

Linking Natural and Cultural Assets in the Upper New River Valley

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Final Report Narrative

Title of Project: Linking Natural and Cultural Assets in the Upper New River Valley

Grant Period: January 1, 2016 – June 30, 2017

Grantee Name: Appalachian State University

Project Directors: Mr. Thomas S. Hansell and Dr. William R. Schumann

Description of Project

Linking Natural and Cultural Assets in the Upper New River Valley is a partnership between the Center for Appalachian Studies at Appalachian State University and the New River Conservancy (NRC). The NRC works in communities along the New River in North Carolina, Virginia, and West Virginia. This project focused specifically on the headwaters of the New River in Ashe and Watauga Counties of North Carolina. Students in the Sustainability and the Arts in Appalachia class (AS 5040) developed strategic projects that built the New River Conservancy's capacity to improve the watershed, enhancing an important natural asset in the Appalachian region.

During the fall semester of 2016, students researched how arts and culture can support asset based development and participatory planning. The students then engaged in projects that applied their knowledge in real world settings. This work strengthened NRC's capacity by providing new tools for the organization to share their work with a broad public. Students developed leadership skills as they applied their learning in communities along the New River.

Students presented their work in several public forums, including an event celebrating the 40th anniversary of the New River Conservancy, the Appalachian Teaching Project at the annual conference, and the annual conference of the Appalachian Studies Association.

Activities

Summary: Our project was designed to develop strategic partnerships to build the capacity of NRC to support sustainable communities in the New River Valley. Students developed four interconnected projects to achieve these goals:

1. A walking tour of NRC sponsored water quality enhancement projects in the headwaters of the south fork of the New River in Boone, North Carolina.
2. Educational presentations about the natural and cultural history of the New River, which were presented at Elk Knob State Park and New River State Park in North Carolina.
3. An interactive timeline about the history of the NRC for the organization's website.
4. An art exhibit in the Turchin Center for the Visual Arts in Boone, North Carolina

A specific list of activities follows:

- February 3, 2016 – Initial meeting between faculty and New River Conservancy
- May 20, 2016 – Second planning meeting with faculty and New River Conservancy
- July 24, 2016 – Final planning meeting with faculty and New River Conservancy
- August 23, 2016 – Students meet with New River Conservancy staff on ASU campus.
- September 10, 2015 - Students gather input from local community at Elk Knob State Park's Headwaters Community Day in Todd, NC
- September 11, 2016 – Students participate in river cleanup with New River Conservancy at 5 sites in Ashe County, NC
- October 8, 2016 – students present their work at New River State Park 221 Access in Laurel Springs, NC
- October 17, 2016 - students present their work at Elk Knob State Park in Todd, NC
- November 17, 2015 – Students present their work to staff and membership of New River Conservancy in West Jefferson, NC.
- December 2, 2016 – Students present their work at the annual Appalachian Teaching Conference in Washington, D.C.
- February 3, 2017 – Students host opening of art exhibit at Turchin Center for the Arts, Boone NC (700 people attend)
- March 11, 2017 – Students present at the Appalachian Studies Association annual conference in Blacksburg, VA.
- April 7, 2017 – Students host first Friday reception for art exhibit at Turchin Center for the Arts, Boone NC (500 people attend)
- April 8 and 22, 2017 – Students host water quality walking tour of sites in Boone, NC
- May 19, 2017 – Students and faculty present at New River Symposium in Radford, VA.

Project Outcomes

Overview: The students participating in this project gained valuable experience working with a regional organization on a project that was seen by thousands of people. This work increased employment options for students, two of whom were able to use this experience to gain employment.

Linking Natural and Cultural Assets in the Upper New River Valley is part of Appalachian State University's Center for Appalachian Studies long-term commitment to building the capacity of the non-profit sector in the communities we serve. This work directly addressed goal 4 (Natural and Cultural Assets) and 5 (Leadership and Community Capacity) of the Appalachian Regional Commission's strategic plan. Specifically, this project linked the work of the New River Conservancy with partners such as the Elk Knob Community Heritage Organization, Elk Knob State Park, New River State Park, and the Turchin Center for the Arts. This project provides a model that the New River Conservancy can use to plan future projects in other communities along the New River. To provide support for future work, historic documents from the New

River Conservancy have been catalogued, archived in the W.L. Eury Appalachian Collection at Appalachian State University, and made accessible on the NRC website.

