

Foreword: The Value of Stewardship in Times of Recovery

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The USDA Forest Service was created in 1905 with a mission that continues to resonate and inspire our work today: “To sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of the Nation’s forests and grasslands to meet the needs of present and future generations.” Our emphasis on both land and people is summarized in our motto, “Caring for the land and serving people,” in recognition of our civic service, the fundamental importance of nature to human health and well-being, and our desire to awaken and strengthen all people’s connection to the land. “Caring for the land” represents our commitment to land conservation, restoration, and stewardship.

Over the last decade, Forest Service research and practitioner experience have demonstrated the power and potential of stewardship activity to help people rebuild and heal after disturbance—after hurricanes, floods, tornadoes, wildfire, and other natural emergencies, as well as human-caused disasters, such as terrorism and other violence. It is no surprise that stewardship can speed the recovery of natural infrastructure, but the act of coming together and creating collective, positive change and beauty in outdoor spaces can also help individuals and communities recover emotionally, psychologically, and/or spiritually. Stewardship action can even help communities become stronger and more resilient than they were before the trauma.

Our core stewardship and resilience research takes place at our New York City Urban Field Station, where our scientists have studied social and environmental response to tragic disasters like Superstorm Sandy in 2012 and the 9/11 terrorist attacks of 2001. The scholarship and personal narratives in this synthesis draw from these disturbances and many more, together illustrating how stewardship activity can help engage and empower people in the aftermath and contribute to the healing process. The importance of cultivating resilient communities and ecosystems becomes apparent as we tackle the complexities of climate change and natural disasters, and the tragedies of violence—none of which are bounded by an urban or a rural landscape. Enabling and employing stewardship networks and practices can put us on a better path of resilience, across all lands and all communities.