

NWF Community Partnerships Research Report

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in collaboration with:

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My role as the Community Partnerships fellow was to engage in outreach and research to support the growth and expansion of National Wildlife Federation's community-based programs, the Community Wildlife Habitat and Mayors' Monarch Pledge programs, by researching Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), women-led, LGBTQ+-led, and accessibility-focused organizations that are doing community-based environmental/conservation work. This research should grasp the models and practices such organizations use to create meaningful relationships and enact lasting change that centers historically marginalized communities in conservation work and advances diversity, equity and inclusion to foster a sense of belonging and ownership for groups that are often left out of conservation.

The goal of our community-based partnerships research is to understand the needs, impacts, and roles of BIPOC, women, LGBTQ+ -led and accessibility-focused organizations in the climate, social justice, and environmental justice space. This work can inform the best ways to support BIPOC lead grassroots organizations. This research hopes to answer these questions:

- **Authentic Partnerships:** What are some practices (formal and informal) that these organizations use to support local, place-based programming?
- **Support:** What type of support do these smaller, community-based organizations need?
- **Outreach Practices:**
 - What are some practices organizations use to make meaningful, long-term connections with the local community?
 - What are some best practices for a large organization like NWF to reach out and build relationships with local communities?
 - What are some possible frameworks that can be used for outreach and program management (i.e. 5 factors of community conservation)? What are other organizations doing to foster this growth?

Literature Review

It is important to note that because of the complicated and troubled history in the U.S. with groups who have been actively marginalized and disenfranchised, including within the environmental and conservation sector, connecting with them in a way that was culturally responsive and sensitive was a priority. With this in mind, I first conducted a literature review for best practices around Environmental Justice (EJ) and Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Accessibility (DEIA) work. A recurring theme in research around DEIA work spoke to frustrations from individuals in being seen as spokespeople for their identified group, as well as having information taken from them with no compensation, perpetuating colonialistic mindsets

and practices, even if this is done with good intentions (Finney, 2014). Because of this, I wanted to build a foundation for my research around existing knowledge and make sure that I was utilizing best practices while conducting my research. I've given a short summary here, but have included many of these resources at the end of this report for further consideration.

Even though historically marginalized communities are typically on the front lines for climate change (Cacciatore, 2021; Masten et. al., 2021; Shueman, 2022; UN Women, 2022), they are often not given a voice in conservation or climate resiliency projects, despite having intimate knowledge of the issues and being consistently most deeply affected. There is also an issue around climate change and conservation communication being too scientific and very wildlife-forward- it is often not seen as a “people-problem”, and the social, health, and economic issues are not clearly tied to these issues (Corner & Markowitz, 2019). This suggests that EJ work with the realm of conservation will need to expand to address the intersectionality of environmental and social issues by engaging in partnerships with a wider array of organizations outside of the environmental sector. Big Green Organizations are in a position to set an example for the conservation world by fostering interdisciplinary partnerships that showcase the interdependence of human and environmental wellbeing.

When looking at access to general programming across many fields, including environmental programming, commonly cited barriers include: lack of low-income options to make programming more affordable, a lack of trust and different cultures (which can lead to other other barriers around language and communication), overly narrow eligibility requirements that still prohibit access for many people, and lack of capacity to offer programs (due to resources, for example). Getting the community's input in building these programs would ensure that the community's specific needs are met and the barriers relative to that community are addressed specifically.

When looking at successful frameworks around engaging in community conservation, there has been a growing push to work more closely with communities and specifically carry out programs using codesign, allowing communities to have a seat at the table and create programming that fits their specific needs and goals. Within my research, I focused on one framework with which I have worked with previously, called the [Five Principles of Codesign or the Five Factors of Sustained Engagement](#), created by Dr. Kayla Cranston.

