

TREE CITIES OF THE WORLD

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At the Arbor Day Foundation, planting trees is at the heart of our mission “to inspire people to plant, nurture, and celebrate trees.” We are now in our fifth decade of planting trees and forests, in rural areas, in cities and towns, across our country and around the globe. We know that trees can change people’s lives and that trees, in fact, provide the necessities of life itself. We all need clean air to breathe and healthy water to drink. We all need a climate that’s tolerable and communities that ensure personal health and wellbeing. These are global issues that demand an urgent global response, at an unprecedented scale. If ever there was a time for trees, now is that time.

Partnerships and positive reinforcement are cornerstones of every endeavor, and every program, at the Arbor Day Foundation. We know that to achieve our vision of “being a trusted leader in creating worldwide recognition and use of trees as a solution to global issues,” we must engage citizens, community leaders, and like-minded partners to have a lasting effect. Our Tree City USA program—started in 1976 with the support of state foresters and the USDA Forest Service—has provided a framework for community forestry management in the United States. Using core standards, we help the managers of community trees gain recognition for their work, knowing that there is always room to grow, to learn, to improve. But achieving recognition from the Arbor Day Foundation has long been that positive first step towards urban forest sustainability.

Our experience with recognition programs in the U.S. has taught us that citizens and community leaders increasingly value community trees. They know, as we do, that trees and forests are vital components of healthy, livable, and sustainable communities. Urban forests define a sense of place and well-being where people live, work, play, and learn. And we all know that the need for healthy trees in urban spaces is great: cities are hotter than ever, air and water pollution affect millions of people, and the frequency and intensity of storms is growing. Insects, diseases, storms, and the constant pressures of urban growth claim more trees every year. City budgets are tight. The need for management of our urban and community forests has never been greater, all around the globe.

That’s why we are launching a new program—with support from the United Nations Food & Agriculture Organization (FAO)—called **Tree Cities of the World**. From the largest mega-cities to the smallest villages, this program is meant to recognize communities that commit to ensuring that their urban forests and trees are properly maintained, sustainably managed, and duly celebrated. Our shared goal is to foster a robust and diverse network of communities, practitioners, advocates, and scientists that will lead to sustainable urban forests across the globe. This initiative is key to FAO’s role in supporting the development of urban and peri-urban forestry projects and planning tools that promote a sustainable and resilient model for cities around the world.

Following the pattern of our recognition programs in the U.S., we have established basic eligibility criteria and standards that will guide this new program. At the end of calendar year 2019, any municipal government with the authority over city-owned or managed trees can apply to join Tree Cities of the World. Applications will be renewed annually to continue recognition.

That government entity—be it a city, a town, or a village—must document that it meets the five core standards that show a commitment to caring for its trees and forests:

STANDARD 1: ESTABLISH RESPONSIBILITY

The community has a written statement by city leaders delegating responsibility for the care of trees within the municipal boundary to a staff member, a city department, or a group of citizens—often called a “tree board.”

Our intent is to set the stage for professional management of community trees and forests. While interested citizens often play a part in holding city leaders accountable and filling necessary management roles in the smallest towns, we know that trained arborists and urban foresters are best suited to deliver a safe, healthy, and growing urban forest to residents.

STANDARD 2: SET THE RULES

The community adopts policies, best practices, or industry standards for managing urban trees and forests. These rules describe how work must be performed, where and when they apply, and penalties for noncompliance.

In the U.S., we have a legal system for adopting local laws and regulations, but we know that other systems may be in place internationally. The U.S. legal system is also underpinned by a fundamental separation of public and private property that may not exist elsewhere in the world. Therefore, we have chosen a highly flexible standard that includes the adoption of professional standards for safety and conduct, or the adoption of ISA Best Management Practices as ways to meet this standard.

STANDARD 3: KNOW WHAT YOU HAVE

The community has an updated inventory or assessment of the local tree resource so that an effective long-term plan for planting, care, and removal of city trees can be established.

It is a time-honored saying that you must know what you have in order to manage it, so we have included this concept as a core standard. The manager must be able to report at least one of two key metrics: the total number of trees under city management, or the percent canopy cover for the municipality. Of course, those numbers should drive the goals of the city tree plan but having such counts of trees is the foundation of an effective tree plan. With the worldwide availability of free software tools, such as i-Tree Canopy, local leaders should be able to meet this standard without difficulty.

STANDARD 4: ALLOCATE THE RESOURCES

The community has a dedicated annual budget for the routine implementation of the tree management plan.

Annual budgeting by cities is hard, but it forces a discussion of priorities. By allocating any amount to community trees, city leaders have chosen the relative importance of this work. But we also know that some planting and tending tasks can be performed by residents, stretching budgeted resources to accomplish more. There are few other public works programs with a similar participatory component.

STANDARD 5: CELEBRATE ACHIEVEMENTS

The community holds an annual celebration of trees to raise awareness among residents and to acknowledge citizens and staff members who carry out the city tree program.

Celebrating accomplishments annually has been a hallmark of recognition programs offered by the Arbor Day Foundation since the very beginning. Positive reinforcement puts city trees and tree managers in the limelight for a moment, helping to raise awareness among both residents and political leaders of the importance of city trees and forests.

Local leaders may ask, “What do we get from this new recognition program?” One likely outcome of joining Tree Cities of the World is simply the benefits that healthy city trees and forests provide to the residents they serve, including reduced costs for energy, stormwater management, and erosion control. But annual celebrations such as Arbor Day or other festivals provide leaders a chance to show citizens that they care about the environment, and participation in the network builds connections to like-minded cities all around the globe.

As we look to spread the word about this new opportunity, we are actively seeking individuals and organizations, such as TREENET, to help communities of all sizes across Australia work towards meeting the five standards in 2019. At TreeCitiesoftheWorld.org you can learn more about the program and find ways to spread the word to communities in your country.

This is an exciting moment for the practice of urban and community forestry. With most of the world’s population now living in cities, our profession is needed more than ever. The essentials of life are at risk. We must ensure that people have clean air to breathe, clean water to drink, and a livable climate. We need to create resilient cities that can quickly restore tree cover following storms that are increasingly damaging. We must integrate trees and forests into the very fabric of our growing cities, so that all residents can share in the benefits that community trees provide. Now is the time for trees. And we need your help to achieve this vision. Join us in our effort to create a new global network of cities dedicated to the sustainable practice of urban and community forestry and grow the profession worldwide.