Greenway Invasives Partnership update

It has been almost a year since the Greenway Invasives Partnership (GRIP) held their kick-off Roundtable meeting in Franklin. Although the results on the ground may not seem so dramatic, a lot has happened since that inaugural meeting. Here is an update:

**GRIP—what is it?**

The Greenway Invasives Partnership’s goal is to manage the Little Tennessee River Greenway as a natural area by controlling invasive exotic plants (IEP) and restoring native plants and wildlife habitat.

GRIP intends to do this through a comprehensive and collaborative approach. “Comprehensive” in that GRIP will focus on numerous fronts: Education and Awareness, IEP Prevention, IEP Detection, IEP Control, and Natives Restoration. “Collaborative” in that GRIP will work with multiple partners, across multiple land ownerships, and using multiple groups of volunteers.

**Leadership**

At the Roundtable, a Steering Committee (SC) was formed, comprised as follows: Kay Coriell, Friends of the Greenway (FROGS); Dennis Desmond, Land Trust for the Little Tennessee (LTLT); Bob Gale, Western North Carolina Alliance (WNCA); Tim Garrett, Southwestern NC Resource Conservation and Development Council (SWRC&D); Anita Goetz, US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS); Jason Love, Coweeta Long-Term Ecological Research Program (Coweeta LTER); and Duke Rankin, US Forest Service (USFS). Unfortunately, GRIP lost Norma Ivey due to WNCA budget cuts. The SC has met six times over the past year, focusing on planning and fundraising. Most recently, SC added a new member, Mary Bennett with GEAR UP (Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs), a program of Southwestern Community College, to help strengthen links with the public education system.

**Planning**

Among the first needs identified by the SC was a Habitat Restoration Plan for the Greenway.

Using USFWS Partners for Fish and Wildlife funds, the SC solicited bids and in May contracted this task to Sonja “Sunny” Himes of Botanical Services of WNC Inc. in Sylva.

The 60-page document was completed in August. While the SC views this as a "living document" that will change as new information becomes available, the SC is nonetheless confident that there is now a solid, science-based foundation on which to pursue goals.

**Funding**

The main roadblock right now, and where GRIP is focusing much attention, is raising funds to implement the plan.

The main funding for this project, a USFWS Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program grant, ended in August and the SC has researched and applied to various funders, with limited success so far. SC did succeed with a Revitalization of Traditional Cherokee Artisan Resources (RTCAR) grant, which is focusing on education/awareness and restoration of riverside and other Cherokee plants along the Greenway.

Mary Bennett also scored a small Greenworks grant from Project Learning Tree that produced big results. Two major grant proposals are currently pending. A major hurdle is coming up with local “match” (cash and in-kind contributions).

**Coordination**

Given the comprehensive and collaborative nature of this project, a primary objective is to hire a coordinator who can give this initiative the time and focus it needs. Given the excellent work Himes did on the management plan, SC identifies her as the best candidate.

She is working with Dennis Desmond as a part-time temporary employee of the Land Trust for the Little Tennessee (LTLT) until greater funding is available.

**Implementation**

Over the past year, SC has worked to tackle invasive exotic plants at two sites along the Greenway.

The first site is a patch of kudzu vines near Tasseel shelter.

Great progress has been made so far via mechanical removal through three workday events involving over 40 hours of labor by 16 volunteers; a controlled burn thanks to the Town of Franklin Fire Department; and judicious chemical control by Himes.

The second site is the forest area at the south end of the Greenway behind the Macon County Public Library, where the mountain bike trail is located.

This area was identified in the management plan as a top priority area for treatment due to the presence of rare plants in the area. GAGE UP College Readiness Coach Mary Bennett worked with Franklin High School students and teachers on a service-learning program.

Altogether, 45 students were involved in six hours each (270 total hours!) of classroom and hands-on site instruction and practice in native and non-native plant identification, benefits of biodiversity, problems of invasive exotics, and methods of removal; five volunteers contributed more than 63 hours of time in helping supervise the students; and approximately 1.5 miles of nature trails were inventoried and two miles of trails were managed by physical removal and herbicide application, targeting autumn olive, common privet, and Japanese honeysuckle.

Currently, Himes is working with a local Boy Scout Troop on an Eagle project that will control invasives and replace them with native trees and shrubs along Morris Trace near Big Bear Park.

**Up and Coming**

With a management plan in place, GRIP plans to further engage with the various landowners along the Greenway to put management agreements in place to spread this initiative along the full length of the Greenway.

The steering committee recently met with board members of the Folk Heritage Association to learn their plans for the Living Heritage Village and Farm that is being planned at the south end of the Greenway and how GRIP’s efforts may complement each other.

As time and funding permit, GRIP will continue to pursue opportunities for educating the public, preventing, detecting and controlling invasive exotic plants, and restoring native habitat.

If anyone has any ideas on how to further GRIP'S efforts or would like to become more involved, contact Himes at (828) 507-1188 or e-mail shimes@yahoo.com; or Desmond at (828) 524-2711 or e-mail ddesmond@ltlt.org.