The 5 factors for Successful Co-design are:

1. Meaningful ownership- do organization and community members feel that the part of the project they own is personally or professionally meaningful to them?
2. Effective autonomy- do project members have the skills and capacity to work under their own direction (without constant input from an expert)?
3. Community demand- Do members of the community say that the project is useful/needed?
4. Group efficacy- Participants believe that they can and do work well together
5. Self-regulated understanding- If participants make a mistake, they can effectively correct it and continue

These five elements are both necessary for successful engagement and important to consider as leverage points within a program when engaging in community-based conservation. I explored whether or not participants were engaging in some or all of the five factors in their work.

Research Structure

While the initial goal of the research was to reach out to organizations specifically led by historically marginalized groups, I hesitated to limit my research to only these groups for a few reasons. There were some considerations around being the right messenger for some of the organizations and the difficulty in reaching out to new organizations without a previous relationship. Rebeca Villegas, National Director of Environmental Justice Strategy at the National Wildlife Federation, also pointed out that many of the smaller non-profit organizations are consistently understaffed and underfunded, making it more complicated to reach out effectively.

As NWF is a large non-profit organization, it also made sense to reach out to other organizations who are not necessarily led by historically marginalized groups, but who are working closely with communities and diverse groups to advance environmental justice work within the realm of conservation. What each organization does to engage communities will be different for a myriad of reasons (trust, being the appropriate messenger, being an active part of the community, having a common/shared goal from the outset or addressing a common need, etc). For these reasons, I expanded my outreach to BIPOC-led, women-led, LGBTQ+-led organizations, accessibility-focused organization and other, more traditionally-led (i.e. white, male, cis, hetero, abled) conservation organizations, as well, to see how they are addressing DEI and community outreach in their organizations, what best practices they are employing, and if they are having success with their tactics, as well as defining what challenges they are encountering and what needs a partnership with the NWF could fill for them. In this way, building authentic partnerships can be explored from multiple angles.

For initial contact, I reached out to groups in the DEIJ realm and Samantha Miller, Community and Partnerships Manager at the National Wildlife Federation, sent out an organization-wide email to the NWF asking for participants who were willing to be interviewed and/or surveyed.

I conducted 8 semi-structured interviews that were recorded and two unstructured, on-the-fly interviews from the end of July to mid-October. Because each organization was different and I wanted to honor their different experiences and areas of expertise, I chose to use the interview questions as a guide and delved more deeply into areas that resonated with each participant, keeping the overall goals of the research in mind.

The participants were varied and reflected the wide spectrum of those involved in the realm of conservation: We had 3 participants from large non-profit organizations, 1 from the Houston Zoo (an AZA accredited zoo), three participants from smaller organizations that are working to become non-profits, two from smaller non-profits, and finally one participant from the Charles River Watershed Association. These organizations are located all over the country and represent the different scales of work being done, from nationwide to neighborhood-focused.

- National Wildlife Federation
- The Wildlife Society
- Better Watts Initiative
- Metro Atlanta Youth Energy Corps (MAYE Corps)
- Youth Environmental Alliance (YEA)
- Vibe Tribe Adventures (Black Girls Hike)
- Houston Zoo
- Charles River Watershed Association

Methods for Analysis

To qualitatively analyze the data, I transcribed the recorded interviews and then coded, using both inductive and deductive methods, to categorize themes within the participants' answers.

Interview Themes and Findings

From the interviews, I first coded for themes that fit the Five Factors of Sustained Engagement in Co-design:

1. Meaningful ownership- do organization and community members feel that the part of the project they own is personally or professionally meaningful to them?
2. Effective autonomy- do project members have the skills and capacity to work under their own direction (without constant input from an expert)?
3. Community demand- Do members of the community say that the project is useful/needed?
4. Group efficacy- Participants believe that they can and do work well together
5. Self-regulated understanding- If participants make a mistake, they can effectively correct it and continue

However, due to the nature of the goals around this research, my interviewees and I spent a lot of time exploring community demand specifically, as well as outreach practices and trust/relationship-building. We also focused on challenges for their orgs and ways in which they would envision a partnership with the NWF. Finally, we spent some time discussing internal DEI work within their orgs, as internal work is just as important as external work when centering EJ into an organization's mission and strategy (Winters, 2020).

