

NOTES YOUTH DEVELOPMENT



Youth Conservation Corps: Employment and Environment

Engaging young people in environmental service projects is an innovative way of achieving several priority objectives through one single intervention. **A well-designed Youth Conservation Corps can provide youth with skills that enhance their employability, protect or restore critical ecosystems, and create a pro-conservation citizenry.** This issue of Youth Development Notes profiles Youth Conservation Corps interventions in developed and developing country contexts and offers some guiding principles on effective program design.



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Today's youth (15–24) constitute the largest cohort ever to enter the transition to adulthood. Nearly 90% live in developing countries and the challenges they face—low quality education, lack of marketable skills, high rates of unemployment, crime, early pregnancy, social exclusion, and the highest rates of new HIV/AIDS infections—are costly to themselves and to society at large. Client demand for policy advice on how to tap the enormous potential of youth is large and growing. This series aims to share research findings and lessons from the field to address these important cross-sectoral topics.

Defining Youth Conservation Corps

Youth Conservation Corps (YCC) is a means by which countries can address two critical development issues in a manner that is mutually reinforcing. It optimizes public resources **to meet national and local conservation priorities** by providing unemployed youth with an opportunity to develop, manage and protect their communities' natural resources. YCC programs around the world have restored degraded ecosystems, reduced vulnerability to natural disasters, and safeguarded ecosystem services vital to local populations. They have achieved this all the while **offering young people a first work experience**, and an opportunity to gain invaluable life and professional skills.

Box 1. The YCC Model—How it Began

The YCC model dates back to 1933, as the US was emerging from the Great Depression. It was conceived to provide work and training to young men to help them undertake actions to maintain and protect the nation's natural resources. During its first ten years of operations, the program provided employment and training to several million young men and is credited with reforesting more than half of the public and private lands ever reforested in U.S. history.¹ Not only did this help them and their families through the depression, but their contributions to national conservation were also significant. Over 30,000 wildfire shelters were built, lakes and rivers were stocked with hundreds of millions of fish, and billions of trees were planted. Since then, numerous YCC programs have emerged throughout the United States at the local and state level, and similar programs now exist in other countries, including Mexico, Honduras, Guatemala, South Africa, New Zealand, Namibia, India, Indonesia, Canada, Australia, and the Philippines.

Source: Paige, J.C. 1985. The Civilian Conservation Corps and the National Park Service, 1933–1942: An Administrative History. National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior.

Activities for YCC programs are entirely dependent on the contexts in which they operate. Typically, they can be categorized into four broad areas:

- **Conservation activities**, such as making trails in national parks, planting trees, erecting fire towers, building roads in remote areas, fighting fires (forest and residential), controlling soil erosion, promoting eco-tourism activities, organic gardening, and countless others.
- **Professional training and certification**, such as conservation skills, CPR/First Aid certification, carpentry, water quality testing, surveying/GPS, and other professional certification that enhance the employability of participants.
- **Lifeskills training**, such as leadership, decision-making, problem-solving and communication skills, and basic information technology skills.
- **Formal education**, including helping participants achieve secondary school equivalency, offering ac-

cess to distance learning programs through their computer center, and providing tutoring.

YCC—Effective Design Principles

Differing contexts have led to different ways of structuring YCC programs. Some key characteristics to program design are as follows:

Goals: YCC program goals are typically two-fold: to promote positive youth development and to further environmental conservation. They demonstrate that conservation activities can be beneficial both to the individual youth in terms of skills and livelihoods as well as to his or her community. Given the very different nature of both objectives, the implementing organizations must possess the capacity to achieve both goals simultaneously.

Scale: Most YCC programs are state-sponsored, although privately and locally sponsored initiatives exist as well. National programs tend to operate on a larger scale and be longer in duration. They tend to have a greater impact on the individual (given a longer time frame), and more tangible outputs thanks to the large scale operations, such as major reforestation efforts. Smaller, locally-driven initiatives, like the Conservation Corps of Guatemala, Honduras and Mexico, however, have the benefit of being more responsive to immediate and specific needs that arise in the community.² A good example of a structure that combines national scale with local responsiveness is the Youth Conservation Corps of New Zealand: a national framework providing funding for satellite programs embedded in local communities.³ This localized approach also benefits from involving local youth, a program characteristic that helps to foster community ownership over the programs.

Selecting Beneficiaries: The program's goals will determine the degree of targeting warranted. Whereas some may be designed to place greater emphasis on providing disadvantaged youth with work and life experience, others may be designed to provide communities with college graduates in relevant disciplines to assist them in planning conservation projects. The Earth Conservation Corps in Washington DC and the Palawan Conservation Corps work with at-risk youth,⁴ while other programs such as Conservation Volunteers in Australia have a broader recruitment, welcoming young people from across the spectrum.⁵ An important component of the World Bank-supported COREMAP project in Indonesia is to provide technically qualified human resources to program districts to support the conservation and sustainable use of coral reefs.⁶ Students who major in relevant disciplines (fisheries, biology, community development, etc) and have prepared plans for field programs related to coral reef



protection or ecosystem management have the opportunity to apply these skills while working in selected villages.

Duration: Programs can range from a several weeks to more than a year. Research indicates that program participation needs to be long enough for beneficiaries to earn the technical and educational qualifications, improve their work ethic, and acquire the life skills necessary for success in the labor market and life more generally.⁷ The AmeriCorps YCC features a year-long program and requires that participants complete 1700 hours of service over that time.⁸ Some programs of shorter duration can achieve this impact through being residentially-based, such as the PCC in the Philippines (See Box 2).

