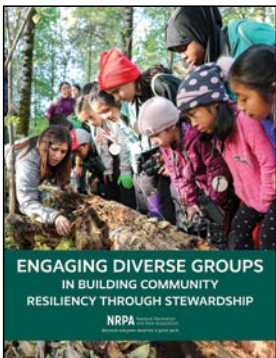




# ENGAGING DIVERSE GROUPS IN BUILDING COMMUNITY RESILIENCY THROUGH STEWARDSHIP

**NRPA** National Recreation  
and Park Association

*Because everyone deserves a great park*



**Cover image:** A community education nature hike at Oregon Metro's Smith and Bybee Wetlands in Portland. Photo courtesy of Cristle Jose, Oregon Metro.

© 2021 National Recreation and Park Association





# Table of Contents

Introduction .....	3
Building Partnerships and Community Trust .....	6
Community Engagement, Communications and Planning .....	9
Planning Volunteer Events .....	12
Case Studies .....	16
Corpus Christi Parks and Recreation’s Oso Bay Wetlands Preserve .....	17
Metro Parks and Nature: A Change in Values Leads to Changes in Volunteer and Education Programs .....	18
Resources .....	19

RAMPIXELIMAGES | DREAMSTIME.COM

Building a group of diverse stakeholders is key to creating successful natural resource programs and parks.





Two volunteers assist with installing plants on a StoryWalk® trail in Oso Bay Wetlands Preserve (Corpus Christi, Texas) as part of the Heart Your Park program.



# Introduction

Advocates, stewards and volunteers are key to the success of ecologically balanced park projects and spaces. They provide vital assistance in the advocacy, establishment, maintenance and educational outreach needed to ensure these spaces are in harmony with nature, well-maintained and a welcoming place for all.

This resource provides a process, tools and case studies that will help park and recreation professionals thoughtfully explore how to engage in community building work around natural resources and conservation efforts. It specifically focuses on building partnerships and community trust, conducting community engagement and communications outreach, and planning events. It also allows space to reflect on your current practices and how you, your agency and your community are engaged in this work.

## GOALS OF RESOURCE

1. Increase the awareness and knowledge of park and recreation agencies to communicate effectively and thoughtfully regarding nature and natural resource management with a community focus. This will bolster support of nature-based solutions and engage racial- and age-diverse participants/volunteers in park and recreation natural resource management programs.
2. Enhance park and recreation agencies' knowledge and ability to build diverse partnerships and relationships focused on natural resource management with justice, equity, diversity and inclusion at the forefront of their engagement process. This resource provides:
  - a. Suggested groups (national organizations, chapters, etc.) to connect with and acquire examples
  - b. Keys to thoughtfully engaging diverse partners
  - c. Keys to planning successful events and creating opportunities
3. Increase park and recreation professionals' knowledge of how to apply these actions and recommendations in their work by sharing case studies that highlight best practices in the stewardship engagement process.

## HOW TO USE THIS RESOURCE

This resource is meant to be used in a reiterative process. You may be tempted to try the steps that are easy without working through the full process, such as reaching out to new groups before doing the additional steps. Remember, this work takes time, consistency, thoughtfulness and dedication. By no means should you delay taking steps in your journey for this work. However, it will take time and may take several attempts or methods to achieve the desired outcomes. By dedicating a thoughtful approach to this work, you can ensure long-term and sustained success and change. When using this resource, reflect on each section — your successes and challenges — and change your approach, if needed. Also, this guide is not prescriptive in its process. Feel free to use the information as it applies to your current processes. And most of all, be mindful as you move through this work!

## WHY WE NEED THIS RESOURCE

Most communities have a vocal minority who are passionate about natural spaces and are eager to support their local parks in these efforts. However, according to national research NRPA conducted in 2020, we know that this population generally skews

### TIPS

To ensure long-term and sustained change, you will need to follow all steps in the process. Here are some steps that could help make the process easier:

- Try starting the process with key individuals well before an event occurs. For example, if you are starting a program before the school-year begins, reach out to stakeholders at least two months before school starts.
- Outline a timeline and provide this information along with other guidance to stakeholders before an event to ensure the process is not rushed.
- Make following the process a philosophy/practice rather than a box that needs to be checked.

CITGO Innovation Academy students add plants to the Pollinator Playscape at Oso Bay Wetlands Preserve in Texas.

PHOTO COURTESY OF SARA JOSE



older, whiter and wealthier than the community as a whole. To ensure the sustainability and success of our natural resource programs and parks, we need to make certain our advocates and stewards reflect the communities these spaces serve. By doing so, we are not only broadening our support base for these important initiatives, but also building our next generation of park advocates and conservation professionals to support building resilient communities.

We also know that communities of color — and, in particular, young people — are passionate about the environment and are often at the forefront of finding solutions to some of our planet’s most pressing environmental issues. So, it begs the questions: “Why don’t we see greater participation within stewardship or volunteer programs that reflect the love, experience and knowledge of these communities?” There are layers upon layers of reasons that this particular problem exists in natural resource and conservation efforts.

There is a long history of communities of color being removed from the environmental narrative. Many of these stories are well-known and well-documented, as evidenced by the Sierra Club’s recent writing about its racist past, and by Christian Cooper’s harrowing birdwatching excursion, in which a white woman called the police on him, for simply asking her to leash her dog. Despite what we know about the historic and systematic exclusion of these communities, a younger generation of environmental advocates of color are making way for greater involvement and conservation of natural spaces.