Effective autonomy and self-regulated understanding were determined both through how the participants talked about their experiences with their program and what they are doing/did to face challenges. Because they were not the main emphasis of the interviews, they were integrated into a specific capacity-building theme that arose from interviews and the themes that arose around internal DEI work within organizations.

Below you will find brief summaries as well as direct quotes from interview participants:

Meaningful ownership

Around meaningful ownership, all of the interviewees spoke to the importance of what they were doing and the need for it in their organizations and spaces. One participant spoke to the excitement she feels around building a sense of belonging in her organization and raising awareness around representation of different cultures and ways of knowing and being, both internally within the organization and externally with the community that they interact with.

Each participant spoke to both the importance of what they are doing environmentally and to how positively they felt contributing to the wellbeing of others.

Personally meaningful	<i>“I didn't want to be nonprofit...realizing that it actually is quite cool to be a service to the community...this is really cool. So I do have other companies. But it's nice to know that this engine is created to support us collectively, black and brown and friends. So bipoc and friends.”</i>
	<i>“So knowing that I'm able to help contribute to a family and not having to decide on certain bills versus electricity is such a huge? I don't know, honor. But that's something that I think it's a basic right, especially as children in a household, or, you know, low income families, like that's something that you shouldn't have to be or decide, like, how can I succeed in life, and I don't even have lights on it, you know, like, so yeah, like, just those - knowing that that was a lessened in some way. I think the biggest compliment that we always hear is someone they feel seen, they felt heard.”</i>

Effective Autonomy, Self-Regulated Understanding and Capacity-Building

Many of the participants spoke to the importance of knowledge, resource access and capacity-building when considering the long-term success of a project.

Access to knowledge around resources and funding	<i>“We also try to direct them to other potential funding sources or resources to get more plants if they want to expand their projects.”</i>
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Capacity-building for program members	<p><i>“We then have maintenance workshops that we offer. Also, usually we do like a site visit for each (location) to like to kind of walk through maintenance individually. And then after that sort of year, a year and a half is up, we have ongoing opportunities for folks to gather through the maintenance workshops or tours.”</i></p>
	<p><i>“I helped run one of our green stormwater ambassador program, where we partner with a local Boston nonprofit, that it's kind of like a work force development for underserved community members. So they help people get like their GED or high school diplomas. And then they also have programs where they pay participants to do like a three month course. And then at the end, they get a certification for whatever jobs that it's working towards. So the one that we partner with them with is for a wastewater operator license, you don't necessarily need like a college degree, what you do need is to get certified to become one. And so they do this three month course. And then we go in, we do so I do like one full day of training, like what is pollution are like stormwater pollution, and then what is green stormwater infrastructure. And then we go with them the next week for a full day of maintenance. And learning of like operations in the system, at one of the Boston public schools that have the system. And these are folks that might not have college- all of them need a high school diploma, but you know, are in different career stages. They're trying to figure out where they want to go. And so part of it is like professional development. So on the second day, they get to go out, we do a full day maintenance, but the other people who are there is the engineering group that actually created the systems, and we have the landscape architects that come out with us. And so we do a full day of like, actually getting to notice this, then there might be opportunities that pop up for them to like work with any of the consultant groups.”</i></p>

Community demand

Community demand was also an important element to community work that every participant spoke to the importance of. While community demand might seem like an obvious factor when engaging in community-based conservation, many organizations often offer programs for communities without considering whether they are aligned with community needs, goals, or interests (IPBES, 2019). Participants really dove into ways to find where their conservation goals and community needs met. They highlighted the extra engagement that they see when there is community demand for a project, as well as how important assessing community demand is for helping people to feel heard, which is especially important when working with communities that have historically not felt heard or had their needs met.