Box 2: Palawan Conservation Corps, Philippines

The Palawan Conservation Corps (PCC) is a non-profit organization established in 1999 dedicated to empowering of out-of-school youth from the rural areas of Palawan, Philippines. The mission of the PCC is two-fold: (i) to prevent environmental degradation by empowering out-of-school youth towards self-sufficiency with marketable skills, and (ii) to help restore critical ecosystems in Palawan.

The PCC is a free, residential program for young men and women, providing room and board for youth between ages 18-24, who lack the resources to attend the public education system. The PCC provides skills training and certification in agriculture, forestry management, and appropriate technology. Funding for the PCC comes from various sources, including local government, national and international donor partners.

The PCC recently completed the construction and development of an educational nature park, a community resource for environmental education. The PCC model has proven so successful in Palawan, that several new YCC programs have been developed in other critical ecosystems in the Philippines.

Visit <http://www.pccphilippines.netfirms.com> for more details.

Compensation: Depending on the target beneficiary and available resources, compensation can come in the form of housing, food, stipends, certificates or scholarships. The YCC model funded by AmeriCorps features both a stipend (albeit below the minimum wage) and a continuing education scholarship worth up to US\$ 5,000 upon program completion. Some programs have chosen to recognize participants through awarding program certificates or technical licenses en lieu of financial compensation, such as the Conservation Volunteers in Australia.⁹ The PCC also compensates households for providing room and board to participants, hereby providing local community residents with an alternative source of income. Whatever the selected method, it is important to be realistic about the needs of program beneficiaries when considering the structure of program compensation, as poor youth encounter financial

obligations that often preclude their participation in a program that does not offer any immediate financial reward.

Partnerships and funding: Small grants from international donors, non-governmental organizations, and partnerships at the local levels of government have all been successful methods of ensuring that resources are available to support activities, but sustainability can be a key inhibiting factor.¹⁰ Partnerships with municipalities and the private sector can be very effective ways of securing in-kind assistance to help ensure sustainability, such as through donating land or unused public spaces. Experience has shown that a mix of funding is crucial rather than relying too heavily on any one source, given the nature of changing political parties in government and among donor governments. One example is the Conservation Corps in Namibia which teams the Namibian Youth Ministry with the private sector to help with the financing of the program.¹¹ In Northern Canada, the Canadian Fur Institute is working with local schools in the aboriginal communities of the Northwest Territories to design a YCC program that strengthens the schools through introducing land-based education, and connects the participants to their cultural heritage.¹² In Russia, a YCC program uses tourist interest in Lake Baikal to raise additional funds (See Box 3).

Institutional Considerations: The cross-sectoral nature of YCC requires the participation of multiple institutions. On the environment side, most models include a national or local institution with oversight capacity for conservation (e.g., Ministry of Environment, Agriculture, Interior, or NGOs with this expertise and authority). On the employment side, most include a national agency with oversight for employment, recruitment or training (e.g., Ministry of Labor, training academies, municipalities). In some cases, YCCs have depended upon the excess capacity for transportation, housing, and training infrastructure of the military or of universities to carry out large scale exercises. In New Zealand, the Ministry of Youth Development (MYD) contracts service providers (such as NGOs, government agencies, and universities) to run local YCCs. Selection is determined according to published criteria and past performance. Each provider has a Program Supervisor responsible for managing the contract, and liaising with the Department of Conservation, regional and local authorities, and with MYD project advisors.¹³

Striking the Right Mix: For Youth and for the Environment

Activities for youth development need to reflect the multi-sectoral needs of youth. The technical and field skills acquired through training in conservation (such as water quality test-



Box 3: Great Baikal Trail, Russia – Funding YCC through Eco-Service Tourism

Since 1995, the Great Baikal Trail association (GBT) has implemented a YCC model to protect Russia's Lake Baikal. Situated in south-east Siberia, Lake Baikal is the world's oldest and deepest lake containing 20% of the world's total freshwater reserve. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, government resource allocations to the protection of Russia's natural resources and ecological treasures have been significantly reduced.

GBT sustains its programs by providing foreign tourists with the opportunity to work side by side with Russian youth volunteers and play an active role in the preservation of Lake Baikal. Foreign tourists pay a fee to volunteer working on construction and maintenance projects. In exchange, these "eco-service" tourists are provided with accommodations, meals, and are organized into groups to work on specific segments of the trail. Seed funding for GBT has been provided by the Trust for Mutual Understanding, Foundation for Russian and American Economic Cooperation and through fees for services.

GBT partnerships span several local governments and international organizations. For the past seven years GBT has partnered with EarthCorps (a youth conservation corps based in the US) to train the local Russian youth who lead and manage volunteers in Baikal trail building initiatives.

To learn more about this program visit: http://www.greatbaikaltrail.ru/index_en.html

ing), trail construction, and GIS mapping provide the necessary professional development component of a successful YCC program. Practical livelihood skills (such as livestock raising and candle-making from recycled vegetable oil in the Palawan example) help alleviate pressures to contribute to the household income, but there should be an emphasis on diversifying these skills and changing the output frequently, so as to avoid flooding the local market. Providing an opportunity to complete a secondary school equivalency diploma combined with general life skills is particularly important for programs targeting youth at risk. Finally, leadership skills can be strengthened through team-based projects, hands-on project management experience, and public advocacy for the environ-

ment. Each of these skills are important factors to help youth make a successful transition to adulthood, and an important contribution to their community.

Activities for the environment can safeguard and restore vulnerable habitat, and by doing so, insure the provision of ecosystem services that are tied directly to the welfare of both urban and rural populations, such as improved water quality and food supply. Through actions such as planting trees, restoring coastal mangroves, building trails in national parks, removing invasive plant species, and training junior park wardens, the YCC harnesses the energy of today's youth toward the health of tomorrow's planet.

References and Recommended Reading

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