One problem is that park agencies recruit for environmental focus work and efforts through their existing channels and staff — who they know. And the best way to recruit racially diverse volunteers is to employ staff that is reflective of communities of color and to partner with groups or leaders with whom a wide range of people will relate easily. Yet, as Dorceta E. Taylor, the director of diversity, equity and inclusion at the School for Environment and Sustainability at the University of Michigan, shared in a 2014 Green 2.0 report,<sup>1</sup> people of color are severely under-represented in the environmental workforce. Nearly 90 percent of new hires in these groups from 2010 to 2014 were white. Understanding this and how they foster this issue, it is important for agencies to diversify their employees, engage community-based partners and consider how they build relationships with communities to engage with natural resource-related projects and conservation initiatives.

## BENEFITS TO YOUR AGENCY

Beyond appreciation for nature, those exposed to your work, especially youth, also may be more inclined to pursue nature or environment-related education or career paths. Youth who participated in a conservation program developed a stronger sense of the type of career they want to pursue.<sup>2</sup> When youth feel more connected to nature, they may be more likely to want to protect it.<sup>3</sup> Youth who participated in a conservation program felt more responsible for addressing issues they noticed in their community after participating in the program.<sup>2</sup>

## REFLECTION

Think about what diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) mean in regard to your work in ecologically balanced parks. Consider each question for you, your agency and you community:

- How does DEI support your, your agency’s and your community’s work in ecologically balanced parks?
- What challenges or opportunities are there for you, your agency and your community?
- What could be the benefits to advancing DEI for your parks, especially around conservation issues?

1 Taylor, Dorceta E. (July 2014). *The State of Diversity in Environmental Organizations: Mainstream NGOs, Foundations & Government Agencies*. Green 2.0. Retrieved from: <https://vaip.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/ExecutiveSummary-Diverse-Green.pdf>

2 Syvertsen, A. K., Wray-Lake, L., & Metzger, A. (2015). Youth Civic and Character Measures Toolkit. Minneapolis, MN: Search Institute. <https://www.search-institute.org/downloadable/Youth-Civic-Character-Measures-Toolkit.pdf>

3 Mackay, C.M., Schmitt, Michael T. (2019). Do people who feel connected to nature do more to protect it? A meta-analysis. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*.



Volunteers help out at a Heart Your Park event in Texas.





# Building Partnerships and Community Trust

NRPA's *Community Engagement Resource Guide*<sup>4</sup> can help you holistically approach the community engagement process. The following tips are important to consider and can help you focus your approach specifically for youth and natural resource management.

Building partnerships with your community is an important key to your outreach efforts. This takes time and effort and can be hard work — there are no short cuts! By approaching this process with humility and authenticity, you can start to build valuable relationships that will be beneficial to both groups. Once you have determined what this partnership means to you, your organization and your community, you can start to build trust. Partners will see that your dedication to the work is something more than a box that needs to be checked.

- **Define “community” for your work**

When you consider what community or community groups you are trying to reach or engage in your natural resource efforts, be specific. This can help you identify your partners, your approach and other considerations

## ETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACH:

This is a type of research approach that observes people in their cultural setting to develop a description of that particular culture or cultural group. This can include customs, beliefs, and behaviors. Information can be collected from observations; by participating in events, meetings or activities; or by conducting research with key individuals. Key sources of information can be participating in community events, reading community fliers, connecting with community leaders, using radio and social media or interviewing community members.

## DEFINING COMMUNITY:

This may feel uncomfortable or as if you are “singling out” certain people or groups. But this is a part of the work and growth. If you are unsure how to approach this or how to name the specific community, it is beneficial to ask a community member from that group to provide their preferred name/term.

when starting the process. This process can seem uncomfortable or like you are “singling out” certain people, but that is a part of the process. If you are uncertain of how to name specific communities, find out how these groups refer to themselves and how they want to be referred to by others by asking community members from that group.

Also, if you don't know the specific group/audience you are targeting, conduct some research and outreach to learn about your community and all of its diversity!

- **Build authentic relationships/partnerships with community leaders, community groups, outside organizations — be the convener and build trust.**

This process will look different in each community; find those partners that already are engaged in this work or leaders within the communities you are trying to reach.

Remember that language can be a barrier. Avoid using jargon, include language that is universally understood, and use terms that are familiar to the community. Review the language section on pages 9 and 10 for examples.

Things to remember when approaching potential partners:

- Be authentic
- Listen to their thoughts and needs
- See how a partnership could benefit both parties
- Share what it would mean to you, your organization and the community
- Be consistent, even when there's neither an immediate benefit nor an obvious benefit to you
- Do NOT overpromise — communities will remember if you don't meet your commitments

## Partner Organizations

Remember to start by building authentic relationships with partners. Reaching out because you have an opportunity might come off as self-serving and strain the resources of these small but powerful groups. Consider your approach, your plan and ways you can build upon your partnership together.

**National:** Examples of groups with larger networks include GirlTrek, Hispanics Enjoying Camping, Hunting, and the

<sup>4</sup> National Recreation and Park Association. (2019). *Community Engagement Resource Guide*. Retrieved from: <https://www.nrpa.org/publications-research/best-practice-resources/community-engagement-resource-guide/>



## TRAUMA INFORMED CARE — RESOURCES AND TRAININGS

You or your team may need additional resources around approaching this work from a trauma informed care lens. Below are some resources from NRPA and others that might be useful.

\* NRPA Trauma Informed Care: <https://www.nrpa.org/blog/trauma-informed-care/>

\* Racial Equity Tools Resources: <https://www.racial-equitytools.org/resources/act/strategies/addressing-trauma-and-healing/>

Outdoors (HECHO), Latino Outdoors, Outdoor Afro, The Black Outdoors and Outdoor Asian.