<p>Assessing community demand</p>	<p><i>“...What we do is typically, before we start working in any community, we have conversations with a wide range of nonprofit organizations, not just conservation organizations, but others focused on neighborhoods, equity, injustice, social issues, you know, sort of trying to reach beyond just the environment or conservation lens, to understand or get a sense of what are the key interest needs, issues, challenges within these communities? ...And rather than really focusing only on sort of wildlife and the ecological benefits for these projects, we're also really trying to focus in on what are the benefits for people again, that access to nature, but also looking at things like how can we improve climate resiliency, reduce local flooding through rain gardens, green stormwater infrastructure, while also providing natural playscapes for kids, and experiences with nature for folks in their neighborhood.”</i></p>
<p>Intersection with community needs and conservation goals</p>	<p><i>“We're typically, we're sort of, obviously, we are a conservation organization. And so, we are focused more on sort of the realm of, you know, the ecology of the area and the environment, portion, you know, how to work. But that said, we still, you know, like, when we're working in early childhood centers, we need to know, like, what are the other challenges for early childhood in the city, right, and like, so, you know, like, in Detroit, a lot of the early childhood centers have really major issues, like, inside the buildings with the actual infrastructure, which has to come before, you're gonna put, you know, a nature playscape outside, right, like, that has to, you know, and so we partnered with an organization that also does the interior work, so, so we're not, you know, just going and offering like, hey, we can, you know, help you improve your outdoor space, but we can't do anything about these serious issues you have inside your building. That's, I mean, that's not responsible or helpful either. So, so that, you know, that's an example of like, where we're trying to make sure we're partnering with someone who can deal with that.”</i></p>
<p>Importance of community demand</p>	<p><i>“I want to see what they're passionate about because we find that we see greater effort when they want something instead of us telling them to do something.”</i></p> <p><i>“I understand, as community of color probably this very hard... someone coming in helping us, but they may be the wrong help. So really ask them what their needs are. So that's been the biggest- but everyone on a team. They say they always hear that, like, they feel heard. They felt seen, they felt like their needs were met.”</i></p>

Group Efficacy

Group efficacy is necessary for successful implementation of a project and for ongoing community engagement. Many ways to foster group efficacy are listed in the relationship-building and trust sections, as having a good relationship with others in the group is necessary for working well together. One participant mentioned specifically that one of the goals of their project was to grow interaction between community members, allowing them to help and support each other, so that the communities can successfully lead their projects at the community level.

Group efficacy	<i>“We sort of feel like that fostering interaction across difference is also a really important piece of the work. And so, we've had, like, organically relationships develop across houses of worship, like, even across like totally different faiths. Oh, yeah. Yeah, we have, like a Muslim community, help out this, like Christian Church, in their planting project, like just offering their support, because they have more expertise.”</i>
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Insights and Practices for Community Outreach

Participants had many suggestions around effective community outreach. Their insights covered both best practices around outreach and considering who their organizations are reaching out to.

Many participants spoke to the importance of identifying institutions who are seen as leaders in their communities or already have a lot of trust within the community when trying to reach community members. Another spoke to the importance of having partners in different areas of the community to increase accessibility.

When exploring different strategies for initial outreach, with the goal of relationship building, the participants stated both the importance of in-person communication and the importance of being flexible with forms of outreach, based on the needs of the community and due to COVID. They also spoke to flexibility being key when discussing some best practices around making community outreach more accessible. They highlighted meeting community members where they were at, instead of making community members adhere to their locations, modes of communication, etc.

For specific outreach strategies, while they used mass outreach methods like emails, cold-calling, and flyers, they found that they had the most success when a partner organization connected them to another organization or gave recommendations around who should be included in a certain project or would be interested in partnering. They also found events really

impactful when networking and trying to make connections. One participant mentioned town hall meetings specifically to connect directly with community members.

Many participants spoke directly to the importance of connecting with organizations that already have trust (trust by association, one participant called it) with the groups that her organization is trying to reach. She also highlights the importance of acknowledging the discomfort of some marginalized groups in these spaces and not expecting them to be the ones leading change. Others spoke to the importance of connecting with non-traditional groups in the realm of environmentalism and conservation.

