Creating Partnerships to Engage Youth in Conservation and Stewardship

Agency Goals
The Park and Recreation Commission of East Baton Rouge Parish (BREC) has developed a number of projects and partnerships that engage youth in environmental stewardship and sustainability, conserving natural resources, and energy conservation. These projects include tree planting, invasive plant removal, fundraisers for environmental organizations, and recycling projects.

Partnering with schools, nonprofit conservation organizations, individuals, local universities, scouts, and others interested in the environment is a primary vehicle for our agency’s stewardship efforts. Many of these groups share common goals of conservation and often require service hours or completion of a conservation project, but some just want to contribute to conservation outcomes in the community. We take calls from these groups looking to partner very seriously and work with them to develop an understanding of implementing a successful project.

Project Partners
Many of the tree planting stewardship projects in BREC parks are a result of a partnership with the Coastal Roots (CR) Program led by program staff at Louisiana State University and established at schools statewide. As part of the CR program, students participating in the program become well informed about the issues of environmental stewardship and sustainability and actively participate in habitat restoration projects. BREC partners with the CR program by providing stewardship opportunities at our parks, where native trees that are grown at nurseries in the schools can be planted. Staff from the BREC Conservation Department explore and develop opportunities to incorporate tree planting in existing parks as part of a management strategy for each park. In our most recent CR planting project, a one-acre area of grass in a park that was underutilized was mulched and planted with native trees. This project has a secondary environmental benefit of reducing the amount of grassy area that requires mowing, thereby conserving energy and reducing staff time and resources for mowing while still meeting our mission of providing recreational opportunities.

BREC has partnered with several scout groups on environmental stewardship efforts over the years. Boy Scout and Girl Scout projects have included removal of invasive Chinese tallow and Chinese privet trees at our Conservation Areas. Boy Scout, Cub Scout, and Girl Scout projects have also included planting native trees in accordance with a restoration planting plan for a mitigation project that is one of our conservation areas.

One of our most successful Scout stewardship projects was collaboration between BREC, volunteers from Boy Scout Troop 12, the Baton Rouge Recycling Foundation, and the Baton Rouge Soccer Association. In June 2010, BREC hosted the U.S. Youth Soccer Region III Championship Tournament at the BREC Burbank Soccer Complex. During the six-day tournament, the scout volunteers worked to recycle over 1.6 tons of plastic, aluminum, and cardboard. Recycling containers were provided by the Recycling Foundation, and a utility cart to assist with the collection was provided by the Baton Rouge Soccer Association.

In 2011, BREC collaborated with individual high school students who sought to complete service projects. The first project was a large tree-planting effort at
one of our parks. The student submitted and received a grant application from an area foundation to plant trees at an area park. The student then partnered with BREC and an area nonprofit tree advocacy group to acquire and organize a volunteer effort to plant the native trees. BREC provided support by having a landscape architect find the appropriate location for the trees and get construction crews to dig the holes for the large trees prior to the planting.

The second project involved a high school student who wanted to raise funds to assist organizations rehabilitating wildlife impacted by the 2010 BP oil spill. Staff worked with the student to instruct her in fundraising and provided her with a venue at one of our conservation areas to host a fundraiser for the project. Her fundraiser, “Walk 4 Wildlife,” raised over $1,500 to benefit the Louisiana Marine Mammal and Sea Turtle Rescue Program and Wings of Hope Wildlife Sanctuary. BREC has been fortunate to partner with the Wings of Hope Wildlife Sanctuary for years and they have supported our programs and conservation efforts.

In June of 2011, BREC partnered with a local nonprofit (City Year) and a local youth leadership group (the Hugh O’Brien Youth Leadership Program) to implement a stewardship project that cleaned up two lakes that are adjacent to BREC parks. This project was part of the Global Youth Service Day (GYSD) that included service projects around the world. The local nonprofit group solicited supplies from various groups including American Rivers, which donated garbage bags and advertised the cleanup on their 2011 National River Cleanup website; local restaurants which donated food and drinks; Louisiana State University which donated canoes, kayaks, paddles, and PFDs for the day; and the local Keep Baton Rouge Beautiful organization, which donated gloves. Hundreds of participants, mainly local youth, picked up garbage to clean up the lakes.

While BREC does not currently incorporate specific formal career orientation to guide youth to “green” job opportunities, we do have programs such as the Bluebonnet Bird Monitoring program that does actively recruit university students as volunteers and teaches them contemporary bird monitoring techniques in order to prepare the next generation of informed conservationists and wildlife biologists. This program also provides extensive hands-on outreach opportunities for K-12 students to learn from and interact with captured birds and the young college-aged biologists who teach them about avian ecology, wildlife biology, and conservation and provide great role models for the youth.

Funding

The programs are funded in a variety of ways. Many of the projects are funded primarily through our partners, but also out of current operating budgets with existing staff. In some cases, the program is supported through donations of supplies and materials from businesses. Staff works with the youth to develop their understanding of necessary funding to complete a project and educate them about how to solicit funds for their project. This is an important part of the development of leadership skills in youth, and it helps to ensure success of projects.

Social Media Utilized

Social media and mobile technology (Facebook, Twitter, and various postings on webpages) were effective in soliciting volunteers for the GYSD project. Social media and mobile technology (posting photographs and stories) have been supported in the post-event marketing of almost all of our stewardship projects.

Creating a Culture of Conservation in Youth

We have had the most success instilling a dedication to conservation in young people in our summer camp program. In this program, we have the time to work with participants to delve deeply into conservation issues and develop environmental stewardship leaders. We typically have these young people for 40-50 hours each week (7:30 a.m.–5:30 p.m.) during the summer, and many of them come back for years after. During our summer camp, we explore various issues in great depth and provide young people hands-on opportunities for environmental stewardship. Youths that participate in this program develop an appreciation for the environment and an understanding of the value of nature, making it easy to motivate them to identify actions that they can take to conserve the environment. Research has supported findings that such experiences are where environmental stewardship and a culture of conservation will be developed.

Goals Set, Results Evaluated

In each case where we partner with an organization, we try to establish measurable goals for specific projects. Each project is different. Tree-planting projects can measure the number of trees planted. Garbage or recycling projects can measure the amount and types of garbage or recyclables picked up over a given period of time. Sometimes in working with partners, particularly young partners, the learning experience involves evaluating the outcome as part of a project after action review. It also may involve discussing why we met, didn’t meet, or exceeded our projected outcomes.

For more information on how the Recreation and Park Commission of East Baton Rouge Parish (BREC) creates partnerships to foster stewardship and conservation, contact: Greg Grandy, ggrandy@brec.org, 225.273.6405, 8201 Florida Boulevard, Baton Rouge, LA 70806.

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