**Regional:** Examples of regional groups include Appalachian Mountain Club Outdoors RX, Black Outside, Greening Youth Foundation, West Atlanta Watershed Alliance and Soul Trak Outdoors.

**Community:** Examples of community groups include church and faith-based groups; local Black, Indigenous, people of color (BIPOC)-led organizations; community leaders; community groups with aligning interests; homeowners associations, local LGBTQ+ centers\*; local women's shelters\*; houseless youth drop-in centers\*; and refugee centers\*.

\* *When engaging these groups, your staff may need additional resources and/or training in trauma informed care.*

### How to Best Connect to Youth

#### Groups:

- Youth ambassador groups
- BIPOC-led community groups
- Community leaders
- Historically Black colleges and universities, Hispanic-serving institutions (universities and colleges), tribal colleges and universities
- First generation college groups or attendees
- Local schools (middle, high, vocational, technical, community college, universities, etc.)
  - > Ask about clubs, groups or classes that might have a mutual interest in this work that also align with your goals. This could include green clubs, civic engagement clubs, volunteer clubs and identity-based clubs

such as Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlan (M.E.Ch.A), Black Student Unions (BSU) and Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA).

- > Many high schools have volunteer hours that are required for graduation or required to wear a graduation honors cord. Get to know who manages these programs and what the surge times are for volunteering.

- Youth groups, sports teams or service clubs

#### Other Things to Consider:

- Understand what your social media usage is like, and how/if it appeals to a younger audience. This includes understanding what photo opportunities in the parks are/could be.
- Consider bringing in youth early in the process, so they can provide input and help guide your process. This ensures you are speaking to youth in an authentic way and building something they are interested in.

### Best Practices

- Create a meaningful and honest relationship with

## COMPENSATING PARTNERS FOR THEIR TIME AND ENERGY

Volunteering is a privilege and done at a sacrifice of those involved. Supporting your community in this work is key. It doesn't always have to be in the form of cash or payments. Always work with your partners to determine what would benefit them and their community. Some ideas could be:

- Create an agreement that offers waived fees for their communities' use of parks and spaces — such as pavilions and conference rooms for monthly meetings, community gatherings and events — in exchange for their stewardship efforts
- Opportunities to get engaged in park and recreation activities or events that can be tailored to the communities' needs
- Host special events for the community or partner groups that speak to their interest and needs
- Praise and support in the community and public forms to champion their work and mission
- Align and consult with partners and community groups on park amenities and future projects/programs





Building diverse, authentic partnerships is key to any resiliency project.

## EXAMINING BIAS

Use the following series of questions provided by Justice Outside to help you understand bias and how it impacts you. Also, consider how this might impact or be reflected in your work.

- Use these series of questions to help you understand bias and how it impacts you. Also, consider how this might impact or be reflected in your work.
  - How does your power, privilege and unconscious bias influence how you interact with communities of color and marginalized communities?
  - What are the narratives we hold about communities with less power and privilege than us?
  - Whose voices and experiences are centered in your policies, practices and community outreach?
  - What needs to shift to center the voices and experiences of folks with less power and privilege?

partners; this is a continual process. (Consider using a resource like Designing the Partnership Alliance that can be found in the resources section on page 19.)

- Co-lead/manage programs/projects with partners
  - Allow partners to take leadership roles and/or help guide the initiative to ensure it aligns and supports their cultural practices and community values.
- Acknowledging messiness and history
  - Acknowledging the past and how it has impacted your community is an important step to take. You must do this explicitly and from a point of humility. It is also important to acknowledge any missteps in your partnership building with both your partners and the community. Using a continual process to build your partnerships.

## REFLECTION

Think about your work in building partnerships and give examples of what effective and authentic relationship building means to you, your agency and your community in regard to your work in ecologically balanced parks. For each section consider the questions:

- How has this impacted you/your agency/your community?
- What will you/your agency/your community do now?
- What wasn't successful or could be improved? How could you/your agency/your community reiterate the process for a better result?



# Community Engagement, Communications and Planning

## COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

- Work with partners and the community to identify their assets/gaps and develop the solution/path tied to your work in natural resource management or increasing ecological balance of your open spaces.
  - The plans and solutions should be as unique as the community it will serve — developing innovative actions or solutions that emerge out of a community’s desires, rather than being predetermined.
  - Put community first and ecosystem/climate benefits as co-benefits. This ties what they care about, but also encourages embedding climate solutions with their work.
- Feedback: This should be a continuous process and include everyone!
  - **Key leaders:** A group you should engage with often, they should be a key partner and their leadership and feedback should be sought consistently. Through your partnership building you can set agreed upon check ins and time frames to ensure you are building

an authentic relationship and seeking feedback.

- **Agency/Staff:** Your agency and staff need to be aware of your work, partnerships and community-first approaches. They should be partners with you in this work, their thoughts and advice can help drive a community-driven approach. Their diversity can help strengthen your approach. Include everyone in ensuring DEI practices are strengthened.
- **Community:** The community you are trying to engage should have clear, authentic and honest communication, as well as feedback opportunities. These might not occur as frequently as with your key players or agency staff, but it would be a good idea to plan when and how these opportunities will be included and ensure the plan is vetted by your key leaders and community members.

## LANGUAGE

It is important to understand that language can be a barrier. Avoid using jargon in your approach from an organization and natural resource perspective. Use language that is universally understood and terms that are familiar to the community. Below are some suggestions to consider and can spur other ways to pivot your approach.

