



NATIONAL
RECREATION AND PARK
ASSOCIATION



HEART YOUR PARK RETROSPECTIVE REPORT

Introduction



Park and recreation agencies provide tremendous value to community members and open spaces. They serve as the central connecting force between people and nature. The continued investment and support of park and recreation agencies' role as conservationists, stewards and guides of natural spaces is a continued commitment to the protection of these spaces and their stewardship for long-term public access. While the funding landscape to support this work has been unstable in recent years, park and recreation agencies are finding new and innovative ways to continue this important work through the support network of NRPA and its funders. This report examines the impact that consistent, environmental funding has had on NRPA's Heart Your Park grantees, specifically for Corpus Christi (Texas) Parks and Recreation, Houston Parks and Recreation, the Forest Preserves of Cook County (Illinois) and City of Lake Charles (Louisiana).

Heart Your Park Grants



Park and recreation agencies are a public service, ensuring the responsible and safe stewardship of our natural areas. Over the past several years, the conservation and environmental funding landscape has been challenging. For many park and recreation agencies, these hard economic times have meant lower staffing and difficulties running crucial programs that support access to natural spaces. From increased inflation costs to budget cuts and decreased funding, park and recreation agencies have seen less funding year over year. On the ground, this has meant agencies having one person staffing multiple roles, reducing the scope of projects and decreasing routine land maintenance. While these times are difficult, park and recreation agencies prove their resolve through innovative thinking, addressing these challenges by working with less and looking toward community and NRPA for support. By establishing partnerships with local groups, bolstering their volunteer programs and public outreach, and pursuing private funding, local park and recreation agencies are able to continue their stewardship of the places communities cherish.

Our conversations with our grantees demonstrated this clearly: continued investment in park and recreation agencies is continued investment in nature itself. Park and recreation professionals do an extraordinary amount to protect open spaces, educate the public on how to exist in nature and curate their experiences. With consistent funding, all four agencies have been able to support vital aspects of their environmental work. For one agency, funding has helped support short-term, stopgap projects that address environmental degradation while it waits to start larger conservation projects funded through its city. This crucial funding allows environmental concerns, such as soil and coastal erosion, drought mitigation and habitat loss from becoming larger issues while bigger funding remains in the works. For others, it has given agencies the support they needed to tell the story of their work and educate the public, especially as their communities experience increasing outdoor recreation activity and/or severe weather. For Lake Charles, boating at high speeds exacerbates coastal soil erosion, and in Houston, residential use of ATVs damages areas of habitat

restoration. Using this Heart Your Park Grant, agencies have improved how information is delivered to public, providing creative, interpretive signage and strengthening public communication and engagement channels to combat these environmental challenges. In Corpus Christi, the severe droughts have increased resource strains, putting their agency's restoration efforts at risk. To address this, the agency invested grant funds into tree teepees to help previously planted trees retain water. Although they have seen some tree loss, the majority have survived. Without this consistent funding serving as a lifeline, these agencies and the natural spaces they steward would degrade faster, creating the environmental snowball effect that we all dread. This funding serves as a preventative measure, supporting agencies to protect nature before it is too late to reverse course.

This funding has not only been used to address direct environmental impacts, it also has demonstrated cultural, social, emotional and economic benefit for communities and natural areas. Creating a culture of engaged, connected and environmentally minded community members makes the work easier. It allows park and recreation agencies to create a culture supportive of environmental conservation and resilience in their jurisdictions. This shows up in two major ways, increased community engagement (environmental awareness) and increased volunteering. In recent years, three Heart Your Park grantee cities passed policies to invest in the restoration and preservation of land and environmental resilience projects. In Corpus Christi, the public rejected their city's proposed elimination of environmental programming at the Oso Bay Wetland Preserve during the budget's review, leading the city to commit to seeking supplemental funding. Due to this public support for continued investment in programs at their beloved Wetland Preserve, a local nonprofit stepped in with donations to keep their educational program afloat. The same nonprofit now partners with the Corpus Christi Parks and Recreation department to strengthen their work together, continuing to provide much needed environmental education programs to their community. Increased community awareness enables the public to see park and recreation departments as leaders for environmental stewardship and resilience. With these roles as leaders, park and recreation departments can better protect natural areas and create more volunteering opportunities for the public, allowing for the vital work of environmental restoration and conservation to occur while actively including community in the process.

