, too, are passed from generation to generation.

Identifying the ethnic groups in a community usually requires no more than the experience of living there.

chairs who I know would love to increase the participation of under-represented populations. The question is how to do this? That's where we all need help."

In the section that follows, we have turned to two sources for help. First, research literature on the subject, then experienced people working in the field. Perhaps as we put all of this together, and add our own experiences from the local level, we can improve on the record of multi-cultural involvement in urban forestry. This is surely a key to sustainability.

Identifying Audiences, Needs and Differences

The first step toward involving the under-represented is to know who they are. Identifying the ethnic groups in a community usually requires no more than the experience of living there. Whether in a small town or the neighborhood of a large city, groups are generally known to any alert individual acquainted with the area. Individuals in urban forestry leadership positions would do well to list all known groups and share this list with others so that none is

But how does one go about assessing social diversity and increasing the involvement of more ethnic groups in urban forestry? According to Mary Yager, Program Director for The National Arbor Day Foundation, "All urban forestry officials and board

Avoid Common Pitfalls

Pitfall No. 1

Although it is usually not difficult to identify cultural or ethnic groups in a community, it is just as easy to mistakenly lump groups that may be different in subtle but important ways. In other words, there can be a tremendous amount of variability within what appears at first to be a homogeneous group. The best example of this is Native Americans. As the explorers Lewis and Clark found, the people within this general cultural grouping are extremely diverse. In fact, they often represent tribes or nations that have completely different governments, customs and beliefs – even though they may live in very close proximity. In the course of their journey to the Pacific, Lewis and Clark encountered over 50 different tribes, most of which are still viable units today. In fact, most are

considered now as sovereign nations within the United States. When identifying culturally diverse stakeholders or audiences, it is necessary to understand enough of their history and background to avoid inappropriate groupings as you plan improved communication and involvement.

Pitfall No. 2

There is a narrow line between looking for differences among cultural groups and stereotyping. The well-intended effort to learn about needs and preferences among all groups in a community must be balanced with an effort to avoid the misconception that all members of each group will share a particular need or hold the same preference.

overlooked. Personal communication with members of the identified groups can be used to alert you to subgroups that should be considered.

The second step is to understand differences between cultural groups potentially associated with urban forestry. This is more difficult. When looking to research for help, it is soon apparent that more work has been done on needs and differences associated with recreation and leisure than specifically found in the field of urban forestry. The following results from a number of studies are representative of the kind of information that has been brought to light, some of it in urban forestry but most borrowed from closely related fields. Sources cited are listed in the appendix for follow-up information.

1. Several studies have documented that urban whites and African Americans have very similar, pro-environmental attitudes and regard for the natural elements of their surroundings. In a study of rural areas, findings prompted a researcher to conclude, "Philosophically, both Southern Whites and Southern Blacks aligned with the concepts of conservation and stewardship." Elsewhere, this conclusion: "Environmentalism is a value that reaches across ethnic lines." (Kaplan and Talbot, 1988; Parker and McDonough, 1999; Parker, Zuefle, and McDonough, 1999; Parker and Koesler, 1998)

Application: Urban forestry is an environmental issue and there is every reason to believe that as an environmental issue previously under-represented groups will embrace it.

2. In open-ended questioning of black residents in the inner city neighborhoods of Detroit, trees and tree care were not mentioned as an environmental issue. Some topics that were identified were: toxic wastes, air pollution, noise pollution, and endangered wildlife. In another study, trees were seen by inner city residents

as important along streets and in parks, but unimportant in parking lots and industrial areas. (Getz, Karow, and Kielbaso, 1982; Parker, 2000)

Application: Information campaigns are needed that show the link between trees, environmental health and the quality of life both where we live and work.

