

**Agricultural landscapes within National Parks: a study of the Cuyahoga Valley  
Summary  
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**The Cuyahoga Valley National Park**

The Cuyahoga Valley National Park (CVNP) spans 33,000 acres in North-Eastern Ohio. The Valley is named after the *Cuyahoga* River - a native term for *crooked* river - that forms the backbone of the park. The park is home to riparian habitat, deciduous mixed-mesophytic forests, wetland habitats, working agricultural lands and open fields in succession. 900 plant species are found within the park, as are 32 mammal species, 22 amphibian, 194 bird, 20 reptile and 43 fish species. Each year around two and half million visitors come to the park, primarily from the two urban centers that border the park - Cleveland to the North and Akron to the South - and from the suburbs that surround them.

The CVNP was established in 1974 as part of a government initiative *Parks to the People* that specifically aimed to create parks for people living in urban centers. Initially established as the Cuyahoga Valley National Recreation Area (renamed Cuyahoga Valley National Park in 2000), the Park was formed with the intention of "preserving and protecting for public use and enjoyment, the historic, scenic, natural, and recreational values of the Cuyahoga River and adjacent lands of the Cuyahoga Valley". The *Parks to the People* initiative was a digression from the wilderness-model of North American parks where nature was preserved *separate* from the people. To this day within the Park there exists the village of Peninsula and several smaller townships. Today, the NPS owns 19,000 acres out of the total area of 33,000 acres.

**Agriculture**

The Valley had a rich agricultural history, from Native American agriculture through to European settlement in the early nineteenth century. The opening of the Ohio-Erie Canal in 1827 spurred on a period of growth for the Valley, as agricultural goods from the Midwest could now be shipped to eastern markets. By the end of the nineteenth century, close to 800 small farms were in production in the Valley. However, with increasing urbanization and industrialization of the food system through the twentieth century, many farmers began to struggle and the rural landscape fell into serious decline; by the time the Park was created in the 1970s, less than half of the initial 800 farms were left. With this in mind, the National Park Service believed the creation of the Park would serve to protect the agricultural landscape and heritage of the park, while saving the area from urban development.

While some farmers continued to farm privately within the Park, others sold their properties to the Park Service and a smaller number were taken by eminent domain. The Park Service encouraged farming through the issuance of Special Use Permits (SUPs) that offered leases to farmers for a period of one to five years. The NPS discovered, however, that they were still losing fields to succession and the rural landscape they had intended to protect was, in fact, still in decline. By the late 1990s, the Superintendent John Debo felt the Park Service had to change its management of the agricultural resources if the original vision of the park was to be fulfilled. While on sabbatical in the UK, Debo was inspired by the European model of National Parks where most land within parks is privately owned and agriculture is valued as an aesthetically pleasing and ecologically sound land use within park boundaries.

## **The Countryside Initiative**

Debo's first step was to reach out to a farming expert, Darwin Kelsey, and together they formed a nonprofit cooperative partner, the Countryside Conservancy, in 1999. The goal was to sustain the agricultural heritage of the Valley by preserving the remaining agricultural land and rehabilitating and restoring the cultural resources found within the park. Darwin Kelsey feels certain this wasn't "a pining for a lost world" but rather an important recognition of something that had lost value in our modern society and was in danger of disappearing<sup>1</sup>. The vision was one of a living working landscape where farmers would pursue sustainable agricultural practices and park visitors would learn to value food and farming once again. This program is referred to as the Countryside Initiative.

The NPS and the Conservancy created an inventory of 85 potential farms that could potentially be rehabilitated and proceeded to evaluate them. While initially hoping they could salvage over 30 farms, they found this number over ambitious; to date, 11 farms have been restored and are in production, while two more will be released in the coming year. Initiative farmland currently totals 200 acres of Park land.

## **Partnership**

The Countryside Initiative is seen as a three-way partnership between the Park Service, the Conservancy and the private farmers who lease the land. The partnership is a unique combination of the private sector (the farmers), the Federal Government and the nonprofit sector (the Countryside Conservancy). This precedent-setting partnership for the Parks Service has served as a model for a number of parks across North America, some of which are also attempting to incorporate traditional forms of agriculture within park boundaries.

