A Case Study on the Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy Partnership

Goal: 11 Year Partnership Promotes Ecological Wellness & Enhancements to Park Systems

The partnership between the Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy and the University of Pittsburgh’s Department of Geology and Environmental Science began 11 years ago to increase scientific access to fundamental ecological components and to address challenges in the City of Pittsburgh around the role of water, soil, and vegetation in local ecosystems.

Accomplishments: Improving Green Infrastructures in Pittsburgh

The Pittsburgh Park Conservancy’s partnership with the Department of Geology and Environmental Science engages the city around research as it shows the importance of incorporating ecological processes into the design of sustainable ecosystems. This research enables Pittsburgh to be at the forefront when it comes to incorporating green infrastructure into regional wet planning. One of the most impactful green infrastructure projects is due to the partnership as Pittsburgh Park Conservancy was able to identify a deficit in the structure due to the research and adapt, allowing this project to be a success. This discovery not only benefited the park, but it also impacted regional planning as this technology is considered a less viable option in the Pittsburgh Water and Sewer Authority’s Green First Plan. This work has also allowed the Pittsburgh Park Conservancy to grow their regional profile and become known as a strong, well-respected advocate for a better, more sustainable city.

Partnership: University of Pittsburgh’s Department of Geology and Environmental Science and Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy Come Together to Improve Ecological Wellness

This 11 year partnership brings together the University of Pittsburgh’s Department of Geology and Environmental Science and Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy to create actionable research around ecological wellness. Growing beyond its original focus to address challenges in the city of Pittsburgh around the role of water, soil and vegetation, this partnership also includes research around the innovative strategic use of Pittsburgh’s parks to address different city issues, ranging from combined sewer overflows to social equity.
MUTUAL BENEFITS

This partnership enables both the Pittsburgh Park Conservancy and the Department of Geology and Environmental Science to be a leader in this work. Through this work, the University has laid the groundwork for the Pittsburgh Collaboratory for Water Research, Education and Outreach, an exciting new initiative at the University which is a platform for sharing knowledge to encourage water sustainability, as well as allowing the University to raise its profile as a center of excellence in urban geophysical sciences.

This work has given the Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy the capacity to produce important research, which allows them to have scientific evidence to support how essential their work to the city of Pittsburgh. Due to this, Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy is at the forefront of this work allowing them to integrate green infrastructure into regional wet water planning.

“...the results of the research...are necessary to understand the ecological response to GSI installation. Also this research is unique to Pittsburgh... [and] has made direct contributions to the green stormwater infrastructure designs that are considered in parks. In addition, the research results allows practitioners as well as designers to understand what is performing well in Pittsburgh...and will inform the region’s green stormwater infrastructure build out”

- Erin Copeland,
Senior Restoration Ecologist,
Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy

Method: Research-to-Practice Partnership

The work done by the Pittsburgh Park Conservancy and University of Pittsburgh’s Department of Geology and Environmental Science is a great example of a mutually beneficial research practice partnership, a “long-term, mutually beneficial collaboration that promote the production and use of rigorous research about problems of practice” (William T. Grant Foundation, 2018). This research method allows universities to get perspective from those working directly on the problem so that their findings are grounded in context and relevant to the industry, but also gives organizations research to drive and improve their work based on scientific findings.

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References