<p>Identifying the community partners</p>	<p><i>“Our team focuses on working with primarily anchor institutions within communities. So that's k 12, schools, pre K centers, and then also our early childhood centers, and then also houses of worship. And so the rationale for that is that those hub or anchor institutions are often places where a lot of folks in the communities gather.”</i></p>
	<p><i>“Reaching out through organizations that already have connections with the different communities we're trying to reach. So becoming partners there. So we're able to kind of show what services we have, but also kind of work with people that are much more familiar with the community.”</i></p>
	<p><i>“And as far as like my school partnership program, when I need a new school partner, or when I've talked to an old school partner, I'm showing I'm looking at where they are in the map, and seeing what's around them and making sure we have an organization that we're partnered with in their area, so that if they can't go to the zoo, we can have a field trip at Houston Botanic Garden, and we already have Houston Botanic Garden on board. And they're like, Yeah, you can come whenever you want. And we could do like a activity or some sort of being outdoors. Because we don't want the students to feel like they only have to come to the zoo to save wildlife or interact with nature, we want to make sure that they know what's in their area so that they can go all the time or whenever they want. So we're making sure we are partnering with local organizations.”</i></p>
<p>Best practices for community outreach and engagement</p>	<p><i>“The initial establishing of the relationships is typically in person and it's true, like before COVID (we) used to, like travel to go to a lot more of the events and things like that. It just hasn't been that way.”</i></p>
	<p><i>“...usually things like green stormwater infrastructure meetings that group together a bunch of different organizations, or, like in Grand Rapids, there's like a group of...it's basically folks who work on water,</i></p>

	<p><i>like in the area. And there's one nonprofit that sort of convenes this monthly meeting. And so that was, that was like a way to meet a whole bunch of different folks like nonprofit slash, you know, mostly nonprofit, folks. Okay. Yeah. So usually that sort of thing, where it's like an organized meeting, either by like city or other nonprofit that's bringing (everyone) together.”</i></p>
	<p><i>“Some of it is kind of providing a broad spectrum of ways for people to do engage with us. So we have different webinars that are kind of focused in on different aspects of the DEI, as well as just kind of general wildlife topics that might kind of be of interest to different people. Some of that is reaching out through organizations that already have connections with the different communities we're trying to reach. So becoming partners there. So we're able to kind of show what services we have, but also kind of work with people that are much more familiar with the community we want to reach, identifying some of those needs and making sure that we're able to address those more effectively before we're bringing those people in to an environment that they may not enjoy as much and not putting as much onus on them to be the ones kind of pushing for that change.”</i></p>
<p>Increasing accessibility specifically as a best practice</p>	<p><i>Some of our, I think, pretty standard principles when we do outreach is, you know, we were learning that we shouldn't be making more zoom meetings for people to attend to; they don't have the time to attend another Zoom meeting. So it's like, how do we meet them where they are, whether it's attending or participating in a Zoom meeting they already have been planning to attend or going to their location in person, meeting them where they're at. We, you know, growing our network of translators and resources for translation as well. So when we have, you know, some organizations that we work with directly, who know who kind of already know the work that we do, so they're ready to translate, you know, a lot of like our work for us, but I think one of the harder things that we've been finding hard to do is finding live translations for zoom meetings, mostly because a lot of our work is pretty technical. And so it's needing to find someone who is familiar with the words and how to translate that into whatever language we need to translate to and most of the time, they would need a couple of days to prep for it. And then sometimes some of our things are not ready until a day or two before the meeting, okay? Those are things that we're still kind of learning, we're trying to, you know, make sure that we're making time and are ready to like, slow down our process so that we're making it more accessible and equitable for people to participate in. We have, you know, when we do meetings, we do record them.”</i></p>

“We're hoping by being free, that could be the first barrier knocked down. And then the secondary, of course, is school buses, and money just to come to the zoo. So I'm hoping to find like a donor in that aspect. So that we can eliminate that one. So far hasn't really been a problem because schools love us coming out which all that is free, like me going out with everything is free, us doing zoom calls, a lot of schools do like staying with the online aspect, because we could show them specific parts of the zoo that we wouldn't necessarily be able to bring over 10 students in, we have like smaller areas.”

