

Engaging citizen foresters as local participants in a national media project

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About the project

The Truth About Trees Community Story Project is part of a multiplatform media initiative that aims to raise awareness of the indispensable role of trees for all life on Earth.

The Story Project is a strategy for developing and strengthening linkages among our Community Partners while building awareness of a documentary series in production by Agee Films. While the films are aimed at a broad, national public audience, the Story Project engages citizen foresters and their organizations at the local level as partners who share the goal of inspiring more people to learn about and get involved with forests and trees.

Why trees?

Trees and forests are threatened by climate change, globalization, and many other factors. At the same time, they are more essential than ever for their contributions to climate resilience. It's important that we expand our understanding of forests and act aggressively to conserve and restore them.

Trees also offer an accessible path to learning. For many, they are familiar, span generations, and are associated with strong memories and emotions. They can inspire hope, make climate change seem less overwhelming, and offer opportunities to act locally.

Who are citizen foresters?

Most of our partner organizations work with urban and community forests. Their volunteers go by different names, but all learn the basics of tree biology and tree care, then put their knowledge and skills to work in places they care about. Some groups focus on community revitalization and social justice, others on conservation and restoration.

How we've worked

We have collected stories in two main ways:
- Workshops
- Recording in the field
In both modes, Community Partners chose participants. Our time was limited and tools simple. We handled recording and editing, sent drafts to participants, and made revisions they requested (few did). We then published their stories on Vimeo, using settings that allow for videos to be embedded in other sites.



Stories

Between February 2013 and October 2015, we worked with 60 people in 8 regions. We produced 51 stories, 47 of them videos, the rest audio. The stories feature 58 people: 28 men, 30 women; 35 White, 15 Black, 4 Hispanic, 3 Asian-American, 1 Native American.

Some participants have shared their stories in blogs, on websites and Facebook, and in other ways. By February 2016, the video stories had been played 6,700 times.



Nelson Salisbury: "A stark contrast"
2 weeks ago



Matthew Schwartz: "Letting nature have a..."
4 weeks ago



Lucia Toledo: "Keep working with the enviro..."
4 weeks ago



Francis Odhiambo Omungo: "I see ourselv..."
1 month ago



Jenny Jiang & Tracy Tse: "We only have on..."
2 months ago



Adam Wargacki: "Working with each other..."
2 months ago



Cheryl Blaylock: "A small organization that..."
2 months ago



David Mendez: "The trees will still be there"
6 months ago

What we're learning

The Community Story Project is situated within a documentary tradition that places high value on the storyteller's voice and authority: on authenticity, spontaneity, a sense of place; and on ease of sharing.

Workshop participants found the process enjoyable (75%) and were satisfied with their stories (91%). But preparing, then reading, a script wasn't for everyone, including a disproportionate number of people of color. Also, participants weren't especially interested in video-making, but were eager to show us places they cared about—and happy to leave the recording to us. That meant it was important that a skilled photojournalist support the process.

Our broad question remains: How will this form of citizen participation be integrated clearly into a nationally distributed film project?

Community partners and friends

Casey Trees, Washington, DC
EarthCorps, Seattle, Washington
Hopa Mountain, Bozeman, Montana
Missouri Botanical Garden, St. Louis
Openlands, Chicago, Illinois
Pennsylvania Horticultural Society, Philadelphia
Trees New York, New York
Urban Releaf, Oakland, California
City Fruit, Seattle, Washington
Forest ReLeaf of Missouri, St. Louis
Forest Park Forever, St. Louis
Friends of the Urban Forest, San Francisco
Wilderness Society, Bozeman, Montana

Community Engagement/Producer: Wendy Pollock
Photographer/Editor: Anna Hiatt
Evaluator: Carey Tisdal
Director/producer of film series: Ross Spears
Agee Films, Johnson City, Tennessee
NSF Grant No. 1223236

