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Community Forestry

Urban and Community Forestry: Opportunities and Challenges

by J. R. Thompson

Community Tree Management" (Forestry 475) became a regular course offering two years ago in the Department of Forestry at Iowa State University. "Urban Forestry" seminars/special topics courses had sporadically been offered during the 1980's in response to student and faculty interest in the subject. A regular course offering in this area was added to the curriculum to provide essential background and experience for the growing number of students that are employed (both during their years at Iowa State University and after graduation) in various aspects of urban and community forestry.

A gradual demographic shift in the U.S. from rural to urban-dwelling citizens during the last half of this century has accelerated to the point that over 75% of U.S. residents now live in urban settings. Although predictably lower than the national average, even in Iowa over 60% of the population lives in town. For some urban dwellers, particularly in large cities, the urban "forest" is the only forest they may have regular contact with. The value of this resource to society is manifold: urban trees and forests improve air quality, sequester carbon, save energy, reduce noise pollution, improve water quality, provide wildlife habitat, and even improve personal health and well-being. Because of the unusual stresses placed on trees (organisms that naturally occur in forests) in most urban settings, intervention and management of the urban forest resource is critical.
A growing number of accredited forestry schools offer coursework and in some cases a major or option in urban forestry (Miller, 1994, Garvin, 1997). In many cases, the urban forestry option in a four-year degree program is closely allied with a traditional resource management specialization or major. Many other institutions offer 2-year technical degrees in urban forestry or arboriculture.

Job opportunities in urban forestry include municipal forestry (city foresters, parks and recreation department positions, or public works), state-level forestry (departments of conservation or natural resources), commercial arboriculture, landscape services, nurseries, consulting, and utility forestry, to name a few. Although municipal forestry opportunities have probably declined somewhat in recent years, the strong demand for expertise in the commercial industry provides excellent opportunities for both seasonal employment and permanent placement for early-career foresters. With the growing number of schools offering degrees in arboriculture or urban forestry, employer demand for students that have obtained specific urban forestry training has also grown. A number of 4-year degree institutions report that students graduating with an emphasis in urban forestry typically receive multiple job offers and can expect to start with jobs at the mid- to upper $20,000 annual salary level, and to progress rapidly (particularly if they elect employment in the private sector).

Recent trends toward ecosystem management and landscape ecology approaches (familiar to many foresters) are now being carried over into the urban landscape and being incorporated in urban/suburban planning and development of sustainable communities. The need for professional foresters in this arena is great! Students with traditional forestry coursework that includes biology, ecology, and watershed/landscape level experience, combined with sociology, political science, landscape design, or community and regional planning will be well-suited to participate in the emerging complex urban and suburban landscape planning process. The importance of this is greatly increased for planning which affects the urban/rural interface, where forest conservation and preservation will need well-trained advocates.

One of the greatest challenges to prospective urban foresters will probably be the public arena in which they will need to operate. One author has indicated that “foresters will need to possess the skills of lawyers, psychologists, teachers, and sometimes even ministers if they hope to work effectively” (Willeke, 1994). Certainly, skills in dealing with all kinds of people having all kinds of interests, and the ability to collaborate effectively with professionals from other disciplines will contribute to the success of future urban and community foresters.

References

