

Fostering a Culture of Stewardship

Can we Leverage the Stewardship Network Model Beyond New Hampshire?

On Nov. 17, 2016, UNH Cooperative Extension hosted a meeting for organizations interested in whether the **Stewardship Network: New England**, currently operating in New Hampshire, could expand to neighboring states. 25 participants attended, representing non-profit organizations and agencies from Massachusetts (14), Maine (8), and Vermont (3).



On Feb. 15, 2017, a second, web-based meeting was held to prioritize the functions of an expanded Network in New England. 77 participants attended, representing Massachusetts (42%), Maine (20%), New Hampshire (18%), Vermont (16%), and Connecticut (1%). The largest number of participants were affiliated with non-profits (56%), followed by municipal, state or federal agency staff (16%), educational institutions (13%), other (9%), and volunteers (7%).

Challenges

At the first meeting participants shared challenges that they face related to stewardship, volunteers, or citizen science.

Volunteer Engagement

These include challenges related to recruiting and engaging a diversity of volunteers, attracting younger volunteers and families, making volunteer work exciting, communicating with volunteers, and increasing volunteer retention.

Professional Development & Training

These challenges include how to train volunteer managers, lack of understanding by supervisors of the importance of volunteers, training volunteers to do specific tasks, and how to use online training for volunteers.

Creating a Culture of Stewardship

Challenges in this category include the lack of public understanding around stewardship, ensuring equal and fair collaborative efforts, lack of understanding within organizations of the benefits of stewardship volunteers, connecting grassroots volunteers to “something bigger,” and connecting urban audiences to suburban or rural stewardship efforts.

Organizational Capacity

Participants offered many challenges in this area, including: funding to support stewardship and volunteers, limits to technology, ability to provide coordination, staff, or oversight for stewardship workdays and volunteers, struggles to expand programming across geographic boundaries without good relationships, few volunteer coordinators, working with volunteers is a small part of people’s jobs, and the need for expensive tools and equipment.

Citizen Science Capacity

Challenges for citizen science programs can be unique, such as: getting reliable data from volunteers, finding scientists willing to work with volunteers, and effectively training volunteers to collect good data.

Volunteer Management

Many challenges offered relate to volunteer management topics such as how to best match volunteers to projects, how to market and manage volunteers, liability and backgrounds checks for volunteers, how to track volunteers and hours, finding weekday volunteers, determining volunteer “ownership” with a shared pool, scheduling projects according to volunteer availability, and questions about legal issues when volunteers lead other volunteers.

Network Functions

Participants provided input on possible functions of an expanded Stewardship Network: New England, based on the understanding that good networks do what their participating groups want them and need them to do. At the web meeting in February, participants were then asked to prioritize these functions. Participants selected three top choices from a list of eight possible functions. So, what could an expanded Network look like? (See sidebar at right).

Participants mentioned the value of **Sharing Resources** such as: providing a clearing house for volunteer opportunities, recruiting volunteers, funding to support volunteers, equipment and tools, communication with volunteers, webinars to teach skills, training for volunteers, volunteer coordinators, interns, stewardship expertise/professionals, information and trends across organizations, system for recognizing volunteers and tracking effort/hours, and funding for the Network structure itself.

Participants also suggested exploring **Collaboration with Existing Networks** such as the Maine Land Trust Network, Southern Maine Conservation Collaborative, public-private partnerships, connecting to business community related to volunteerism and sponsorship, Regional Conservation Partnerships, Wells Reserve for research on volunteer and conservation motivation, and "Boston Cares."

Participants discussed the value of a **Regional Conference** related to stewardship, citizen science, and volunteers for: getting together in person for inspiration, training for volunteers and the public, considering timing of other conferences (trails, conservation commissions, land trusts), and offering professional development (beyond the basics) for staff.

Other functions/values mentioned include the value of the Network in converting volunteers into donors, drawing attention to stewardship excellence, bringing stewardship and citizen science together, connecting small groups to larger tools, and help understanding volunteer community and business community (not just understanding partners' needs).

Concerns brought up included needing to understand how much staff time will it take to expand the network and how will it be governed?

Key groups not present (yet) were identified to be state and federal agencies, town conservation commissions, chambers of commerce, environmental educators, watershed organizations, businesses, Appalachian Mountain Club, all Cooperative Extensions, universities (who are open and inclusive), private land owners organizations (need volunteers and are volunteers), environmental justice groups, faith communities, Highstead Center, and Woodlands and Wildlands.

Next Steps

The next steps for the Network will be to take the functions and priorities gathered from these two meetings with New England organizations and come up with a business plan for an expanded Network. In 2017, we will work with academic advisors from the University of New Hampshire Carsey School of Public Policy, UNH Cooperative Extension, and volunteers from partner groups in other states to develop a governance structure, a potential timeline, and a financial model to share with other states.



Top Priorities for an Expanded Network Identified at Feb. 2017 Meeting:

- Shared calendar - clearinghouse for volunteer events (29)
- Conference related to stewardship, citizen science, and volunteers (27)
- Collaboration on stewardship efforts, such as the Garlic Mustard Challenge (25)
- Training for volunteers - Best practices/shared training (22)
- Accessing funding for stewardship or citizen science (18)
- Tracking and sharing data on volunteer participation (8)
- Sharing tools (8)
- Weekly e-bulletin for communicating with volunteers (7)