### Eliminating Jargon

Instead of	Use	Why
Volunteer	Help, support, benefit, give, caretakers	Using language that any member of your community can understand and can identify with is important for successful community engagement.
Restoring Habitat	Planting trees, flowers, plants	
Invasive Removal	Cleaning up, improving the health of the park/land	
Conservation	Nature, protecting, taking care of	
Public lands	Community park, green space, park in your neighborhood	
Manual control	Weeding, cleaning up	



Figure 1. For successful community engagement, make sure to continuously engage these key groups.



## Inclusive Terminology in Natural Resource Management

Some language within the professional natural resource field can be insensitive and cause unintended impacts when you are communicating to partners, communities and volunteers. The easiest way to address this is to **focus on describing the benefits/harm of the specie(s) to your local habitat/ecosystem**. By being explicit of the impact of certain species, you can share the impact they have without using terminology that can be seen as insensitive.

### Using Inclusive Terms

Instead of	Use	Why
Invasive or Alien	Introduced, non-Indigenous, pest, weed	Can be seen as Xenophobic and could offend some community members and set an unacceptable standard of labeling that can extend further into the community setting
Native	Indigenous, long established, needed to keep the balance/health	The definition of what is indigenous to a space will continually change due to climate change and the natural process

### Inclusive Language

Throughout your process, remember to think about how you can ensure everyone feels welcome, regardless of culture, race, identity, ability, sexual identity or native language. Please refer to Justice Outside’s Diversity, Equity and Inclusion definitions in the resources section on page 20.

## FRAMING WHAT YOU SAY

It has been found that using negative or fearful messaging to engage communities in nature-based solutions and outdoor experiences is **not** effective. Use positive language to communicate, especially regarding nature.<sup>5</sup>

Try this approach that focuses on positivity, as well as being relevant locally and to the individual:

1. Acknowledge the environmental work the community has been doing already — this conveys that you know

they are a part of this work already.

2. Lead with solutions rather than problems. Conveying solutions that will ensure the resiliency of the planet, your city and community and sharing a positive vision for the future will garner more support than focusing on the current problem: global warming, habitat and biodiversity loss, etc.
3. The local impacts — what does it mean for your local area and home?
  - Along with expanding broadly how this applies to your community if you are focusing on a volunteering event, explain how the work of volunteers will benefit families and community. Specifically, show how volunteers’ talents and skills will be applied and how they will make a difference. Empower them by conveying their ability to contribute.
4. Ask the community how they wish to engage — welcome them to engage with you, your organization and partners to help.

For more specific examples on how to communicate and connect to specifically Black and Latino communities, see pages 33 to 35 of EcoAmerica’s Let’s Talk Climate toolkit.<sup>6</sup>

## COMMUNICATIONS

### Methods

- Transcribe plans/content into visuals that are easily digestible for the community.
  - Add visuals that speak to the community.
  - Create your content in multiple languages.
  - Consider creating mutually beneficial content and co-brand materials with partners. It will benefit you and your partners, as well allow your community to value your partnerships.
    - Invite partners to cross promote materials at events, across social media and within their newsletters and emails.
  - If the plans feed into your master, regional or community plans, make sure to also convey those plans in easily digestible and understood ways — share how they connect!

5 Jacobson, S. K., Morales, N. A., Chen, B., Soodeen, R., Moulton, M. P., and Jain, E. (2019). Love or Loss: Effective message framing to promote environmental conservation. *Applied Environmental Education & Communication*, 18(3), 252-265.

6 EcoAmerica, Lake Research Partners, and Krygsman, K., Speiser, M., Perkowitz, R. (2015). *Let’s Talk Climate: Messages to Motivate Americans*. Washington, D.C. Retrieved from: <https://ecoamerica.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/eA-lets-talk-climate.pdf>



PHOTO COURTESY OF SARA JOSE

- Make sure where and how you communicate fits the community's needs and preferred ways of communicating and is determined with help from partners and the community.
  - For group communications, find out if email, calls, texts, social media or other methods are preferred to discuss the partnership and activities/events. This may require multiple methods, depending on the groups involved.
    - Try Google for texting if you don't have a work cellphone.
    - Try Discord, WhatsApp, Facebook, Slack or other online communication channels that the group is using already.
- When communicating with partners and groups, make sure you communicate information and ask them questions in multiple ways — this ensures that it comes across as a genuine invitation and shows that you have put thought into your approach.
- When partnerships and trust have been built, remember to not only communicate with the leadership of groups, but also connect with the individual participants. You can start to create your own list of individuals to engage with
  - especially if leadership changes frequently.
- Make sure your communications reflect diversity and inclusion both visually and verbally in an authentic way. The visual aspects can be in both the landscape you include as well as people's racial, age, ability and identity. The verbal aspects can be the language(s), terms and phrases. Also, consider if your language is inclusive of all abilities.

## REFLECTION

Think about your work in community engagement and give examples of what effective community engagement means to you, your agency and your community in regard to your work in ecologically balanced parks. Consider each of these questions for each section:

- How has this impacted you/your agency/your community?
- What will you/your agency/your community do now?
- What wasn't successful or could be improved? How could you/your agency/your community reiterate the process for a better result?





Volunteers work together during a Heart Your Park service event in Texas.

## Planning Volunteer Events

Just as important as building the partnership and connecting with your community, planning a volunteer event will be how you present yourself, your organization and your work to your community.

