Poverty Reduction Project Increases Social and Natural Capital

It’s hard to care for the environment when you can’t see beyond the garbage in your yard.

By Debra Kollock
Members of a small rural community just seven miles south of the Canadian border have mobilized their town to remove over 53 tons of garbage, win a grant to upgrade the town’s boat launch, and start a community garden. For these citizens of Northport, Washington, simple conversations about reducing poverty have become a community-wide demonstration of the power of dialogue over disagreement and a spirit of service over blame.

While this town of 301 residents is surrounded by mountains, a river, and breathtaking scenery, 27 percent of its families live below the poverty level. With this level of poverty, the community has been eligible, since 2006, to participate in Horizons, a grant-funded poverty-abatement and leadership development program. In the early stages of the program, 78 of Northport’s youth and adults participated in facilitated discussions about poverty issues in their community. Thriving Communities: Working together to move from poverty to prosperity for all is a public dialogue and problem solving process. Using the study guides, in their Community Conversation Groups, the Northport participants worked through topics that ultimately led them to an action plan (see inset.)

Community Clean-up
As they discussed the topic “What Does Poverty Look Like Here?” community members acknowledged that mounds of trash and run-down houses gave their town the appearance of being poor. Inadequate transportation, lack of money for fee payments, and limited time conspire against these and other remote community residents’ efforts to dispose of trash. The Horizons group determined that, in their town, this situation could best be addressed together and a Community Clean-up was scheduled as the first action item.

The first clean-up was held on “Earth Day” weekend in 2007 and has happened every third week of April since. Volunteers meet at Northport’s old gas station and bring gloves, tools, and heavy equipment. The clean-up is community-funded and volunteers are reimbursed for gas and dump fees. In the past four years, the community has raised enough money to cover these costs through recycling aluminum cans (2,985 pounds) and vehicle batteries (27,768 pounds).

In addition to the 53 tons of garbage and appliances, volunteers have removed 178 tons of scrap metal. With their town’s designation as a permanent location for scrap metal collection, disposing of scrap is easy for Northport residents as is pick up for a private recycling contractor. A designated compost area for green waste also decreases the amount of trash taken to the nearby landfill. In 2010, the town council assigned two employees to the trash removal project and allowed them to use the city’s heavy equipment to clean up Northport’s alleys and sidewalks and remove debris from a fire-damaged home.

The group’s unwavering “how can we serve” attitude has won over some of the community’s most vocal skeptics. The team distributes flyers door-to-door and asks residents what they need. In one instance, group members partnered with a local church to repair a resident’s fence while the resident participated as she could by rolling her wheelchair across the yard, and delivering small tools to the volunteers.

While 158 homes and families have been helped through the Community Clean-up, removing trash is not the only benefit. Residents of all ages, physical ability and income levels participate—including many youth. At the end of each clean-up day, community members hold a potluck barbeque and reports abound that community and personal pride have been enhanced by the simple collective act of removing trash.

Restored Marina
The leadership development phase of the Horizons program provided an opportunity for members of two typically disengaged groups to see themselves as potential leaders—youth and people in poverty. Through Horizons, Wheatley’s (2008) definition of a leader emerged. This author suggests that, “A leader is anyone willing to help, anyone willing to step forward to change things. Communities everywhere are filled with these leaders. The challenge is to tap into this energy and direction.”

In Thriving Communities, Wheatley (1999) suggests that a community without leaders needs to create leaders. A leader emerges when others are speaking of a problem, but they are not offering solutions. The community decided to change the boat launch. The group, with no prior experience, went to the state and won a grant to upgrade the launching area. The boat launch was designed with the help of local engineers and volunteers, and received the state’s highest rating for safety and accessibility.

The group also is pressing for a $1 million project to extend the pier at the boat launch to accommodate larger vessels and fishing boats. In addition, they are petitioning for a new marina and public dock for larger boats. Community members are optimistic that by involving volunteers, the project will be a demonstration of community pride and capability.

Thriving Communities Discussion Sessions:
- How Are We Connected to Our Community and to Poverty?
- A Vision for Our Community: What Does Poverty Look Like Here?
- Why is There Poverty in Our Community?
- Reaching Our Vision and Reducing Poverty
- Moving to Action

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with these leaders; they reveal themselves when the issues appear.” As a result of their participation in Horizon’s-sponsored leadership education, community members created Northport Community Preservation & Restoration (NCPR), a non-profit corporation dedicated to community improvement.

