Friends of the Environment

Yale scientist, local students and volunteers restore Abaco wetlands

If you think community is a four-syllable word that doesn't exist anymore, check out this story that comes from a remote area of a northern island in The Bahamas.

Hundreds of volunteers worked for 10 days straight, ignoring wind and rain, to move and put back a road, clean out debris, install culverts and open a creek-bed to its natural state. Their project: the restoration of more than 50 acres of wetlands in Abaco. Their goal: to create a natural breeding ground and habitat for fish, especially snapper, conch and crawfish. Their results: within a few days, nearly a dozen of the 400 fish that had been tagged leading up to the re-opening of the creek and wetlands were spotted upstream and their location recorded.

"Everyone has come together so unbelievably," said Lindsey McCoy, director of Friends of the Environment, which led the effort. At least 10 schools participated. A six-year-old child worked side by side with a 75-year-old great-grandmother. The Bahamas National Trust and The Nature Conservancy donated time, resources and volunteers. The Bahamian government donated the culverts. Yale University scientist Dr. Craig Layman oversaw the technical aspects of the restoration.

"I've worked in 12-15 islands in the Caribbean," said Dr. Layman, the Donnelly Environmental Fellow at Yale's Department of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology, "and I have never seen anything like this."

The Cross Harbour restoration project had been planned for months. Actual physical labor took place in April.

The objective was to neutralize the damage created when two logging roads were built in the early 1900s, blocking off the natural flow to and from the sea. As more silt and sedimentation filled in, the chances of fish breeding or living upstream declined and the less flow there was, the more filled in the area became. When Friends of the Environment and the teams of volunteers began the project, the channel was still well-defined, but mangroves—eco-critical and preserved under normal circumstances—had grown so thick, they were choking off the flow and some had to be moved. "Under normal circumstances, mangroves in tidal water habitats are exceedingly important and should not be removed," explained Dr. Layman. "We removed the mangroves that had grown into the channel that would not be there if the road had not been built, less than 1/1000th of all the mangroves."

According to Dr. Layman, the particular site was selected from among the many creek systems in The Bahamas partially because it was not on a main road and no boat or vehicular traffic would have to be re-routed. McCoy calls it a 'win-win' situation.

The logistics of the effort were incredible. From one school, the kids traveled by bus, then by ferry, then walked to the site. They traveled for eight hours to put in two hours of work, but they wanted to be part of it."

While Dr. Layman will lead monitoring efforts tracking fish movements upstream, he will also be monitoring the spillover effect—the increase in fish and crawfish population on and around nearby reefs.

The Cross Harbour Abaco project may serve as a worldwide model for creek and wetland restoration and could ultimately define the link between wetlands and coral reef habitats.

We think it should be used as a model for pulling a community together for good times and good causes, not just when tragedy or disaster threatens. ✈ —By Diane Phillips