3. There is some evidence that blacks have more of a fear or dislike of wooded areas than do whites. This may also be why there seem to be differences in preferred landscape designs. For example, when shown pictures of different landscapes, respondents in Detroit and Ann Arbor, Michigan, showed strong differences in their preferences. Whites favored tree scenes in unmanicured or undeveloped settings, whereas blacks favored more open and manicured park-like scenes. Blacks also preferred built elements such as benches, paved walks and picnic shelters. (Kaplan and Talbot, 1988; Metro, Dwyer, and Dreschler, 1981; Parker, Zuefle and McDonough, 1999)

Application: In planning tree spacing and other landscaping details in a project, be aware that there is no "right" or "wrong" design. Instead, consider the needs and opinions of potential users of the site.

The first step toward involving the under represented is to know who they are.

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Gaining Participation by All – Some 'How to' Ideas

Of the many specific techniques available to increase participation of ethnic groups in urban forestry, the general principle has been nicely summarized by Deborah J. Chavez of the USDA Forest Service. She calls it the "I Triad" – invite, include and involve:

Invite — Sincerely inform your target audience of your interest in them and their use of your program or participation in your group. More detailed suggestions about this are included in the list on page 35. Another form of "invitation" is making sure that photos in your publications and posters include individuals from all racial and ethnic groups in your area.

Include — To include means to not overlook or exclude. It begins with identification as discussed previously, but it also means including their opinions and making them a part of all aspects of program planning and implementation.

Involve — This is the next element and final test of a successful program. To involve means to not only acknowledge a group's presence and include its opinions or ideas, but to truly involve individuals in decision-making and other key parts of the program. It means going beyond symbolism and placing members of the group on boards and hiring them into positions for which they are qualified – at all levels of the organization.

Especially for Kids

Working with young people in a multi-cultural community takes a special effort. To help, Reginald Hagood, speaking at the 2001 National Urban Forest Conference, offered these suggestions based on his experience with the Student Conservation

Don't overlook the younger age groups. It is far tougher to influence high schoolers than kids in the early grades.
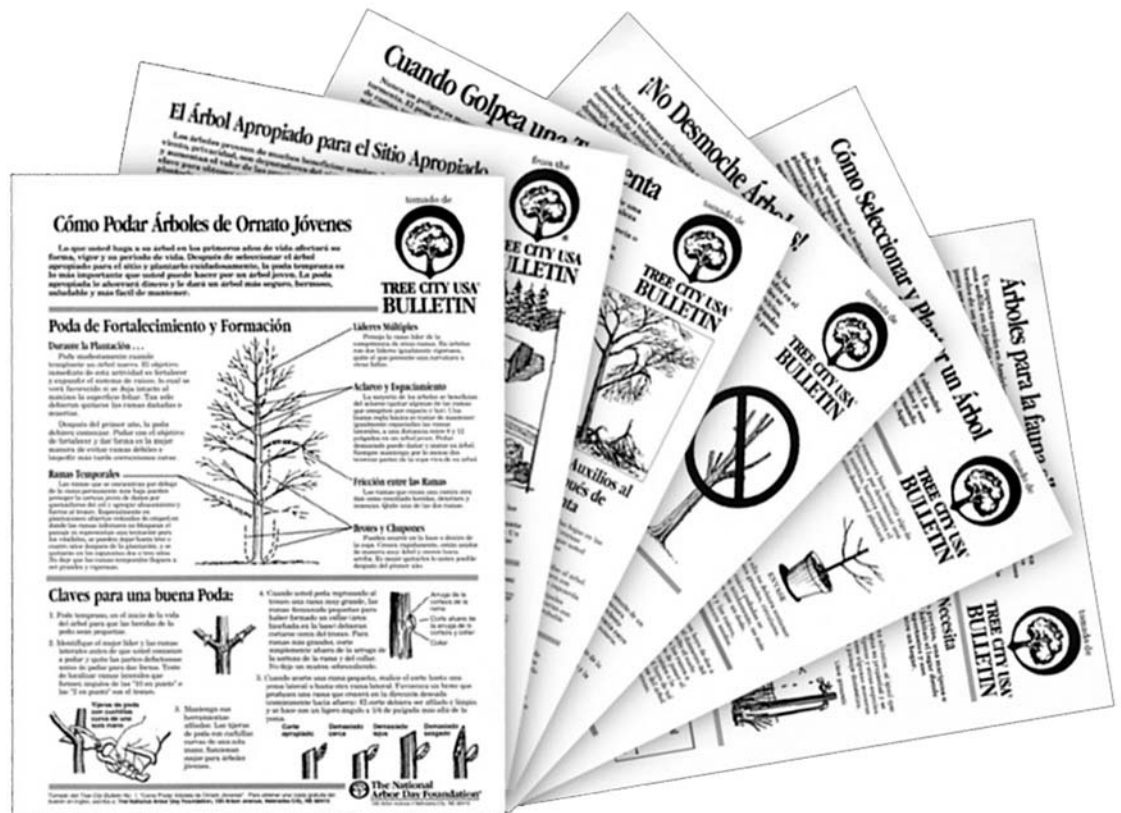
Association's urban and diversity programs:

✔ Know the language of the specific youth group with which you are working. You can learn it from the kids, but don't pretend to be as hip as they are.

✔ Keep your messages and activities 'place-based.' Fish dying from pollution in the Anacostia River is going to get the attention of District of Columbia youth more than talking about saving redwoods in California.

✔ Get across the reasons "why" behind what you want them to learn or do. Make a connection, for example, between tree planting and environmental justice or equity issues.

✔ Don't overlook the younger age groups. It is far tougher to influence high schoolers than kids in the early grades.

✔ Challenge kids (e.g. "We're told we can't accomplish this...").

✔ Be aware of barriers. It might be you or your leadership is not reflective of the area's demographics, or might be something as subtle as a kid not wanting to get his $150 shoes dirty.

✔ Encourage kids to take home what they learn and pass it on to others.

More Suggestions

✔ Develop partnerships and work through existing organizations and their leaders to enlist ethnic groups or individuals (churches or fraternal organizations, civic or sport groups, activist organizations, parent associations, after-school clubs). These need not be 'green' organizations.

✔ Don't just push your agenda. Find out what the group or local people want and need.

✔ Take the time to learn about the history and political structures of specific ethnic groups.

✔ Allow time to develop trust. It doesn't happen in one meeting.

✔ Communicate more effectively by using multi-lingual publications and signs. Hiring multilingual urban foresters and involving multilingual individuals as described above will also help when working with ethnic groups that speak a language other than English.

✔ Educate your leaders about cultural differences through workshops or other training sessions. Invite the participation of speakers or panels from the groups you have in your community.

✔ Determine what radio, television stations and newspapers serve ethnic groups in your area. Include these when running public service announcements, news, events or other information items.

Communicate more effectively by using multi-lingual publications.

✔ Link tree events with local cultural celebrations. This might include tree plantings or dedications, an information booth, giveaways, etc.

✔ If looking for 'green' individuals in urban areas with which you are unfamiliar, drive or walk around and look at yards. Those with owners or tenants interested in trees will be reflected in the care and appearance of their small parcel of land.

'Hats off' to Three Special Efforts

Individuals, governmental agencies and non-governmental organizations are rising to the challenge of addressing the needs of multi-cultural communities. Here are just three examples, all of which may be useful to you in your efforts locally.