### What volunteer projects/actions/events are meaningful to the community?

- Gather feedback from the engagement process.
  - Make sure the community helps frame the actions and solutions. Don't set predetermined plans/solutions.
- Consider skills-based volunteer opportunities.
  - This is a great way to allow volunteers to build their résumés and enable those with specialized skill sets to apply their expertise. This can be of interest to those who are building their work experience for future employment.
  - This may not be a great entry point or a fit for every group. Discuss with your key leaders and teams to ensure this would be appropriate.
- Consider incorporating Indigenous natural resource management practices or ways that are meaningful to those that you are engaging. Can your partners help lead this?
- Consider the registration process.
  - Ensure inclusive questions and requests are

included that cover dietary restrictions, ability (auditory, mobility, etc.), family inclusive needs, etc.

### Will this activity advance the community's connection to nature, nature-based solutions and equitable access?

### What is a reasonable ask for these key groups, what are the barriers?

These considerations are important and will help you determine what you can do to remove barriers that may discourage the groups you are trying to engage in your outreach. Remember, volunteerism is a privilege and to ensure we are equitable in our approach, we will have to change the way we do this work.

- Clothing and Uniforms: What are they wearing? What are they not wearing?
  - Avoid having staff wear authoritative uniforms, colors that maybe associated with authority (law/U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement), guns or badges that might make attendees feel unwelcome or uncomfortable. Also, consider having staff wear name tags that share their pronouns.
- Transportation: Will it be walkable? Will you provide transportation or give stipends?
- Food: Providing refreshments or a full meal might be customary and considered "a must" for certain groups.

Also consider dietary restrictions or cultural norms when planning.

➤ Ask groups about dietary needs with options for halal, kosher, vegan, vegetarian, allergies and other, so they can self-identify their needs.

- Family friendly/childcare: Adults might not have access to childcare. Consider providing it or including children in the activities.
- Comfort with nature: Understand your community's comfort with a natural setting and make sure your approach is sensitive.
- Inclusiveness of actions/events: Consider how all can participate.
- Historical context of place, activity or involvement (direct or indirect): Remember to think about how the local park/land is connected to the community. Consider how the community already engages with the park.
- Key groups to include to ensure success: What partners and individuals should you have there?
- Time commitment: Make a realistic ask for the group's available resources.
- Date: Be calendar sensitive to important multicultural dates.
  - Use resources like Diversity Best Practices' holidays and heritage months calendar.<sup>7</sup>
- Location and perceived ownership/authority: Avoid an assimilation-based approach to nature engagement and acknowledge that nature-based experiences include a wide range of activities and can exist in urban environments, not just remote settings.
- Exclusionary policies: Review your policies for rules or language. What would cause barriers for diverse groups to participate?
- Prior training: Cutting down on additional expectation and time will help ensure participation. If you need to provide training for an in-person event, consider conducting it via video, an informative flier or other creative ways.
- Simplify paperwork

- Clearly explain why the information is needed and how it will be used. Or better yet, find ways to limit forms and paperwork for participants.
- Ensure inclusive questions and requests are included covering dietary needs/restrictions, ability (auditory, mobility, etc.), family inclusive needs, etc.

### When hosting events, consider how you and your agency show up.

- Diversity/Representation: Representation matters when hosting events geared toward racially diverse groups. Find ways to ensure this but without being tokenizing.
  - Let partners shine: Your community partners are key to your success, let them lead and help create a welcoming and inclusive environment.

## ENSURING INCLUSIVENESS IN YOUR EVENTS

- **Gender identity:** If you ask for gender, consider asking for pronouns instead.
- **Drop honorary titles:** This can force individuals into certain gender identities.
- **Requesting names:** When asking for names, ask for their full name instead of first and last names. This avoids cultural insensitivity if an individual's names can't be encompassed in two words. Also, ask what their preferred name is, so you know how to address them.
- **Diet:** Dietary needs can be for cultural, personal or for health reasons — halal, kosher, vegan, vegetarian, celiac, lactose intolerant, etc. You also should have an open space to allow them to self-identify their needs.
- **Ability:** To access someone's needs when it comes to ability, ask: "Do you have any access requirements you would like me to be aware of?" This is a simple way to receive the exact information you need to plan. But you will need to ensure you include the scope of the experience, so the registrant knows how to respond. Be thoughtful in how you describe your event and, if there are multiple options, explain how they can participate, so you set the stage and make everyone feel welcome.

<sup>7</sup> Diversity Best Practices. (2016, August 9). Diversity Holidays and Heritage Months. Retrieved from <https://www.diversitybestpractices.com/diversity-holidays-and-heritage-months>.



CITGO Innovation Academy students and teachers update the Oso Preserve parking lot with native plants.



PHOTO COURTESY OF ARTHUR LUNG

- Employ a diverse staff: Ask staff if they represent the community you are engaging with and want to assist. Allow them to self-identify — don't assume or assign.
  - Also, if through this process, you realize you don't have staff who represent your community holistically, that should be something your agency should address. Use tools such as the Avarna Group's toolkit<sup>8</sup> for assistance in framing your recruiting process. Create pathways for diverse individuals to connect with your work or workforce development programs to foster the next diverse workforce for your agency. Check out NRPA's workforce development resources.<sup>9</sup>
- Bring materials: Consider bringing materials that are representative of your community. You can bring your partners' materials, show a video or use some other creative way to represent the diversity of your community.
  - Provide materials in languages that are relevant to the community (you might also include an infographic).