Specific outcomes of this project included:

- A series of presentations interpreting the cultural and economic value of the river at North Carolina State Parks (Elk Knob and New River)
- Web-based materials on the history of the New River Conservancy, including local efforts to preserve and perpetuate local agriculture and artisan food products.
- A tour of water quality enhancement projects in the upper New River Valley
- An art exhibit at the Turchin Center for the Visual Arts in Boone, North Carolina that opened February 2, 2017 and runs until July 29, 2017.
- Enhancement of student and community awareness of rural development work, including the role of federal agencies like the ARC
- Presentation of student work at the ATP Conference in Washington, D.C. December 2 and December 3, 2016
- Presentation at the Appalachian Studies Association Conference in Blacksburg, VA, March 9 through March 12, 2017
- Creation of a poster and other presentation assets for the conference in Washington, D.C. as well as multiple, community-based meetings (see the activities list for a complete list of community presentations).

Problems Encountered

Most of the problems encountered during this project fall under the general category of logistics. Transporting students to community meetings and engaging with partners takes planning, coordination, and flexibility. Once these issues were addressed, the project moved forward relatively smoothly.

The only change from the original proposal is that the outcome labeled “future projects to increase visibility” became an art exhibit at the Turchin Center for the Visual Arts in Boone, NC. More than 700 people attended the opening event on that opened February 3, 2017, and an additional 500 attended a “First Friday” event on April 7, 2017. This student-produced exhibit has attracted several thousand visitors to the gallery, and the curator has confirmed that she has received a record number of requests from elementary school classes, college classes, and local community groups to view the exhibit.

Program Continuation and Sustainability

Looking to the future, we plan to continue working with the Appalachian Teaching Project to connecting the resources of our institution in service to the Appalachian communities we are a part of. In the short term, this means capitalizing on the good will created by this project to further support our community partner. For example, after the art exhibit wraps up, pieces from the exhibit will be auctioned off as a fundraiser for the New River Conservancy. We plan to partner with the NRC to approach other educational institutions along the New River such as Radford University, New River Community College, Virginia Tech, Concord University, and West Virginia Tech to support future exhibits.

Next year's Appalachian Teaching Project class will build on the relationship established with New River Conservancy to collect land ownership data that will contribute to a larger Appalachian Land Ownership Study. Students and faculty at Appalachian State University will review land ownership documents from Ashe County, NC (labeled by ARC as an at-risk county with one distressed area) and conduct a riparian quality assessment along the county's section of the New River. Research will support public policy administration, particularly at local and county levels, by providing land ownership data that can inform infrastructure planning, service delivery, and (in the case of the riparian study) environmental remediation efforts. The project goal is to increase the capacity of local governments and non-profit organizations to manage economic growth and environmental conservation in the area. Students will learn leadership skills through organized data collection, information sharing/networking, and public presentations.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This project strengthened the capacity of both the New River Conservancy and the Center for Appalachian Studies at Appalachian State University by expanding and deepening our network of partnerships. The student projects provided a model that the New River Conservancy can use to plan future projects. The students who create these projects developed leadership skills by working collaboratively with the New River Conservancy and presenting their work to the community and the ARC. This project will support future work on sustainable economic development in the Appalachian region.

In addition, more than one thousand residents of the New River attended student presentations and are now better informed about how to protect water quality in their communities. The broad reach of this project has helped build a consensus around the New River as a natural asset that is vital to economic development.

Finally, the students participating in this project developed leadership skills and gained experience that directly led to employment opportunities. Student Samantha Eubanks used her Appalachian Teaching Project experience educating the public about water quality issues to obtain a full time job as a community educator at the Tennessee Aquarium in Chattanooga, Tennessee. Her classmate Jacob Meadows used his experience to become the first Appalachian

Teaching Project Fellow, and will work with the Appalachian Regional Commission in Washington, D.C. during the summer of 2017.

Attachments (in PDF format)

Attachments submitted with this report include:

- Digital copy of the poster presentation
- Magazine article in Carolina Mountain Life
- Exhibition announcement from Turchin Center for the Visual Arts
- Photographs showing students in action