Since its inception, a representative of NCPR has attended every monthly city council meeting to listen, learn, and offer support for community improvement projects and tasks identified by the council. With trust earned through this regular level of positive engagement, NCPR was asked by the council to assume responsibility for applying for a grant to improve the boat marina on Lake Roosevelt, one of the area’s most important natural assets. The group subsequently wrote and received a $400,000 grant from the Washington State Recreation and Conservation Office to upgrade the marina and boat launch. When complete, the project will provide a safe place for local residents to launch their boats, a new park for families to enjoy, and is very likely to improve the local economy by attracting water recreation enthusiasts to the area and bringing outside tourism dollars to local businesses. The project has already increased community involvement, demonstrated by the successful collection of a cash match for the grant.

NCPR has been busy with other projects as well. In 2010, Washington State Fish and Wildlife announced its intention to close 12-15 miles of the river adjacent to Northport. With a new sense of empowerment and newly acquired leadership skills, NCPR rallied 15 people to drive 40 miles to testify at the public hearing. Two members of the committee also spoke at a regional meeting, and convinced Fish and Wildlife that the local economy relies on the tourism dollars from river visitors. NCPR members report that engaging in environmental issues has created a better understanding of and passion for their surroundings.

Growing a Community Garden
Following more community conversations, the Horizon’s group selected a Community Garden as its next priority project. NCPR received a donation of land in the middle of town and organized volunteers to establish the garden, erect a fence, and obtain a grant to build a greenhouse.

The project has further strengthened group members’ leadership abilities and increased their understanding of food systems and the environment. The intent is now to ignite this same level of understanding among other members of the community, as noted by Nina Grobben, NCPR community garden committee chair, “If we could help show a garden friend how to steward the land, perhaps it would lead them to becoming a better steward of themselves, their loved ones, their homes, and their communities.”

In addition to the donation of land, the group has received four truckloads of bark, wood for 35 raised beds, and carpet for weed control on the paths. They have been awarded five grants totaling $25,500 for initial construction of the garden, greenhouse, and educational programs. Youth have learned construction skills by working with the contractor to build the greenhouse.

The group has now hired a VISTA Volunteer who will become the “Garden Keeper.” When this person begins work in fall of 2010, his primary responsibility will be to work with the elementary school to develop a curriculum that teaches K-8th graders about healthy food systems—from planting seeds, to growing, to harvesting, to preparing, and finally to eating. Fifty-two percent of the students in Northport qualify for free and reduced lunches—another indicator of the extreme level of poverty. In addition to learning about the environment, the goal is to teach the youth skills and knowledge that will break the cycle of childhood obesity and diabetes.

The Community Garden has sold 16 beds, and has the remaining 19 planted for community use and provides nutritious food for the twice-weekly Senior Meals and Food Bank. Plans also include building wheelchair accessible and walker-friendly raised beds where seniors and individuals with disabilities can work in the garden alongside youth. The drip-water irrigation system was designed by a Master Gardener and funded through one of the grants and the water for the garden is donated by a neighbor. Home-schooled youth are also planting three seasonal items in the greenhouse for year-round fundraising activities.

Conclusion
The lesson of Northport, Washington is that community change can start with simple conversations. In this remote, rural community, the investment in talking to each other has created conditions to foster change. Projects launched in Northport were initially intended to solve one problem – clean up a dumpy looking town. From a community development perspective, it has morphed into so much more. The projects improved their natural capital, the marina, the streets of Northport, and individual homes. These actions then resulted in increased social capital because people who needed assistance felt supported and understood by those who could help. And it was possible because of the increased human capital encouraged through the Horizon’s program (Emery & Flora, 2006). Through this process, community members learned about their community needs and developed leadership skills that enabled them to act in productive ways.
Real change begins with the simple act of people talking about what they care about,” states Wheatley (2002). The success of the Community Clean-up project started with discussions between neighbors and it has resulted in physical and social change. Working together to do something as simple as picking up trash has created the momentum of change. The key to their success has been a consistent, long-term attitude of service in place of judgment or blame. Before the clean-up people felt overwhelmed by the garbage in their yard, but with simple conversations they are moving toward NCPR’s vision: “to have a sense of community; a sense of pride; and a sense of place for our young, endeavoring to show and amaze our visitors this beautiful place.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