- Acknowledge diversity: Discuss the history of a place and different individuals' relationships to place, including Indigenous groups<sup>10</sup> who inhabited (and continue to inhabit) an area. Programs may use storytelling as a method for understanding stories about the past and present of a place. Discussing the history of the relationship between the institution(s) and the people you are engaging also is important.
- Encourage sharing of identity and culture: Invite attendees to share information about their identities and cultures. This fosters inclusiveness and allows others to connect with you and each other. Examine why you are together through the attendees lens.
- Create an inviting atmosphere: Consider how you would show up for your family?
  - Professionalism sometimes works against your community engagement process, so consider these things when hosting an event:
    - **Look:** Are you wearing a uniform, or do have a very professional or authoritative presence?
    - **Language:** Are you using professional terminology, natural resource terms or other language that is not reflective of the group you're working with?
    - **Tone:** Remember to be warm and inviting!
  - If you and your staff present yourselves in an authoritative manner, consider changing those

## UNDERSTANDING THE TERM INDIGENOUS

Do not assume those in your agency or those you are engaging in the public understand the term Indigenous. You may need to do some table setting with them to ensure it's a learning moment. As a working definition, "Indigenous" describes any group of people native to a specific region. It describes the groups of people who lived there prior to colonist and settlers. This term is broadly used across the globe and doesn't specify a particular group of people, it only explains their relationship to the region.

<sup>8</sup> Avarna Group. (2020, October). Toolkit to Mitigate Bias in Recruitment & Hiring. Retrieved from: <https://theavarnagroup.com/resources/hiring-practice-better-practices/>

<sup>9</sup> Schultz, Courtney. (2021). Workforce Development Resources. National Recreation and Park Association. Retrieved from: <https://www.nrpa.org/publications-research/best-practice-resources/workforce-development-resources>.

<sup>10</sup> Native Land Digital. (2021). Native-Land.ca. Retrieved from: <https://native-land.ca/>

aspects to create an inviting atmosphere. Also, encourage your staff to represent their diverse cultural heritage in how they show up for events.

- Consider language and communication: Make sure to have someone from your staff or partners who can connect with attendees in their preferred language/style.
  - Don't use jargon. Make sure to communicate in a way that is understood by your community.
- Plan event elements: How is the event organized/hosted? Be considerate of the community's cultural practices and how they like to engage (e.g., food, celebrations, music, etc.).
- Implementing a feedback loop: Reiterate. As outlined in the Community Engagement, Communications and Planning section on page 9, remember to follow up with your key stakeholders, agency members and community on the process, outcomes and collect feedback on the overall experience. You can leverage this information to ensure your partnership is successful and continue to build upon your work together.
- Celebrating and elevating engagement:
  - How does your community communicate or celebrate?
  - How can you honor community members' contributions and elevate them in your work?
  - How can you continue to engage them?

- How can you grow your involvement with them while reaching mutual goals that promote climate change solutions and resiliency for your community?
- How can you invite those individuals who you engage to grow their relationship with you and your agency?
  - Employment opportunities (part time, full time, seasonal)
    - Consider how these opportunities are timed and aligned, so that they are equitable and create continued engagement opportunities
  - Positions on advisory boards or commissions
  - Ways to contribute their leadership and voice to your projects and planning

## REFLECTION

Think about your work with events and give examples of what successful event planning means to you, your agency and your community in regard to your work in ecologically balanced parks. Consider each of these questions for each section:

- How has this impacted you/your agency/your community?
- What will you/your agency/your community do now?
- What wasn't successful or could be improved? How could you/your agency/your community reiterate the process for a better result?



Community members help add native plants and trees to the Oso Preserve parking lot and bus drop off zone.

PHOTO COURTESY OF SARA JOSE





# CASE STUDIES

PHOTO COURTESY OF SARA JOSE

Volunteers from the Hi-Fairness Girls Club and TeamCITGO assist with installing plants on a StoryWalk® trail in Texas.



# CORPUS CHRISTI PARKS AND RECREATION'S OSO BAY WETLANDS PRESERVE

The Oso Bay Wetlands Preserve — part of Corpus Christi (Texas) Parks and Recreation — explored creating more meaningful and diverse partnerships with its community to engage youth. Corpus Christi has a majority Hispanic or Latino population (63 percent), but the community's volunteer population is currently represented by an older, primarily white population. Oso Bay's program participants and site visitors look like their community, but staff want to ensure that they are offering opportunities for all to envision themselves at the Preserve in a variety of roles, including future employees. Oso Bay staff worked with NRPA and Justice Outside through the Heart Your Park program to pilot *Engaging Diverse Groups in Building Community Resiliency Through Stewardship* to help their process and inform the resource.

The staff focused on forming a new partnership with a local youth group during a time when most groups were not meeting in person due to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. Prior to 2020, they had an ongoing relationship with a team from a local high school that participated in their Adopt-A-Park program and volunteered quarterly. But due to the pandemic, those engagement activities were put on hold.

This led to considering other groups not traditionally engaged by Oso Bay. The staff conducted research on other local youth-focused groups that were aligned with their key focus of nature and stewardship. Though the current impacts of COVID-19 provided some hurdles finding possible partners who were able to engage, they connected with the Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi's Islander Green Team, a student group highly active in both community cleanups, campus initiatives including recycling and a community garden, along with an average membership of 50 to 70 students.

Initial discussions were conducted with key staff and the student team's leadership to discuss the two organizations' focus and interest. Student officers shared that they were often looking for training activities and sites to learn locally relevant skills for new members. This included events, such as learning about the removal of invasive plants, becoming familiar with local conservation issues, and introducing students to community sites off campus. The Islander Green Team is run by students and for students, so increasing their knowledge allows them to plan purposeful events for their group and help them develop career skills. Working to develop a meaningful partnership with this group meant meeting outside of business hours and being mindful of the academic calendar to allow both groups to focus on the conversation.

