

Constructing Sustainability Through Local Community Collaboration: An Example of Landcare and Forest Management (37)

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Landcare is an international movement active in 12 countries and currently being tested in the US as a strategy to affect land use change by sustaining working farms and forests threatened by the urbanization and globalization pressures affecting many resource dependent communities located near large, expanding urban centers. It promotes the triple bottom line of sustainability: economics, environment, community. Grassroots led coalitions of landowners, businesses, politicians, university experts, and non-government and government organizations focus their collective energies on finding the common ground of sustainability.

This paper will review Landcare's philosophy, using as illustration its manifestation in Grayson County Virginia, USA. The paper will focus most of its attention on a forestry initiative, the Blue Ridge Forest Cooperative, evaluating the co-op from the perspectives of economy, ecology, and equity using criteria from the established literature of rural community development, community forestry, the Montréal sustainability summit, and Agenda 21. Established case-study research methods were used, including extensive interviews with participants.

Results show important but limited environmental impacts. The co-op provides an opportunity to implement and afford active management of fragmenting forests that otherwise would be vulnerable to pests, fire, disease and other threats to forest health. Also, environmentally sensitive forestry operations protect ecosystem services. It is not clear if the main environmental goal of keeping forests forested rather than subdivided and developed into housing estates is achieved. Thus far the co-op has only attracted wealthy members whose land ownership decisions are less dependent on generating income from the land and thus less motivated to sell land to pay taxes and generate income.

There are important economic impacts. Economic value is added and kept in the community by producing and marketing high quality Forest Stewardship Council forest products. Value is also added and kept in the community by processing lower grade materials into flooring, molding, and other niche products that are marketed locally.

The impacts on community and equity are modest and mixed. The co-op has mobilized a small

group of local landowners, businesses, and community leaders but thus far the capacity built by these new horizontal and vertical networks has not been used to affect other issues. In contrast, other networks within Grayson Landcare have had considerable success mobilizing local community action towards various sustainability issues. However, there remains little evidence that these efforts represent or benefit poor, transient, or traditionally disadvantaged residents of the region. Most the participants are landowners and the major proposals target politically empowered groups. Landcare also has the potential to greatly improve coordination and delivery of government services to locations and people that can most effectively use them. This potential has yet to be realized as state and federal assistance programs are only now taking notice of Grayson Landcare.