“It's also just going through school and interacting with the student who was afraid to come in nature or the family who was like, I don't know how to go out in nature. But oh, so we do offer family programs for them, where we choose a specific location throughout Houston. So I took about I took families out to Wabash bridge who have never been there. And so the only cost for that program I think, is like \$10 for family and there's no maximum family...and they will go to a nature center or specific area in Houston. And then give them parking information, give them maps of how to get there.... easiest route, we try to make it just easy. So what the parking situation is if they need to pay if what they need to where they need to bring. We do provide like a mosquito repellent. We have a basket backpack for sunscreen, we have a backpack of maps. And we have- we go on a trail so that they learn like a trail, we show them their maps of what that a location has to offer. So we scout the area beforehand, and we're like seeing what resources they already have. Because we don't want to just try to redo something if they're already doing great at that. We see what trail is going to be the best, especially for strollers or anything. So make sure that's an inclusive program. And then we see what they have to offer. So like if they do have that trail with the music, we do show them like you could do this and we also do an activity with them so that they could always activity when they go out in nature and not be like what I do with my kids out here? Why do you want me to go walk in the heat? So it's kind of, it's making it a little bit more fun so that they know how to have fun in nature. So it's something small like that. And we are also doing that with school so that it's at their school, we're just like, oh my gosh, like you have this tree frog here. Like, you want to track it? Things like that. And to just let them fall in love, so if there is like a scared part, or is there there is some concern with the zoo, or with nature, like we are trying to figure out how we can break that.”

Partnering with organizations outside the realm of conservation	<i>“So we have a lot of local organizations that we're working with, we're still trying to build up a lot more of our connections with your non traditional groups, we have a lot of connections with like housing justice, energy justice, transit justice people. Yeah, but not. We haven't I don't think we have that great of a connection yet with anyone who's in, you know, in the realm of like, people with disabilities or more language accessible needs. We have some connection with the elderly, like organizations, but you know, still have room to grow on that. Okay. Yeah. And we're also building out connections with the native population in our watershed.”</i>
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Trust and relationship-building

Building trust to have effective partnerships with community members was a central theme during the interviews, with all participants speaking to the importance of trust in the relation process and really emphasizing the need for good relationships when partnering with the community.

One of the key points that participants stressed was the amount of time that it takes to gain trust to build solid relationships- up to a year. Another key point that many participants highlighted was the importance of just listening and opening up a conversation for relationship-building first. Putting pressure on organizations to partner, especially ones that are led by historically marginalized groups, can be overwhelming and stressful; opening the conversation just to see where each organization is at and explore experiences and goals takes some of that demand off.

A few of the participants talked about trust-building specifically in historically marginalized communities and how past injustices and tensions between neighborhood groups can run deep and complicate the process of relationship building. They spoke directly to the importance of consistently showing up and earning trust. Participants also discussed decolonizing data collection when working with communities, allowing them to have ownership over their data and integrating storytelling as a legitimate form of data collection.

In addition to giving community members rights over their data, acknowledging community members and organizations as experts in their field and centering what they have to say was integral to best practices when working with communities. Participants also spoke about providing community members with adequate compensation for their time and effort. They noted that compensation doesn't necessarily have to be monetary and is very dependent on community wants and needs. Finally, one participant highlighted the importance of personalized communication to nurture relationships.

