Environmental Case Study  
Naugatuck, Connecticut  
Rumble at Gunntown! Science, Politics, and Open Space

Introduction

As the millennium nears there is a need, whether driven by a biophilic upwelling and/or by a gradual blend of theory and experience, for more intimate contact with sun, earth, water, and wildlife that local active parks cannot normally provide. Green open spaces, truly passive and protected, provide sanctuary for both body and mind, as well as for other beings. The Gunntown story demonstrates that low-impact cultural/environmental activities can be a vehicle to a political base for saving and continuing to preserve those very special green places found in every community.

"Leave not your native land behind." -Thoreau

"...most people have a ditch somewhere or a creek, meadow, wood lot, or marsh...These are places of initiation, where the borders between ourselves and other creatures break down, where the earth gets under our nails and a sense of place gets under our skin." -Robert Michael Pyle

"Pick out a place that means something to you, dig in, and protect it." -Gary Paul Nabhan

Background

When high school students Vanessa Gouveia and Cassey Knittel heard the last "yes" vote from the Board of Mayor and Burgess of Naugatuck, Connecticut, they jumped to their feet and celebrated. Like most of the audience that October 1996 night, they thought the municipal land in contention was now preserved by the unanimous vote as green, passive-open space. Gouveia had proposed a nature trail through the diverse habitats of an area in the far western part of town called Gunntown. Knittel would follow this up with an interpretive guide booklet. Both Girl Scouts were hoping to win awards for their efforts. Now they could make their plans a reality on the first parcel of declared passive open space in their town (Figure 1).

The Issues

Wrong

Within two weeks of the decision, town vehicles began bulldozing a road right through the heart of the open space and through one of the last intact rural areas in this valley town. Outraged, local environmentalists, Girl Scouts, and the statewide executive leader of the Sierra Club held a press conference at the site of the carnage. The widespread publicity resulted in the temporary halting of the road building.

The initial proposal by town administrators for a "passive park" for the Gunntown land appeared to be a route to save this special area. What makes this land special is its 39 acres, which is 40 percent wetlands with 900 feet of the Long Meadow Brook cruising it, and a large flood plain (Figure 2). Its diverse habitats support and attract bald eagles, coyotes, deer, and birds, including neotropical migrants. It is contiguous with other forested areas and one of the last large working farms in the town.

When environmentalists got the particulars of the so-called "passive park," they were horrified. Certain town administrators were proposing a running track, tennis courts, bocci courts, all-purpose field,
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and basketball courts. Such areas would require the planing of grass, with fertilizers and pesticides to quickly follow. Furthermore, the stream running through the property was to be dammed to make a fishing pool with vegetation to be cleared along its banks. This would cause siltation into the stream and endanger this important spawning area for trout. To top it off, a 124-space paved parking lot was to be constructed— all on 39 acres!

This proposal was now correctly viewed as active, not passive, open space. The pelting of rain off all of these hard, impervious surfaces would be particularly destructive later. Environmentalists rightfully asked, "What would be left of the natural environment, including the wildlife, on this special land?"

An environmental battle, spear-headed by young people, ensued. These youths, predominately women, realized early on that they were being shunted to male-dominated team sports and recreational areas designed for these activities while being denied broader cultural/environmental experiences only afforded by truly passive-open space devoid of human constructs.

For example, these young people grasped that an important episode in the history of the Naugatuck Valley occurred, in part, on this land. During the early revolutionary period of the country, the Judd family of Naugatuck supported the movement for independence. Amidst the Civil War atmosphere of the times, the Judds' son, Chauncey Judd, was kidnapped by Tories in the Gunntown area and was nearly executed along the banks of the Long Meadow Brook. He was saved by other Gunntown youths—a woman and a slave—the latter at great peril to his own life.

The storytelling of the real-life drama was done as a low-impact activity on the land to promulgate this history and broaden support for its preservation. As is so often the case, the environment of this former predominately industrial town was among its first victims. The Naugatuck River became a sluice-way of pollutants from the Uniroyal chemical and rubber industries. The waters turned red, yellow, or black, depending on the day of the week and the activities of these industries. Landfills, almost always located in working-class neighborhoods, poisoned wells while children played in polluted streams. Tests of streams here revealed benzene, toluene, and other carcinogens. When much of this could no longer be ignored, the town set up an environmental control commission with a Uniroyal chemist at its head. In the late 1970s, and after a long, bitter strike, the footwear division abandoned the town for its branches in South Korea and the Philippines, leaving the unemployed and the toxins behind.

