Sea Grant NEW YORK

Natural and Nature-based Features
Case Study #10

Social assessment field researcher documenting an informal trail. Photo credit: NYC Urban Field Station

Assessing the Social Uses and Meanings of Green and Blue Spaces, New York City

Project Overview

Researchers at the United States Department of Agriculture Forest Service's New York City Urban Field Station, including Dr. Lindsey Campbell, seek to document the uses and functions of green and blue spaces in NYC by tracking and analyzing users' behaviors, as well as descriptions and narratives about natural areas in the city.

Key Takeaways

- Social assessment data can be collected in a variety of ways. The entire team can be trained to collect this data, not just social scientists.
- Communities change. Incorporate this insight into plans for ongoing monitoring, reevaluation, and adaptive management by asking, "Is this site still providing the broadest array of services?"
- Understanding what people who may never come to a community meeting are doing in situ makes for a companion to engagement strategies that come from research or good practice in planning.

Project Context

Understanding the social impacts of natural and nature-based features (NNBF) is difficult. Practitioners, researchers, and policymakers all seek ways to assess the social dimensions of NNBF projects and produce information that can be put in conversation with other datasets. Comprehending the way people use public space and existing natural features such as parks can inform planning and assessment of emergent NNBF projects and help sustain healthy ecological relationships along with a sense of stewardship and investment in the importance of these projects.

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Social assessment field researcher conducting interview on Jamaica Bay. Photo credit: NYC Urban Field Station

Tool Highlight

Field-based approaches to social assessment that are accessible to an interdisciplinary team (once trained) include:

- Observing and counting people in different places.
- Documenting signs of human use (such as graffiti, art, signage, and murals; informal trails, improvised sitting places, and encampments; community gardens in parks; and dumping or vandalism).
- Conducting randomized interviews.

Social media data (X, formerly Twitter)

- Analyzing and comparing patterns of use by searching X for key terms and geolocating those posts.

Results

Social assessment data was combined with ecological data and shared with land managers in order to understand the social value of publicly accessible natural space.

Implications for Practice

The collection and incorporation of social assessment data as part of project planning and monitoring can help ensure community needs, preferences, and uses are fully incorporated into the design and programming of NNBF projects, and can help communicate the social co-benefits of these projects to other stakeholders and finders.

Featured Researcher: Dr. Lindsay K. Campbell
Coauthors: Dr. Erika S. Svendsen and Dr. Michelle L. Johnson

Dr. Lindsay K. Campbell is a research social scientist with the USDA Forest Service. Her research explores the dynamics of environmental governance, civic engagement, and natural resource stewardship. She also serves as joint PI of the Stewardship Mapping and Assessment Project, which maps environmental stewards' social networks and spatial territories in 20 locations across the globe. Dr. Campbell aims to amplify the voices and experiences of stewards through exhibitions, essays, and convenings. She has co-led the Social and Site Assessment, a partnership with NYC Parks and the Natural Areas Conservancy to understand the use, value, and meaning of urban green space, natural areas, and waterfronts. Dr. Campbell strives to create spaces of collaboration between land managers, scientists, artists, and other practitioners and co-directs the NaturePLACE Collaborative Arts Program.

References

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About SRIJB (https://srijb.org/): The SRIJB is a CUNY-wide institute created through a partnership amongst the National Park Service, the City of New York, and the City University of New York (CUNY). Our mission is to produce integrated knowledge that increases biodiversity, well-being, and adaptive capacity in coastal communities and waters surrounding Jamaica Bay and New York City. The Institute is hosted and supported by Brooklyn College and works closely with member organizations including NY Sea Grant, the Jamaica Bay Rockaway Parks Conservancy, and the Jamaica Bay Ecowatchers.

New York Sea Grant (NYSG) (www.nyseagrant.org) is a partnership program of the State University of New York, Cornell University, and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration that delivers science-based solutions for environmental stewardship, economic vitality, and resilience across New York's Marine and Great Lakes regions.