



New England Grassroots Environment Fund

Founders' Vision Document NEW ENGLAND GRASSROOTS ENVIRONMENT FUND: Fostering New England's Environmental Grassroots Movement December 1995

*Though I do not believe that a plant will spring
up where no seed has been, I have great faith in
a seed. Convince me that you have a seed there,
and I am prepared to expect wonders.*

Henry David Thoreau

Mission: The New England Grassroots Environment Fund is designed to foster and give voice to community-based environmental initiatives in New England. The furthering of an environmental ethic based on stewardship and citizen involvement is dependent upon the support and maintenance of a vibrant and diverse grassroots network. By investing in grassroots efforts, this fund will enhance community participation in local and regional environmental issues.

Background: In early 1995, four New England foundations (The Jessie B. Cox Charitable Trust, The Island Foundation, The Henry P. Kendall Foundation and The John Merck Fund) sponsored a consultation process, *New England Environmental Futures*, to elicit views from various groups about the state of the environmental movement in the region. The result of this two-month "listening exercise" clarified and reinforced the need for greater attention to community-based environmental activism. These sessions further illustrated that grassroots groups are marginally integrated into the mainstream environmental movement, and their institutional scale often makes them invisible to the environmental funding community. Yet, fueled by energy, creativity and commitment, grassroots activists form the basis for an environmentally responsible democracy.

Most funding organizations are not capable of responding to grassroots needs and concerns. Foundations have difficulty in evaluating the large universe of *ad hoc* organizations that develop around a wide spectrum of local concerns, and then disbursing small grants in an efficient, fair and accountable fashion. Often the need for assistance arises suddenly, and most foundations cannot respond quickly.

The New England Grassroots Environment Fund is now being created to provide assistance in a form that is and can be reached by grassroots groups seeking help.

The Purpose of the Fund: The Fund will support community environmental initiatives beginning in four of the six New England states (Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire and Vermont) and may possibly expand to Connecticut and Rhode Island in the future. The Fund will concentrate on the priority objectives of building networks, increasing community involvement, and fostering environmental stewardship within the citizenry of this region.

The Fund is designed to be responsive and flexible, with low overhead expenses and high value-added inputs. While grantmaking will comprise much of the Funds activities, it is also expected to be an interactive program that is engaged in conversation with grassroots groups in the region. The Fund will hire an administrator/coordinator who understands grassroots activism, who listens well, and provides insightful guidance (see attached Job Description). The Fund administrator will work with a rotating Steering Committee composed of funders and grassroots leaders. The committee will ensure local perspectives are incorporated in the grantmaking process.

Governance: The Fund will be governed by a nine member Steering Committee comprised of four foundation and five grassroots representatives. Foundation representatives will be selected from the contributing foundations. Funder appointments will last two years with half of its seats being rotated annually. One of the funder representatives will serve as the Chairperson of the Steering Committee. The Chair will be ultimately responsible for oversight and supervision of the Fund Administrator with guidance from the Steering Committee. The Chair will be a rotating position with a one-year appointment. The Fund Administrator will answer directly to the Chair of the Steering Committee.

The remaining five seats on the Steering committee will be comprised of one grassroots leader from each of the four northern New England states plus one grassroots leader at-large. All five will serve one year, non-renewable terms in order to assure wider grassroots participation. These positions will be appointed by the funders upon recommendations of a funder-grassroots nomination subcommittee. The Steering Committee will meet semi-annually to review proposals and make awards.

Types of Fund Activities: The Fund will disburse grants ranging from \$500 to \$2,500. A broader range of activities will be funded. These include: communication needs, computer networking, institutional support, advocacy campaigns, public education, conferences, meeting travel and enhancing partnerships in the region. In certain instances, funds may be used to provide emergency assistance. Grants will not be made for lobbying or direct political purposes.

Eligibility For Grants: The fund will be housed within an established 501(c)(3) non-profit organization. As such, *ad hoc* community groups are eligible as well as local organizations with a valid 501(c)(3) IRS determination. Individuals are not eligible. Organizations with current grassroots representatives on the Steering Committee will not be eligible for support.

Selection Criteria: Criteria for grantmaking will focus on the ability of a local organization to develop a persuasive case for support, which will include articulation of a need and the demonstration that the applicant can translate need into tangible actions. Organizational capacity and the ability to account for funds are important. Ideally, prospective grassroots groups should represent their local communities and have supportive constituencies. Applicants will also need to demonstrate leadership, stamina, and commitment (i.e., a proven track record).

Appraisal and Monitoring: As part of the overall design of the Grassroots Fund, an appraisal component will be designed. An opportunity to incorporate rigor into this venture will allow funders to refine the initiative over time and hopefully gain lessons in grassroots-oriented philanthropy.

Timeline: The Fund will have a five year planning horizon and will be activated with an initial two years of funding. It is hoped that the first cycle of grants will be held by mid to late summer of 1996. Subsequently, there will be two to three grant cycles per year depending on funds available and demonstrated need.

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