Through this work and relationship building process, three volunteer events were scheduled during the spring semester, working around holiday weekends, testing weeks and other student commitments. Their volunteer activities centered on invasive species removal, pollinator mulch bed spring updates, and the installation of a StoryWalk® trail. All of these activities and their objectives were co-created with the student group to ensure the events and their focus were fulfilling and meaningful to the participants. These projects are similar in scope to others that the Green Team hosts and assists with, including maintaining their own community garden on campus, and can provide useful training for potential conservation careers, but also for stewardship events throughout the Corpus Christi community.

Oso Preserve Manager Sara Jose also hosted a virtual question-and-answer session on careers in park conservation for the entire Green Team, hoping to reach out to students who may not have been available to attend one of the weekend volunteer workdays. A small subset of the organization attended, and they were eager to learn more about working for parks. Most of the questions from the students focused on state and federal jobs, rather than the local jobs highlighted in the opening presentation. The motivation behind these particular positions seemed to be an interest in working in a variety of sites, ecosystems, and roles rather than being in one place long term for their early careers.

Education and Outreach Officer Morgan Bruce stated, "I'm so happy that the Oso Preserve reached out and provided this opportunity for me and the rest of the Islander Green Team. Although I've lived in Corpus Christi for several years, I've never



visited the Preserve and intend to begin visiting on my own time for nature exploration and to check on our projects. This is a great way for our club to be engaged in the off-campus community.”

Oso Bay Wetlands Preserve’s long-term hope for this partnership and program is to be able to host volunteer events with both the college and high school Green Teams to allow the college students to also serve as mentors and examples of the next step in their possible career development. They also intend to continue to host educational volunteer events with their StoryWalk® and other areas to provide training and knowledge as future youth express interests in our conservation work.

## **METRO PARKS AND NATURE: A CHANGE IN VALUES LEADS TO CHANGES IN VOLUNTEER AND EDUCATION PROGRAMS**

The volunteer and education teams in Metro’s parks and nature department in Portland, Oregon, has undergone a radical shift in priorities and programs as it tries to make its work true to the agency’s racial equity and justice values and policies.

About five years ago, the programs served more than 15,000 community members a year through individual and group activities at parks and natural areas across Metro’s three-county jurisdiction. The programs valued Western science approaches to conservation and restoration. While the team said they were serving “everyone,” they were working with dominant-culture groups, supporting predominantly white organizations.

As new staff came on and Metro adopted racial equity values as policy, the team started asking itself questions: Why do we do things this way? Why are all but a few of our volunteers white and over the age of 55? Why are we talking about traditional ecological and cultural knowledge without consulting the Indigenous folks and tribes of our region? Who are we actually serving when we say we serve “everyone?”

As the team dug into those questions and began thinking about implementation of the department’s new racial equity action plan, they realized they didn’t have the capacity or shared understanding to do the work of advancing racial equity. They went through many trainings and many hard conversations, and some staff left because they didn’t like the shift from conservation priorities to people priorities. It was a hard process.

One of the most challenging decisions was to end a beloved volunteer program that had been going for more than 20 years. The volunteers supported field trip programs, but it required a lot of staff resources to train and support the cohort. The team’s new values pointed them in another direction, one that allowed them to reallocate staff resources to better serve BIPOC and additional marginalized community members.

Ending that program allowed more staff time and money to focus on co-creating volunteer and program opportunities with community members and community organizations. The team also created more positions and focused on hiring and training staff who not only have experience in leading outdoor volunteer programs, but also knowledge of systematic racism and cultural competencies needed to work with communities of color. The team learns from new members and learns from creating programs with partners who serve communities of color. It’s become a cycle that builds on itself.

Now five years into their intentional shift toward racial equity, the team members are proud of the work they do to prioritize building and maintaining relationships that allow them to co-create experiences with BIPOC and additional marginalized members of their communities. They work to provide spaces for reciprocal relationships between land and people, celebrating the connections that folks have to outdoor spaces in ways that are meaningful to them.

# Resources

The following resource from CompassPoint and the LeaderSpring Center is meant to be used in your partnership building process to ensure the development of conversations and relationships that are authentic, mutual, meaningful and beneficial.

## DESIGNING THE PARTNERSHIP ALLIANCE

### From CompassPoint and LeaderSpring Center

Ninety-minute meeting once in two months or three months — only about partnership, not about work. Preferably over lunch away from the office. Choose three to five questions per meeting to spur discussion.

#### I Identifying Intentions

- What assumptions do you have of each other?
- Name your highest hopes and dreams for this partnership.
- Name your worst fears or lowest dreams for this partnership.

#### II Creating the Atmosphere

- What is the tone or relational environment you want to create?
- How do you each contribute in creating the experience you want?

#### III Sharing Responsibility

- What expectations do you have of each other's roles?
- What can you count on from each other? Be specific!
- What requests do you have of each other?
- What commitment do you want to make regarding how and what information is shared with each other and with the board?

#### IV Acknowledgement and Championing

- How do you appreciate and fiercely support one another?
- Acknowledge or champion each other now.

#### V Creating a Backup Plan

- How do you choose to be with each other when conflict arises?
- What discussion do you want to have if one — or both — of you breaks an agreement?
- What will help you get back to your alliance if it gets slippery or starts to break?
- If one — or both — of you chooses to break the alliance, what is important to remember/to occur in that discussion?



# JUSTICE OUTSIDE: DIVERSITY, EQUITY AND INCLUSION DEFINITIONS

The following list has been developed and published with permission from Justice Outside. Find these definitions online at <https://www.brandeis.edu/diversity/resources/definitions.html>.