In the relatively good economic times in the 1970s and 1980s, contractors and realtors were given carte blanche by town administrators. This led to virtually uncontrolled construction of roads and suburban housing—in a word, sprawl. Like a web of opportunistic diseases, these environmental sores exploded to the surface in the 1990s (Figure 3). Some housing was constructed on hillsides with drainage problems. Sinkholes began appearing in backyards. Lawsuits followed.

One federal housing project was built and destroyed without ever being occupied! By the 1990s, when certain construction companies proposed or began gravel mine operations in residential areas, neighborhood environmental groups popped up like mushrooms after a fall rainstorm. This is the same town saddled with the infamous Laurel Park landfill. While never a park, it is now a superfund cite (Connecticut is No. 1 in superfund sites). This landfill was sited on a mountaintop, polluting waters from its effluent. Many of the toxins were from Uniroyal, but were also trucked in from wealthier Connecticut towns that had private land trusts to protect their environments.

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By the spring and summer of 1996, a grassroots group called the Committee for a Cultural/Environmental Center-Gunntown Road formed to protect the Gunntown municipal open space. A petition campaign was initiated, which garnered over 1000 signatures to save the land. Glacial till from the land, the only place in town where it was exposed, was shown to the politicians at a town meeting to emphasize one of the special features of the land and some of its educational potential. This led to the fall, 1996 meeting mentioned above, with the illusion that the land was saved.

The headlines in the local press, "Rumble on Gunntown Road," with a photograph of the torn land, brought many supporters to the committee. The enraged town mayor and administrators called for a meeting with the local newspaper in an attempt to intimidate. However, by the next town meeting, environmentalists, led by a young Panamanian-Portuguese woman, forced the superintendent of streets to halt the destruction. Parallel to these events, the accumulation of environmental degradation in the town led to the formation of the Naugatuck Environmental Network. Citizens were finding ways to help citizens.

In November 1996, the grassroots committee organized a rally on the town green (Figure 4). In a driving rainstorm, seventy-two people gathered in support of passive, municipal, green open space. For the first time, a president of a Valley Audubon chapter spoke in support of the Gunntown open space. The area president of Trout Unlimited pointed out that pelting of rain off all of the hard, impervious surfaces contained in the administration's active park proposal would be particularly destructive. A middle school student constructed a web page depicting the aesthetic qualities of the 39 acres and the organizing to save it.

Most importantly, the local president of the Public Workers Union addressed the rally. This union included some of the very workers who began the road building at the open space. The president of the area Labor Council attended a number of meetings sponsored by environmental groups. Environmentalists pointed out that another category of municipal land - passive open space - would mean more jobs for public workers. There was an awakening among union leadership that a healthy environment was in its members' interest too.

A special hearing on the Gunntown issue was held in December of that year. Large poster-pictures of active parklets in disrepair lined the meeting room. To make inroads into the "consumer" approach to the environment of the town Burgess, a slide presentation was initiated to educate the politicians and audience. Two important ecological points were emphasized. Large parking areas and road building allow edge species, such as blue jays and black birds, to encroach upon the area and drive out deeper forest dwellers like owls. This harms the biodiversity of the land, blanding the environment to look more like the town green than the natural environment. Secondly, the presence of coyotes in the Gunntown area was important to biodiversity. The coyotes kept the raccoon population in check, thus preventing excessive predation of avifauna. Some of the birds surveyed, like the scarlet tanager, were neotropical migrants. Thus, the coyote functioned as a keystone species (see Sidebar). It was pointed out that an active park would certainly disrupt these ecological relationships.

A January 1997 vote of the committee of Mayor and Burgess was overwhelmingly in favor of passive-open space and a low-impact approach to the land. There was, however, a two-year provision that the grassroots committee show it was being "used." Even the more forward-looking town officials exhibited a consumer approach to the environment.

The enemies of the environment did not stand idly by during these developments. Certain town administrators attempted to split the community, particularly the young people, by circulating a petition
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with a focus on Boy Scouts. This petition vilified the grassroots open space group as an elitist organization that wanted to use the land for its exclusive interests. In other words, town administrators issued a petition against the citizens of the town! Most hideously, they approached a handicapped town hall worker to lead a campaign claiming that physically challenged people would not have access to the open space. This attempt to misuse the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), led by the anti-environmental wise use (brown) movement, was being repeated elsewhere in the country. It didn't work. A knowledgeable disabled leader in the community explained, in a letter to the editor, that the ADA purposely sets aside natural areas.

