

Creation of the Green Corps

Summary: Administration goals in the natural resources, health, national service and environment sectors can be achieved through the creation of a new **Green Corps** offering year-long opportunities for youth ages 18 to 30. The Green Corps would embrace cherished traditions established by the Civilian Conservation Corps of the 1930's – allowing young men and women the chance to work on lasting legacy projects on America's public lands, federal state and local. It would also build upon recent successes of the AmeriCorps program. A goal of **500,000 participants per year** should be established for 2010 through 2016 – coinciding with the centennial of one of America's world-leading traditions, the National Park Service and reflecting the growing need for reinvestment in the nation's public lands and natural resources – **to harness the energies of, and assist, nearly three and one-half million young Americans.**

Background: The American public shares a splendid and unique heritage: millions of acres of publicly-owned and managed lands and waters covering one third of the nation's surface. These lands include nearly 400 national park units, more than 150 national forests, nearly 600 wildlife refuges and thousands of state and local recreation and conservation sites. Management of these lands yields diverse public benefits, ranging from commodities like oil and gas and timber to water and clean air – and billions of recreation experiences contributing to our mental, physical and spiritual health. The various products and uses of these lands yields substantial economic benefits for rural communities and is an important source of employment and rural development.

Management of these lands also requires an army of public employees – and hundreds of thousands of volunteers. The investment is easily justified – study after study has demonstrated that America's public lands produce benefits dwarfing invested public and private dollars and those investments in the maintenance and protection of these natural resources and public assets is falling far behind the need.

Even so, **public land and water agency budgets have failed to meet levels required to safeguard the well-being of these assets and the infrastructure which allows them to deliver public benefits.** The backlog of deferred investment is counted in the billions – ranging from steps to control erosion and rid these places of invasive species to the roads, bridges, trails and other structures which attract and serve the visits of the public, while also mitigating the impacts of public use of these assets.

One of the special tragedies is that much of the **infrastructure resulting from a grand and successful program of the 1930's – the Civilian**

Conservation Corps – now faces special risk. From roads and bridges to ranger stations and trails, from visitor centers to campgrounds, marvelous efforts of CCC workers have been patched and braced for generations but now face irreversible deterioration.

A parallel tragedy is that Americans recognize that **changes are needed in the structure of urban and suburban communities to help reduce energy use, improve transportation access, provide more parks and open space, and create more livable places.** These changes in our urban infrastructure can also help address the rising epidemic of childhood obesity, diabetes, and with it, the rapid rise in American health care costs.

Changes in our communities – changes that would make biking and walking to work, schools, and stores viable alternatives to car trips – can be blueprinted community by community through improved urban and community planning and can then propelled into reality by teams of young Americans and building and maintaining interconnecting trails, including trails that make our public lands more accessible and of greater direct public benefit.

One important and **effective building block for addressing these challenges exists in the Corporation for National Service and its AmeriCorps program.** AmeriCorps already serves the nation well, but a redefinition of its efforts to serve as the vanguard for creating new “green infrastructure” and jobs will enable the program to dramatically increase its contributions.

AmeriCorps needs a new vision consistent with new interest in and energy focused on green jobs and a new, green economy. That vision should focus on harnessing the energy, enthusiasm, and creativity of young Americans to restore and improve America’s public lands and its urban and suburban parks, paths, and trails.

While AmeriCorps’ decentralized nature and coordination by state agencies offers localized benefits, its **impact on the nation – and the lives of its enrollees – can be magnified by new and core involvement of the five federal agencies – the Forest Service, the National Park Service, the Fish and Wildlife Service, the Bureau of Land Management, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers** – that manage most of the nation’s public lands. AmeriCorps also needs to capitalize upon the skills of federal land managing agencies, **agencies with robust training, mentoring and management resources.** The work of AmeriCorps volunteers would include the kinds of physical projects pioneered by CCC crews – but would also include application of new technologies to enhance the quality of visitor services and management – from podcasts and new modeling of resources.

The restructured AmeriCorps, renamed the Green Corps, would enroll young men and women for a twelve month period. The start of this enrollment would involve a period of training and work at **existing residential centers on federally-managed public lands**, including former Job Corps and Youth Conservation Corps centers.

After three months, Green Corps members would disperse. **Some would be assigned roles on public lands under the guidance and management of federal officials or partners operating on those lands**, including concessioners and permittees. Through arrangements with ski areas operating on national forests and concessioners in parks, the costs of room and board for Green Corps members could be minimized or eliminated – increasing the program’s efficiency and effectiveness. **Others would be deployed in and around America’s urban regions** and work with local and state agencies and their partners to transform our communities, especially through restoration of parks and open space and the construction of new trails and paths.

Importantly, the contributions of the Green Corps would include some lasting physical assets, ranging from better habitat to replacement of dams and bridges now at or beyond safe use timeframes. **But like the efforts of the WPA and other Depression-era programs that put artists and writers and others to work in conjunction with the outdoors, the skills and interests of today’s youth could be harnessed to dramatically alter our current systems of information dissemination, interpretation and integration into educational programs.**

Core Benefits and Serendipities: **The creation of the Green Corps will produce measurable and important benefits.** The Corps can **reverse a negative trend over three decades in the quality of our public lands and its infrastructure.** It will **connect millions of American youth to their outdoors legacy and create a new sense of linkage of communities across the nation.** It will **help a new generation of Americans adopt a healthy lifestyle**, including increased physical activity and a focus on healthy eating. And it can be a **powerful aid to better lives through a higher, \$10,000 educational grant** that would be awarded those completing the program, supplementing the basic stipend paid to Green Corps members and the coverage under a medical plan.

But there are other benefits of the new Green Corps. The Corps will **reduce unemployment and underemployment among youth – a chronic challenge especially in urban areas – and increase the effectiveness of remedial education.** It will allow **youth of diverse backgrounds to work and learn together** and share in the **pride of national service.** It will aid the nation’s higher education institutions by

creating a new **channel of financial assistance for college-bound youth and for young graduates seeking to pay off student loans.** And, the Green Corps will provide a means for Americans to serve their country in maintaining and restoring the proud heritage of natural resources, historic and cultural sites, and livable communities that benefit all Americans.

The new Green Corps might include a **special program for servicemen and servicewomen returning from Iraq, Afghanistan and other dangerous assignments – returning now to an economy where jobs are difficult to secure.** Yet these Americans often have leadership and management skills that could be of direct benefit to the Green Corps.

Similarly, the Green Corps might have a **special program for more senior Americans, including retirees, who could bring both a passion for the outdoors and important skills and capabilities to the program – in exchange for earned educational stipends for grandchildren and great-grandchildren.**

In the first year of the program, **Green Corps members could work with federal agencies to build, improve and revamp residential areas for Green Corps members and others who live on public lands in cooperation with construction trades unions and green design firms, creating sustainable demonstration infrastructure.**

Finally, the new Green Corps program could play a vital role in **improving America's educational system by helping to host, on public lands, classrooms in the outdoors** where real visits are supplemented by, and extended by, remote monitoring of public lands and waters from classrooms near and far from actual sites.