**Ally:** Someone who makes the commitment and effort to recognize their privilege (based on gender, class, race, sexual identity, etc.) and works in solidarity with oppressed groups in the struggle for justice. Allies understand that it is in their own interest to end all forms of oppression, even those from which they may benefit in concrete ways. (The Dynamic System of Power, Privilege and Oppression)

**Cultural Appropriation:** Theft of cultural elements for one's own use, commodification, or profit — including symbols, art, language, customs, etc. — often without understanding, acknowledgment or respect for its value in the original culture. Results from the assumption of a dominant culture's right to take other cultural elements. (Colors of Resistance)

**Diversity:** Psychological, physical and social differences that occur among any and all individuals, including but not limited to race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, socioeconomic status, education, marital status, language, age, gender, sexual orientation, mental or physical ability, and learning styles. A diverse group, community, or organization is one in which a variety of social and cultural characteristics exist. (The National Multicultural Institute)

**Environmental Justice:** The fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people in the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies. Environmental Justice acknowledges that vulnerable communities are often subjected to the disproportionate burden of pollution and contamination, and works to empower and support communities disproportionately targeted by inequitable environmental treatment.

**Equity:** The guarantee of fair treatment, access, opportunity and advancement while, at the same time, striving to identify and eliminate barriers that have prevented the full participation of certain groups. The principle of equity acknowledges that there are historically underserved and underrepresented populations and that fairness regarding these unbalanced conditions is needed to assist equality in the provision of effective opportunities to all groups. (UC Berkeley Initiative for Equity, Inclusion, and Diversity)

**Inclusion:** The act of creating environments in which any individual or group can be and feel welcomed, respected, supported and valued to fully participate. An inclusive and welcoming climate embraces differences and offers respect in words and actions for all people. (UC Berkeley Initiative for Equity, Inclusion, and Diversity)

**Intersectionality:** The theory of how discriminatory power structures interact in the lives of non-whites across gender, race, ethnicity, economic status, etc. Mapping one's identities within and outside dominant culture may clarify ways in which oppression is compounded or ways in which an individual may simultaneously experience privilege and oppression.

**Institutional Racism:** Refers specifically to the ways in which institutional policies and practices create different outcomes for different racial groups. The institutional policies may never mention any racial group, but their effect is to create disadvantages for groups classified as people of color. (Flipping the Script: White Privilege and Community Building)

**Microaggressions:** Are brief, everyday verbal and nonverbal exchanges that insult, belittle or send negative messages targeted at certain individuals because of their marginalized group membership. Microaggressions include statements that:

- Repeat or affirm stereotypes about a socially marginalized group
- Position the dominant culture as normal and the other as abnormal
- Exclude, negate or nullify the thoughts, feelings and reality of a person belonging to a socially marginalized group
- Minimize the existence of discrimination against a socially marginalized group

**Oppression:** Systemic devaluing, undermining, marginalization and disadvantaging of certain social identities in contrast to the privileged norm; when some people are denied something of value, while others have ready access. (WPC Glossary from 14th Annual White Privilege Conference Handbook)

**Power:** Refers to the ability to control one's environment and /or influence decision making.

**Privilege:** Refers to the myriad of unearned social advantages, benefits and courtesies that come with belonging to a socially constructed and sanctioned dominant group.

**Racial Equity:** The condition that would be achieved if one's racial identity no longer predicted, in a statistical sense, how one fares. When we use the term, we are thinking about racial equity as one part of racial justice, and thus, we also include work to address root causes of inequities, not just their manifestation. This includes elimination of policies, practices, attitudes and cultural messages that reinforce differential outcomes by race or fail to eliminate them. (Center for Assessment and Policy Development)

**Racial Justice:** Proactive reinforcement of policies, practices, attitudes and actions that produce equitable power, access, opportunities, treatment, impacts and outcomes for all. To work toward racial justice, we must confront the societal, cultural, and institutional beliefs and practices that subordinate and oppress one race for the benefit of another. (Citizens Uprooting Racism, Racial Justice Conference)

**Social Justice:** The work of taking personal responsibility to promote equitable access to power, civil liberties, wealth, human rights, upward mobility and healthful and fulfilling lives for all members of society. The taking on of this responsibility entails recognizing and leveraging one's own power and privilege for the redistribution of this access.

**Unconscious Bias:** Biases and negative associations that people unknowingly hold. Unconscious biases are expressed automatically, without conscious awareness. Notably, unconscious bias has been shown to trump individuals stated commitments to equality and fairness, thereby producing behavior that diverges from the explicit attitudes that many people profess. (State of Science: Implicit Bias Review 2014)

**Youth Development:** Activities and strategies that involve youth decision making, use youths as resources to implement programs, and build youth assets and strength that result in improved academic performance and lower-risk behaviors. (California Department of Education)

## AUTHORS:

This resource was authored by Michele White from NRPA with consultation and review by Rena Payan, Justice Outside.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS:

Thank you to NRPA staff members Ayanna Williams, Autumn Saxton-Ross, Rachel Banner, Jennifer Nguyen and Vitisia Paynich for making this resource possible.

Thank you to Corpus Christi Parks and Recreation, specifically Sara Jose, for piloting this resource and providing feedback and to Oregon Metro Parks and Recreation, specifically Alice Froehlich and Diego Gioseffi, for sharing their story.

## DESIGN:

This resource was designed by Kim Mabon of Creative By Design.

## FUNDING:

This resource was made possible by the support from the CITGO Petroleum Corporation and the Scotts Miracle-Gro Foundation. NRPA, which created this resource, is solely responsible for the content.



**NRPA** National Recreation  
and Park Association

*Because everyone deserves a great park*

**22377 Belmont Ridge Road, Ashburn, VA 20148**

**800.626.NRPA (6772) | [nrpa.org](http://nrpa.org)**