The annual Earth Day events on the town green were used by most of the environmental groups to advertise their cause and garner support. This became the next target. Certain town officials saw to it that the open space committee did not receive an application for the event. When one of the co-chairpeople of the town-sponsored Earth Day was queried about this, the open space group was told it was being denied an application because "it was political." Even the local Girl Scout troop, which was supportive of passive-open space, did not receive an application! It took intervention by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) to stop this obvious discrimination.

In July 1997, just six months after the two-year agreement, these same administrators forced a vote to unwind the previous votes for the Gunntown passive-open space. They were defeated again. The seething cauldron that was Gunntown made it easier for others to come forward in defense of the environment. Two more passive-open space groups emerged in the town, one in defense of a reservoir and a land trust. Indeed, this upwelling of support was symptomatic of a broad, passive-open space movement statewide. This movement reached a milestone when the Connecticut General Assembly passed Public Act 97-227. This act states that, "It shall be the goal of the state to have not less than 10 percent of the state's land area held by the state as open space land."

Cultural and environmental activities on the Gunntown land itself proved to be effective in raising environmental consciousness in the town. This was a way to reach different constituencies and develop a political base for environmental initiatives. Story telling, nature walks, and a wildlife photograph workshop was conducted. Writing/poetry workshops, led by a Puerto Rican cultural worker, were well attended. A college student offered an "Astronomy on the Land" evening program. A Mexican leader of the environmental group led Tai Chi exercises. The constituency grew.

Pointing out that passive-open space was one way of mitigating sprawl made it easy for officers of the Sierra Club to participate. Connections could now be made to global concerns such as climate change, in which sprawl is a main culprit. Recent data, which included climate change as a variable, show that the economic and environmental benefit of biodiversity is worth $319 billion to the United States. Also, pointing out the increased municipal costs with active parks and the residential development that follows brought support for passive-open space from the local taxpayers organization.

Following the axiom that no environmental victory is permanent, environmental/cultural activists continue to strive to offer low-impact activities on the land to raise open space awareness. A grant has now been procured to perform the Chauncey Judd historical incident for grade school children on the Gunntown land, where the incident took place 220 years ago!
Sidebar: Keystone Species

This is a species that plays a crucial role in a community due to its impact on other organisms. Just as the loss of the keystone would result in the arch crumbling, the loss of the keystone species would dramatically alter species composition and species abundance. The coyote is a keystone species for the Gunntown area in Naugatuck, Connecticut.

Consider the impact that the loss of owls and hawks (raptors) might have on a rural area. As rodents are their main prey, the number of mice, voles, and shrews would escalate. This would negatively impact farms and their productivity as the rodents make their way into grain storage and other areas.

References


Sidebar: Passive Open Space/Low Impact Land, be it wooded, meadow, and/or wetland, with no impervious surfaces and with minimal disturbance to the land and wildlife.

Key Principles

1. Passive-Open Space
2. Biodiversity
3. Democracy
4. Low-impact Activities
5. Erosion
6. Sprawl
7. Ecosystem
8. Global Warming
9. Keystone Species

Ethical Considerations

1. Are municipal supervisors accountable to local citizens?
2. Do natural areas have to be accessible to all including those with handicaps or impairments?
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3. Compare the rights of people having either a nonmaterial culture versus material culture.

Civic Engagement & Service Opportunities

1. Volunteer for a local community group involved in environmental stewardship.
2. Write or e-mail your local politicians about developing or preserving green spaces in your area.
3. Form a student group having an environmental preservation mission.
4. Set up a public forum at your school discussing land use in your area.

Learn more about community service as part of your educational enrichment by visiting the following websites: http://www.learnandserves.org/, http://www.servicelearning.org/.

Author

Len Yannielli  
Assistant Professor of Biology, Math/Science Division  
Naugatuck Valley Community-Technical College  
Waterbury, CT 06708  
NV_Yannielli@mail.commnet.edu

Edited & Revised in 2005 by

Dr. Brian Shmaefsky  
Professor of Biology & Service Learning Coordinator  
Kingwood College  
20,000 Kingwood Drive, HSB 202V  
Kingwood, TX 77339  
Brian.shmaefsky@nhmccd.edu

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