The Park Service retains ownership of the farms while the Conservancy provides farming expertise to both the NPS and the farmers in the Initiative. The farmers themselves help the Park Service fulfill its mandate of preserving the agricultural resources and heritage of the Valley. The partnership is viewed by all involved as the key to the success of the Initiative. Farmers spoke of their initial discomfort at farming on Federal land and yet now feeling like the Countryside Conservancy is their advocate and ally. The NPS is clear they would not have had the agricultural expertise to support the Initiative farmers without the knowledge and resources the Conservancy brings to the partnership. The Conservancy was described as a 'marriage counsellor', providing advice and assistance to the two other partners who have little history of working together. The Conservancy can also publicize the park and the Initiative farms, which the Federal Government cannot do.

## **The farms**

Farmers are selected through a competitive process as Request for Proposals are released when a farm has been successfully rehabilitated. A committee that is comprised of CVNP staff, a Countryside Conservancy board member, and external NPS staff reviews the proposals and gives its recommendations to the Superintendent who then passes them on to the Regional Director. The Countryside Conservancy does not have a final vote, but rather serves as the farming expert on the panel. The RFPs are assessed on a score-system where points are awarded for farming expertise, farming enterprise, financial capability, sustainable practices,

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.nps.gov/cuva/historyculture/upload/Countryside-Initiative-Darwin-Kelsey.mp3>

compatibility with Park mandate and available resources; the proposal with the highest score is awarded the lease.

Farms vary from between 5 and 50 acres. All are using sustainable farming practices and grow a variety of crops on their land. Below is a summary of current Initiative farmers.

- \* Basket of Life Farm - vegetables
- \* Brunty Farms - chicken eggs and broilers, vegetables and flowers.
- \* Canal Corners Farm & Market - vegetables
- \* Goatfeathers Point Farm - meat goats and heritage breed turkeys
- \* Greenfield Berry Farm - pick-your-own berries, honey, jellies, syrup
- \* Kossuth Farm - diversified crop and livestock
- \* Neitenbach Farm - mixed vegetables, medicinal herbs
- \* Sarah's Vineyard - vineyard, wine bar, restaurant
- \* Spring Hill Farm and Market - produce, eggs, flowers, herbs, tomatoes
- \* Spicy Lamb Farm - wool, orchard, herbs, vegetables
- \* Trapp Family Farm - mixed crop and livestock

The majority of farmers have come to the program with minimal experience in farming, save for some farming education or perhaps a family history of farming. All have come with incredible enthusiasm, a strong work ethic and an unwavering commitment to sustainability. Only one farm has left the program since the beginning. Most have families and many have at least one member of the household that brings in off-farm income. One farmer farms both on his own private land and on Initiative farmland.

### **Marketing**

Farmers in the park benefit from their proximity to urban consumers who are increasingly looking to buy locally grown food. While rural farmers must manoeuvre lengthy distribution chains, farmers in the CVNP engage in many forms of direct marketing. The Initiative farmers service over 500 families a week with Community Shared Agriculture programs (CSAs) in the growing season; that translates into 500 families a week entering the Park and visiting Initiative farms. Several farms run roadside stands, the Greenfield Berry Farm has a pick-your-own operation, some provide regional restaurants with produce, and many sell directly to visitors who come and visit the farms. The Countryside Conservancy runs three farmer's markets; two within the Park and one in the nearby city of Akron.

### **Lease conditions**

Farmers are given sixty year leases and enter into a landlord-tenant relationship with the Federal Government. The NPS feels strongly that the SUP-approach to farming failed to maintain a working agricultural landscape in the Park because leases ran for a maximum of five years. Sustainable land use practices require investment of time and effort, and can fully amortize over a period of sixty years.

Farmers must submit an Annual Farm Report to the NPS which summarizes the year's activity and includes proposed activities (and any developments planned) for the coming year. An Annual Financial Statement must also be submitted, including agricultural revenue and gross revenue. Rent is based on two factors: a residential component (attained by an appraisal) and a productive component (a percentage of the gross revenue, excluding off farm income). The residential component is adjusted due to the public nature of the farmer's residence in the

Park and their requirement to maintain the property in accordance with strict NPS standards, as well as to interact positively with park visitors. Residences included in the Historic Registry are discounted by 60% and non-historic homes by 50%. The productive component is benchmarked at 10% of gross farm income, and a further 1% for certified organic producers. Because the NPS recognizes that sustainable land use practices require time to bring production to optimum levels, the productive component of the rent is discounted for the first ten years of their lease. In year one, only 5% of gross income is calculated and increases .5% annually until reaching 10% in year ten (9% for organic producers).

