Plant Communities/ People Communities

Lynne M. Westphal
USDA Forest Service
North Central Forest Experiment Station,
Chicago, IL

Exploring the interactions between plant communities and people communities was the theme of a symposium held in November 1992, which identified various areas and topics for potential audience research.

The symposium aimed to assess current knowledge about the active involvement of people with plants and to clarify research needs that will lead to improved program management and information delivery.

An excerpt from the problem statement, developed to provide a basis for the discussions, follows:

> Research on people's environmental perceptions indicates a strong preference for environments that include trees and other plants. Research has also identified a variety of social and psychological outcomes of exposure to and experience of vegetation: aesthetic and recreational pleasure, psychophysiological and restorative health benefits and symbolic and spiritual values. Many of these values and benefits are profound and suggest deep ties between people and plants. These values and benefits in turn are often cited as reasons for planting and maintaining trees, gardens, and natural ecosystems in work, living, and leisure environments.
>
> Although we have learned much from these types of studies to improve our theories and management practices, most of this work has focused on various "passive" benefits people receive from seeing or being around trees and plants. Less attention has been paid to interactions that derive from active, "hands-on" participation (e.g., community gardening or ecological restoration). These activities are increasing in popularity and can provide additional benefits and values that passive interactions might not (e.g., increased self-reliance skills; a tangible means to improve the environment; increased volunteerism and reduced management costs).
>
> We know little of the psychological processes involved in hands-on people-plant interactions, or of the practical implications of these processes. Answers are needed so that we gain a full understanding of the people-plant connection and in turn improve the benefits received by individuals and communities.

A brainstorming session to list questions about active people/plant interaction produced queries that ranged from the philosophical to the specific. Examples included: How do people learn to "see" (interpret, understand) the environment? How do we determine if the benefits are derived from the plants or from the person leading the program? Who does not participate, and why? What are the implications of participation for the design and planning of open spaces? What are the individual and community benefits of participation? Does changing a child's attitude toward nature change parents' attitudes also?

Discussion revealed a similarity of issues across programs sometimes thought of as disparate, e.g., urban forestry and urban gardening, or horticultural therapy and ecological restoration. Different scales as paradigms for thinking about people/plant interactions that were discussed included:

1. *Individual to family, community, and society at large.* For instance, benefits of horticultural therapy accrue most directly to the individual whose healing process is enhanced, yet societal benefits are also present through this effective care.
2. *Individual plant to ecosystem.* Benefits can be profound, even from a simple activity with one plant (a coleus grown in a retirement home, for instance). The benefits available from work with prairie restoration may be quite similar or different in scope.
3. *Passive to active participation.* Participation can range from "passive" (e.g., a lunchtime walk through an arboretum) to "active" (e.g., community gardening), though the group agreed that "passive" involvement with plants is not less important, meaningful, or even necessarily less participatory than "active" involvement.

Practitioners told researchers about their programs, their own questions about program effectiveness, and areas where they wished they had more information. Some of these information needs include:

1. An increased understanding of perceptions of nature and the impact these perceptions can have on visitor and participant behavior. For instance, a greater understanding of how children perceive a woods could improve botanic gardens' and arboreta's presentations of their woody collections to children.
2. Hard numbers that might back up the intuitive understanding that practitioners have gained—that urban gardening is an effective tool for rebuilding a community, for instance—would be helpful in talking to funders or to reshape programs.
3. Determining the programmatic impact of the time element in working with plants. That is, gardens provide a more immediate reward, while tree planting and care provide longer-term benefits (including an important tie to future