The Corps Network: Opportunities to Engage Youth and Veterans in Cultural and Natural Resource Management
By Hannah Traverse, Communications Manager, The Corps Network

Nearly 86 years ago, President Franklin D. Roosevelt established the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), a Federal program that put 3 million unemployed young men to work on public lands during the Great Depression. Operating out of camps run by the Army, the “CCC Boys” drastically changed America’s natural landscape, planting a billion trees, and building infrastructure still used today. Though the CCC was disbanded at the onset of WWII, it became a model for modern-day Corps conservation programs. Today, The Corps Network carries on and continues the CCC’s legacy, annually engaging thousands of young people in maintaining Federal, state, and local lands, including properties managed by the Department of Defense.

Corps units are locally-based organizations that engage young adults in service projects to address recreation, conservation, disaster response, and community needs. The Corps Network, the National Association of Service and Conservation Corps, currently has a membership of more than 130 Corps across the country. Unlike the CCC, most 21st Century Conservation and Service Corps are nonprofits, while state or local governments manage others. Corps units are funded through a combination of Federal, state, and local grants as well as through private support. Collectively, The Corps Network enrolls approximately 25,000 participants every year. Most Corps participants – or “Corpsmembers” – are young adults between the ages of 16 – 25, however, some Corps enroll veterans up to age 35. Typical Corps projects include conservation of natural resources. In 2018 alone, Corps units restored 1.4 million acres of habitat, planted over a million trees, and treated nearly 68,000 acres of invasive plant species. In addition to their work on natural resources, many Corps engage in projects to preserve historic sites, including important former military sites.

For resource managers, engaging Corps units has a number of benefits. First, these partnerships can help over-burdened agencies address backlogged projects sooner and in a cost-effective manner. Also, Corps units complete high-quality work: a survey of resource managers found more than 90 percent would work with Corps again. Finally, working with Corps gives resource managers the opportunity to engage the next generation of conservation and preservation professionals.

Corps units also partner with public and private managers of historic properties to preserve historically and culturally significant resources. Corps often work with experts from the National Trust for Historic Preservation (National Trust) and the National Park Service (NPS) Historic Preservation staff to educate Corpsmembers in the craft skills necessary to maintain the integrity of historic properties. Most of the Corps work completed on Federal lands is made possible through cooperative agreements. The Corps Network has national cooperative agreements with multiple Federal land management agencies, including the NPS and U.S. Forest Service, under which Accredited Corps can easily partner with local units to complete projects.
A 2012 study on behalf of the NPS Facility Management Division showed: by using conservation crews instead of NPS crews, the NPS “saved 65% with the minimum savings just 3% and the maximum savings 87%.” The study also found “the savings using conservation corps instead of contractor crews were even more significant with average savings of 83% and over $130,000 per project.”

For larger projects, the Corps hires and provides the conservation crew, which is supervised by the Corps and can also be subject to onsite supervision by the partnering agency. Corps interns are also provided by the Corps but are supervised by the partnering agency. Due to limited access, conservation work conducted on military installations is evolving. For such projects, the Corps units focused on recruiting active military and military dependents. Some Corps units offer opportunities to the children of military families. For instance, Northwest Youth Corps gave Tacoma-area youth and teens from Joint Base Lewis-McChord the opportunity to engage in conservation service and outdoor recreation at Mount Rainier National Park.

A number of other Corps projects occurred on former DoD properties in recent years, in partnership with the National Trust. The National Trust provides preservation expertise, the Corps provides crew participants, and a site-owner provides the historic property in need of preservation. Youth corps act as contractors on such projects and provide the labor, tools, training, room and board, insurance, and materials. For example, in 2015, New Jersey Youth Corps of Phillipsburg restored structures at Fort Hancock, now a NPS property, damaged by Hurricane Sandy. The National Trust provided a preservation advisor and a craft expert for the project. The advisor worked pro-bono and helped guide the project. The craft expert, paid through the project’s budget, helped train the Corpsmembers on techniques such as repointing and carpentry. In 2017, members of the Student Conservation Association restored 19th century living quarters at Fort Monroe National Monument in Virginia, also under NPS management. Corps also worked to preserve national cemeteries, overseen by NPS, including Chalmette in Louisiana and Custer National Cemetery at Little Bighorn in Montana. Together, agency personnel and Corpsmembers can work to preserve Federally managed historic properties in an efficient and cost-effective manner.

Resource managers can engage with Corps in a similar fashion to partnering with other outside contractors. Many Corps can provide either crews or individual Corpsmembers (interns) based on project needs. The first step in a partnership is for the resource manager to determine appropriate projects and begin outreach to nearby Corps. The Corps Network can assist resource managers in locating a suitable partner based on project needs. Corps units are fully-insured, provide supervision of Corpsmembers, and typically bring all necessary tools and safety equipment to complete the project at hand. Corps units generally bring at least a 25 percent cost match for funding projects with Federal agencies. By establishing cooperative agreements with Corps, resource managers can see additional savings.

More information about Corps Network can be found at: www.corpsnetwork.org. To find local Corps units, please go to: https://corpsnetwork.org/members-by-state. Questions about partnering with the Corps Network and its units can be directed to Joshua Tuohy, Government Relations Manager at The Corps Network, jtuohy@corpsnetwork.org, 202-737-6272 x118.