

“The woods next door”: U.S. community forests take root

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THE COUNTRY IS SEEING A GROWING TREND IN GREEN SPACES GOVERNED BY LOCAL RESIDENTS, BRINGING CONSERVATION, EDUCATIONAL BENEFITS AND INCOME TO URBAN AND RURAL COMMUNITIES

By Carey L. Biron

CHARLOTTESVILLE, Virginia, Nov 17 (Thomson Reuters Foundation) - Chris Gensic swept his arms around him as he sought to fully explain the scope of the surrounding Virginia forest - as a project, a green space and an opportunity for local residents.

A parks and trails planner for Charlottesville, Gensic was standing just off a new trail in the 142-acre (57-hectare) [Heyward Community Forest](#), which he helped the city buy and which opened to the public just before the pandemic hit.

The new parcel connects other forestlands in the area.

"To have a huge, unbroken forest tract that's been a forest for a long time - you feel like you're in a national park, even though you're two miles out of the city," he said, surrounded by towering tulip poplars and oaks, their leaves rustling in a warm October breeze.

While the city owns Heyward, it is designated as a community forest, purchased in part with funding from a federal program that has helped establish dozens of similar projects across the country in the past decade.

They are all part of a growing movement of creating urban and rural green spaces that involve residents in local conservation efforts, backers say.

"The community is the one that's been coming up here and creating trails. The nonprofits come up here and remove invasive species. Groups (ask) if they can bring kids up here and educate them," Gensic told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

"To me the word 'community' means all of that - it's not one agency, one nonprofit, but rather the entire community that sees the value in this," he added.

Community forests have long been a fixture internationally - in [countries such as Nepal and Guatemala](#) - but they have only gained attention in the United States recently, said Shelby Semmes, a director with the nonprofit Trust for Public Land.

Over the past decade, there has been ["mounting energy" with a spectrum of local aims](#), like conservation, tourism and watershed protection, as well as halting Black land loss and helping Native American tribes regain their land, she said.

"These forests are permanently conserved, and the benefits from that land are flowing directly to the community and reflecting their values," Semmes said.

Senator Patrick Leahy of Vermont, who in 2008 authored legislation on community forests, said they serve the public "in numerous ways," pointing to activities such as hiking and birdwatching and the tourism potential of outdoor recreation.

"They provide children with a place where they can explore the outdoors, and outdoor play is more crucial than ever as we face an epidemic of child obesity," he said in an emailed statement.

The movement could soon get another boost with the major ["Build Back Better" package](#) under discussion in Congress, which includes \$100 million for acquisitions of urban and community forests.

EMPLOYMENT AND REVENUE

Forests owned by counties and towns in certain parts of the country have played vital roles for years, Semmes said, but the idea started gathering steam when the U.S. Forest Service program launched its community forest grants in 2012.

Since then, the program - which is open to local and tribal governments as well as nonprofit groups - has helped create more than 60 projects totaling more than 24,000 acres, according to the Forest Service.

The program has so far provided about \$20 million in funding, and helped prompt an additional \$38 million from other sources.

"People are embracing the idea that the forests they rely on for their water and recreation aren't somewhere else - [they're the woods next door](#)," said Scott Stewart, a program manager with the Forest Service's community forests program.

From 2001 to last year, the United States lost 42.2 million hectares (104 million acres) of tree cover, according to data tracked by the Global Forest Watch monitoring service.

A first-ever analysis of the benefits of community forests was released in June by the [Trust for Public Land](#), in partnership with the Forest Service.

The report looks at 17 projects and details how, for instance, visitors to a trail system in and around Foy's Community Forest in Montana spend at least \$3.4 million a year in the local economy.

Randolph Town Forest in New Hampshire leases 35,000 taps a year to produce maple syrup, helping bring jobs and revenue to the town, while the Urban Food Forest in Atlanta includes seven acres of orchards and edible gardens, freely available for harvest and public distribution, the report notes.

"These (forests) are proving to be incredibly important financial investments for the communities," said Stewart.

SHAPING THE LAND

For years, John Littles and his team have focused on righting racial disparities in farming across the southern United States, but increasingly came to realize that many of those same concerns existed among Black landowners in general.

"Programs out there to assist landowners weren't getting to our African American communities and landowners," said Littles, executive director of McIntosh Sustainable Environment and Economic Development, a Georgia-based nonprofit.

The group wanted to use sustainable forestry to help Black residents keep and make the most of their land but needed the space to run educational programs, he said: "Most of the land in our area is privately owned - we don't have access to it."

That changed around 2015, when land in Long County, Georgia, came up for sale, Littles recalled.

"We would be able to control that land, shape that land and use it as a demonstration site," he said.

With assistance from the nonprofit Conservation Fund and philanthropic groups, the group today owns nearly 1,150 acres, where it hosts training sessions on forestry and conservation for youths, landowners, professionals and more.

Local access and control over land is also driving a project in Butte Falls, Oregon.

The tiny town of 450 people was once a company town for the timber industry and remains surrounded by timberland.

It has never controlled that land, however, which has increasingly become a concern for wildfire management, said Mayor Linda Spencer, who said the town also wants to tap into the area's tourism and educational opportunities.

Butte Falls is now slated to buy from a timber company 430 acres of former timberland, including a nearby waterfall that Spencer said the town has been trying to get access to for years.

"There's a bit of astonishment in the community over this - we're actually going to acquire that land," she said.

(Reporting by Carey L. Biron @clbtea, Editing by Jumana Farouky and Zoe Tabary. Please credit the Thomson Reuters Foundation, the charitable arm of Thomson Reuters, that covers the lives of people around the world who struggle to live freely or fairly. Visit <http://news.trust.org>)