Earth Care Youth Corps Pilot Project Progress Report, July 2013 :

*Engaging Future Agrarians in Land Stewardship, Sustainable Food Production and Ecological Restoration in the Working Landscapes of Santa Cruz County Arizona*

By Gary Paul Nabhan and Anita Clovesko-Wharton

W.K. Kellogg Program on Food and Water Security for the U.S./Mexico Borderlands, University of Arizona

In collaboration with G.a.r.d.e.n, Inc., the Borderlands Habitat Restoration Initiative, and five anonymous donors from Santa Cruz County

*“Sustainability, baby. We are all the future but kids of all ages do not know even what different varieties of fruits and veggies look like. We need to educate. Food and water are essential to living. We may seem to have all the available resources but we need to make them accessible them to all youth. Grow a garden, even an herb garden. Grow and learn, pass it on like a kind act and watch it spread like pollen and seeds do in the wind.”*  Johnny Montanez, Earth Care Youth Corps participant

With less than 11/2 percent of Americans remaining as the quickly-aging farmers and ranchers who grow the food for the rest of us, there is an unprecedented need to inspire and train youth in the skills required to become the land and plant stewards of food producing landscapes, from farms, orchards, market gardens and ranches, to greenhouses and aquaculture ponds. There is a particular strong need to attract rural youth from counties with high unemployment and low-income to consider obtaining college, vocational school or university training as well as hands-on skills by mentorships with elder farmers and ranchers.

The Earth Care Youth Corps pilot project in Santa Cruz County Arizona in early summer 2013 engaged five local youth in a variety of agricultural and natural resource management tasks on the farms, ranches and town gardens in the Sonoita Creek and Santa Cruz River watersheds. This brief progress report documents their activities, responses to these activities, tangible outcomes, and proposes next steps.

The pilot project was patterned after multi-cultural land stewardship programs elsewhere in the country inspired by the land ethics of Aldo Leopold, the wildlife ecologist, Joe Quiroga, the rangeland restorationist, and Saint Francis of Assisi, the “patron saint” of restoration ecology. It was focused primarily on high school students, but also included one college age youth as well. While the University of Arizona’s Southwest Center endowment from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation generously supported the summer engagement of Community Food Fellow Anita Clovesko-Wharton as group coordinator, Gary Nabhan as planner and mentor, and the purchase of tools and materials, we were delighted to find five” anonymous “donors from Elgin, Sonoita and Patagonia Arizona including one part-time resident who generously donated support through the non-profit G.A.R.D.E.N. Inc. for student stipends. Borderlands Restoration, Inc. offered work supervisors for some tasks and transportation as well to sites being worked on through the grassroots (not-for-profit) alliance, Borderlands Habitat Restoration Initiative.

The youth participants included Jodie Quiroga, Johnny Montanez, Felix Clovesko-Wharton, Carlos Mingura and Oso Steen. All have been Santa Cruz County residents for most of their lives and are already mature, competent, and highly conversant with some land stewardship tasks because of their family backgrounds. They all kept journals for the project, which they used to summarize activities and work tasks three days a week, five hours a day for five weeks. In addition to journaling and hands-on work responsibilities, they were gifted copies of Leopold’s *A Sand County Almanac*, the Leopold Foundation’s magazine article “Listening to youth about the land,” and the Forest Service’s Green Fire documentary about the Leopold legacy in the Southwest. They also generously left a digital photo log of their activities which Anita then compiled.

As much as we are grateful for the energy, skills, enthusiasm and intelligence of the youth participants, there are others we must also thank. First of all, the farmers and land restorationists that hosted the Earth Care Youth Corps: Tina Baartsh and Jim McManus of Walking J Ranch; Kate Tirion of Real Dirt Farm Institute; Evan Sofro of Native Seeds/SEARCH farm; Tarenta Baldeschi and many others at Avalon Gardens; Caleb Weaver of BLM Seeds of Success and David Siebert of Borderlands Restoration; Lee Roger and Susan Wethington of the Hummingbird Monitoring Network, with their own orchard along Harshaw Creek; Laurie Monti of Almunya de los Zopilotes Experimental Orchard; Ron Pulliam of Borderlands Restoration; and the Brophy family at Babocomari Ranch.

We also wish to thank Lonnie Ellis, Richard and Diane Collins, Joe Quiroga, Rachel Golden, Lea Ward, Ruken Jelks, Lea Ward, Ron and Janice Pulliam, Susan Silverman and Joe Wilder for their moral, spiritual, financial and logistical support.

What kind of work was done? Making, throwing and dispersing “seed balls” to jumpstart range and arroyo restoration. Building from scratch a hoop house and shaded lathe house nursery to grow pollinator-attracting plants for on-farm placement in hedgerows and pollinator gardens. Native plant seed collection for forage, erosion control and hedgerow cultivation. Construction of gabions and one-rock armaments and check dams in arroyos for erosion control. Harvesting and cleaning of organically-grown onions, shallots and garlic with other student interns in the Farm Education Resource Network. Shaping of rainwater harvesting catchments for Patagonia’s parks and gardens. Invasive weed control in an area being restored for on-farm wildlife conservation. Filling pots for compost and planting seeds or cuttings for greenhouse and lathe house propagation. Taking data on milkweed populations required for migratory monarch butterflies. Weeding garden beds and building compost heaps and windrows. Fencing out livestock from plant propagation areas. Etc, etc.

Each four hours of hands-on work was followed by a shared lunch, a reflective discussion and journal writing. In other words, this was a hand, heart and mind exercise. It built friendships, community and healthier foodsheds.

Our hope is that it will continue to build momentum for Santa Cruz County youth to think of themselves as young agrarians, future farmers and ranchers, healthy food advocates, restoration ecologists and above all, true land stewards. We hope to expand the program in the summer of 2014 to six weeks for eight to twelve high school youth, and assist at least eight to ten farms and ranches in the county. We also wish to formalize elements of the curriculum, have more field trips to see other like-minded projects, and host youth-to-youth exchanges in a multicultural, interfaith context. We welcome suggestions, donations and invitations for collaboration. We also thank Lonnie Ellis, Richard and Diane Collins, Joe Quiroga, Rachel Golden, Lea Ward, Ruken Jelks, Lea Ward, Ron and Janice Pulliam, Susan Silverman and Joe Wilder for their moral, spiritual, financial and logistical support.

Summer