Hispanic Tree Worker Initiative

In July 2000, the USDA Forest Service Southern Region hosted a meeting in Atlanta, Georgia, with representatives from the International Society of Arboriculture, National Arborist Association, National Hispanic Environmental Council, Texas Forest Service, and a number of companies and interested individuals. The purpose was to identify the issues and needs of Hispanic tree workers in the U. S. and their employers, and to develop an action plan to address these needs.
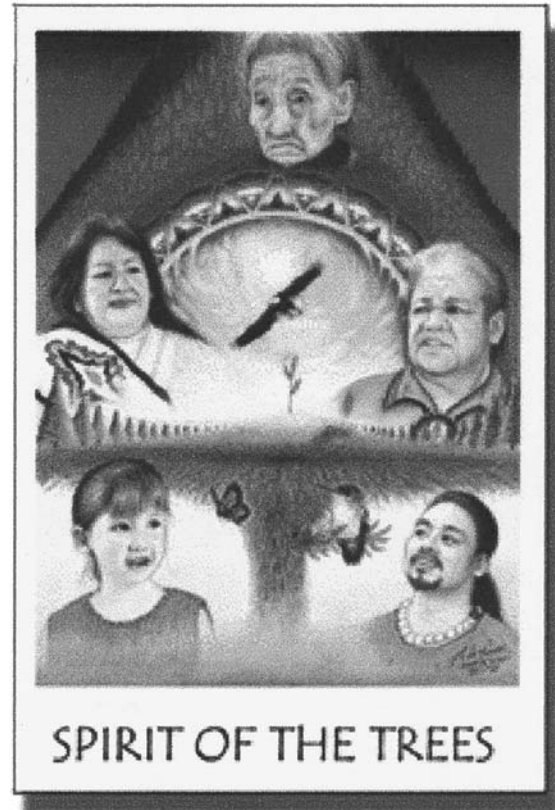
The main action items developed at the meeting were to:

• determine what tree-related publications are available in Spanish.

• prioritize translation needs.

• modify existing safety training videos by dubbing them into Spanish.

• write articles and promote continued efforts on behalf of Hispanic tree workers.

• identify or develop programs and materials to train employers about Hispanics and their culture.

• market these efforts as the Hispanic Tree Worker Initiative.

For more information, contact the USDA Forest Service, 1720 Peachtree Rd. NW, Atlanta, GA 30367 (Phone: 404/347-1650).

'Spirit of the Trees'

Iowa's Trees Forever has produced a six-part documentary, *Spirit of the Trees*, as part of its mission to make available to the public educational materials on all aspects of trees and tree care. This video series is a revealing portrayal of Native Americans from throughout the U. S. and their traditional connection to trees and forests. For information, visit the Web site www.treesforever.org.

SPIRIT OF THE TREES

National Hispanic Environmental Council

Another Web site to visit is www.nheec.org. Here you will find the home page for the National Hispanic Environmental Council, a national, non-profit organization that seeks "to educate, unite, and engage our community on environmental and sustainable development issues; encourage Hispanics to actively work to preserve and protect our environment; provide a national voice for Hispanics before federal, state, and non-profit environmental decision-makers; and actively assist Hispanics to pursue the many career, business, educational, and policy opportunities in the environment and natural resources field."

National Hispanic Environmental Council

'The Sheriff' Transforms a Landscape

James R. Fazio

Wilhelmina Lawson of Washington, D.C., has provided leadership to transform a littered, drug-plagued recreation center into a park-like setting. The neglected facility is now a fitness center where young and old gather for healthful activities ranging from sports to computer training.

Wilhelmina Lawson is living proof that one person can make a difference – especially when you can get an entire neighborhood to join the effort.

In Wilhelmina's case, the effort was to transform a neglected recreation facility into something beautiful and useful. The Wheatley Recreation Center had become a graffiti-plagued facility and hang-out for the undesirable. "The drug boys ruled," says Wilhelmina, "and the grounds were littered with beer cans and junk." That was before Wilhelmina stepped in to make a change. She is currently the president of Trinidad Concerned Citizens for Reform, but the local boys on the corners just call her 'The Sheriff.'

To get things started, Wilhelmina organized picnic-work days on the center grounds. Parents responded! Thanks to that, along with having the District of Columbia Parks and Recreation Department as a partner, the building eventually was transformed into the Joseph H. Cole Fitness Center, named for the city's first black director of the department. With the help of local residents, seniors, youth and inmates of the Center 4 Halfway House, a perpetual neighborhood beautification initiative also began, and Wilhelmina and her partners have transformed the grounds into lovely green lawns with trees and chip paths.

"Kids used to pull up any trees and shrubs that we planted here, but now they leave them alone," says Wilhelmina. "And parents used to keep their kids indoors. Now they're out jumping rope. We've come a long way, and I'm optimistic about the future.

"This is my way to revolt," she adds with pride.