The Park Service is responsible for making the residences habitable and the land readily useable for agriculture, but is not responsible for soil quality or any further upkeep of the grounds. The NPS takes responsibility for cyclic repairs of structural components such as roofing, septic system, water supply, and electricals. The farmers are responsible for day to day management of the farm and for routine upkeep and cosmetic repairs to the aforementioned systems. The leasee and lessors' responsibilities are carefully laid out in the lease. Any project to be undertaken by the farmer must be approved by the NPS; the Conservancy assists the farmers in these matters by helping them create a proposal that is in accordance with park guidelines. Capital investments are not the responsibility of the NPS, although they are willing to consider projects they could assist with. The leasee is responsible for all fees and charges regarding utilities on the premises.

### **Sustainability**

Farmers are encouraged, but not required, to farm organically. They must clearly outline in the RFP their sustainability plan. The Park Service has included a spectrum of land use practices, ranging from unsustainable to highly sustainable and they will only choose farmers who are placed on the higher end of the spectrum. Every farm (including farmers still farming under SUPs which today total around 14 within the CVNP) must include an Integrated Pest Management (IPM) form with their plans each year; any application requires NPS approval. Livestock grazing must be management intensive to maintain healthy pasture and animal welfare practices are closely scrutinized. Preferred practices regarding weed management, crop rotation, organic matter maintenance, insect management, nitrogen fertilization and animal welfare are outlined in the RFP package. The Park Service expects grass-based livestock production and encourages multi-species grazing.

### **Ecological Integrity**

The ecological integrity of the Park was an important consideration when the Initiative farms were mapped. The NPS sees national resource protection as a vital part of its mandate, alongside cultural resource protection. An Environmental Impact Statement was carried out as the program was being developed which carefully considered how to balance the complex ecology of the Park with the agricultural activities of the farms. Combined with a GIS layering process, the NPS then parcelled together potential residences with useable farmland. Farmland that had gone into succession was not restored and instead was seen as a contribution to the open space amenity and rural landscape aesthetic of the Park. As a result, not all of the farm residences have their farm fields within their immediate vicinity. Wildlife corridors were also considered when preparing the Initiative farms for leasing. Original field shapes were revised to take into account migration zones. Any areas designated as significant habitat zones were not included in Initiative packages. Fencing guidelines were put into place to take into account the need to protect farm livestock while also adhering to strict NPS

guidelines regarding structural changes to properties. Wildlife must be dealt with in a very passive way as no form of hunting is permitted on NPS-owned land.

### **Education**

All farmer's are expected to fulfill their promise, outlined in the RFP and the final lease, of taking an active educational role in the Park. Each farmer has chosen to fulfill this role differently; some work closely with the Environmental Education Center and conduct classes there or at the Conservancy, others work with the interpretive staff or take part in the junior ranger program. Others interact with the public largely through roadside stands, farm tours, school visits or hosting special events. The visibility of the farms in the Park and their proximity to large urban populations is seen as an important way to educate the public about sustainable farming practices and to reconnect people with their food and where it comes from.

### **Recreation**

Visitors come to the CVNP to hike, ride horses, ski, visit the village of Peninsula, ride the historic railroad that travels through the Park and, now, to buy food and connect with local farmers. Some trails were rerouted when the Initiative farms were established, but several trails pass alongside existing farms. This is seen, by all partners, as a good opportunity for education. The visibility of the Initiative farms is considered an advantage in this context, as the educational component of the program is of prime importance. Farmers enter into the agreement with the NPS with full knowledge of the public nature of their livelihoods, and they are compensated with rent adjustments for this very reason.

### **Challenges**

The following challenges were identified by the different partners in the Park:

- \* Lengthy wait time for approval process for structural additions such as greenhouses, barns, fences
- \* Inability to deal with serious wildlife problems from deer and coyotes, worse on some farms than others
- \* It was challenging establishing the farming program decades after the park had already been in place. The lesson was to plan for farming carefully from the beginning
- \* The NPS was not fully aware of the responsibility of becoming a landlord. It has been a lengthy learning process for them
- \* Initial leases did not fully outline the leasee and lessor's responsibilities in sufficient detail
- \* Lack of NPS financing to continue to grow the program