Cook County, Illinois



In Cook County, volunteers helped to remove non-native species, collect millions of native seeds and plant them, contributing to increases in biodiversity, a healthy life cycle of pollinators, bees, birds and plants, and carbon capture. The agency also highlighted the mental health benefits for the forest preserve users of these restored sites.

"You know it's so nice to come back a couple years later and see all the new wildflowers growing and just seeing how things have changed, from an environment that maybe would have had 10 species, now we have an environment that could have 100 different species of life using it... and that helps to build resiliency." — Cook County Agency Staff Member



Houston, Texas



In Houston, volunteers helped to collect seeds, remove non-native species, plant thousands of trees and return prairies, restoring 36 out of 70 sites.

“We wouldn’t have been able to plant nearly as many plants without big volunteer groups coming out, and I mentioned that... many of them started out as invasive forests and so if we don’t install the plants back in there, it would just come back [as] invasive forests.... If you go back to 2018, which is when our first plantings for those were, it just looks like a [native] forest now.” — Houston Parks and Recreation Staff Member



Lake Charles, Louisiana



In Lake Charles, the installation of rock barriers and planting of native trees resulted in the physical abatement of coastal erosion, evidenced by aerial view GIS mapping that shows consistent land mass over the past few years. The agency also observed that with the park improvements, the community is more mindful about taking care of these spaces, noting a reduction in the amount of trash that maintenance staff has to remove. This work also benefits the local economy because these amenities are important to residents and tourists that enjoy recreational water activities.

“We actually looked at an aerial view on our GIS map, and you could tell from old pictures just how much land had eroded from the west side of the beach... and we actually had to tear down a pavilion because it was falling into the water. And so, [now we] look at that over... a 3- or 4-year span, and [we can] say, ‘Hey, we’re saving almost the exact amount of land each year.’” — City of Lake Charles Agency Staff Member



Corpus Christi, Texas



In Corpus Christi, volunteers helped to remove non-native species and plant native trees and plants at the Oso Bay Wetland Preserve and other sites. In restoring these habitats, the preserve has seen an improvement in pollinator health and has been recognized as a [monarch waystation](#).

These opportunities not only benefit the environment, but they also increased social connection between volunteers and the land, resulting in new ambassadors and stewards of these natural spaces. The connection to these green spaces — the spaces where we recreate and enjoy the outdoors — helps protect the environment and allows the public to better understand the outdoors. The ability of park and recreation agencies to connect community members to nature allows for environmental education and life-long engagement with nature — increasing awareness of environmental factors and motivation to adapt to serious environmental problems.

Hear From Our Grantees

"I just think the outreach is all important, because without the support of the community... you cease to exist and had it not been for their outcry for us then we wouldn't be here anymore, so that's why it's important."

"That hands-on [experience] has an impact on how you feel about a situation... because now they're invested as stakeholders, so that's the other plus to the grant." — Corpus Christi Parks and Recreation Staff Member



Volunteer events serve a tremendous role in the activation of natural spaces and the active education of public volunteers. This past year, the Forest Preserve of Cook activated their park areas through their Fourth Annual Trash Bash. It became an official event series in 2026, expanding to four locations, covering the north, central, south and southwest zones of the county. Through these activations, the Forest Preserve was able to attract and connect with people who may not otherwise have visited. It also provides an opportunity to educate the public about other sustainable practices and to engage volunteers in roles outside of ecological stewardship — creating the opportunity with Trash Bash to connect with residents in a meaningful way and grow our community of support on which the Forest Preserves depends.

Time and time again, parks and recreation proves to be a vital community resource. It is a resource that benefits all people and the environment. The continued investment in our park systems creates not only a healthier, happier public, it also benefits the environment. NRPA's Heart Your Park program has proven to be critical for our grantees. The continued support of NRPA's funders allows park and recreation agencies to support their vital work and for their stories to be shared nationwide.



Acknowledgements

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Cook County



Volunteers remove non-native species.



Volunteers learn how to identify and remove non-native species. Photos courtesy of Cook County.

Lake Charles Beach



Volunteers work together to remove trash from the shores of Lake Charles.



Crews install rock barriers to help mitigate beach erosion. Photos courtesy of Lake Charles.

Corpus Christi



A Heart Your Park sign welcomes volunteers to Corpus Christi.



Volunteers work to plant native species to support the health of the habitat.



Volunteers become stewards and ambassadors of natural spaces while connecting with each other and green spaces.



Photos courtesy of Corpus Christi Parks and Recreation.