The process of relationship	<i>“We really value trust in community building. And so our first initial- when we do retrofitting we don't just say here's the problem. Let's go fix</i>
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<p>building</p>	<p><i>your house. We really say what is your story? And so we're very big on oral storytelling and getting knowing what their story is...so like how can we use it...if you're, you know, having health problems let's focus on retrofitting that targets you know, cleaner air, window sealing, caulking doors. So how can we do more regarding specific and tailored to their needs? So we'll kind of go out lunch first. So it's a long process. Because...we want to really build that community; we kind of test ran this in our last grant proposal that we won, which is called Project for Peace, where it was very storytelling-based. Hearing their stories, again, knowing what their needs are. And then we cater to those needs, and then also follow up with people. Okay, what do you need now? Because we don't want to just say, here's a problem, we fix it, and then we just leave? Yeah, so very big on re communication, like, how is everything going. So our timeline before COVID was very, three to six months of just relationship building, getting into the family, the household kind of resources that they need, connecting them to resources that may be out of our control, connecting them that way, but always solid, being MAYE Corps team so it's not like we just pushing them off to someone else. Yeah, like we're here throughout the whole process during retrofitting. And then following up three months later, how's everything going? Well, can you come here for next steps. And a great example is Martin Luther King Service Project and they do retrofitting -kind of the same format for low income houses and senior housing. Okay, they have a great model that we kind of followed as well. The Martin Luther King Service Project program."</i></p>
<p>Best practices for developing trust</p>	<p><i>"How do you develop trust? ..The short answer was like, really to work with people that they already trust? Like, get them on your side be, like, obvious about your intentions, and the transparency. And I mean, I also think that the compensation helps. Because it like honors them- take - because it's not easy, a lot of the time to take this time out of your day, or to like get to a certain place and, and the follow up as well, like the continued dialogue, I think, is also a very important part, because I've read about some studies are like, Oh, they took their story. And yeah, they received some money. They never heard about it again, they never saw the final report. I never, you know, all that stuff. So it's like, okay, so you just came in here. Did you finish the project and left? So, continuing-? Yeah, it's very important for long term. Trust. Yeah, community is out there already. Just- it does take some work to like find it in the right way. And then to connect to it, but it's very valuable."</i></p> <p><i>I have to say it's like a constant process of like, just showing up and like making your face known is like, probably the best thing that you can do. following through on promises."</i></p>

	<p><i>“There are basic principles to follow. And I mean...the top one is listening.”</i></p>
	<p><i>“ I know a lot of organizations were either trying to give them [Mayers, an organization] money or reaching out to them to try and partner with them on various things. And in kind of speaking with some of their leadership that was like, hey, it’s great in terms of their connections and awareness of what services they provide. But the ask was pretty weighty. And so being able to kind of connect on things that don't necessarily put the entire onus on their organization to kind of be the driver for those shared goals, I think was really helpful and kind of coming into it with, we all have ways in which we're approaching some of these issues. What is going to be most beneficial for your organization's mission and goals? What's going to be most beneficial for us? Where is there overlap? And how can we most effectively work on that, and some of our initial calls were truly just, this is who we are, this is what we do. Let's talk about some of the frustrations we've had before we even tried to like identify a path forward, let's just have a conversation that's not super, super specific to action items that we need to accomplish.”</i></p>
<p>Acknowledging the community members as experts and centering them.</p>	<p><i>“But I think, from the community, like there's a lot of good ideas or practices out there. It's really a matter of connecting with them in a way that doesn't seem like extractive or self serving, but it's for like, community benefit, not like someone writing in, like, here's what we have to offer, right, but really handing the mic over to them.”</i></p>
	<p><i>“The community should lead itself. So like, you may have resources or connections or ideas but really, for it to be effective, the community needs to lead itself.”</i></p>
	<p><i>“Then the other thing is, like, when we do projects to make sure that the data belongs to the community or making sure like that the research is specific to the community. And that stays there.”</i></p>
	<p><i>“Everything that we do is about honoring the communities as they are sharing their stories. It's not really, for us, except you know, that we're doing this ourselves so that we can learn, but it's really to uplift others. So trust is a really big thing that we focus on.”</i></p>
<p>Communication on a more personal level</p>	<p><i>“They were more like personnel, like inner circle connections. So we definitely do stay in touch with them. We also have, we ran two really huge fundraising campaigns. 2020. Yeah. And we're, like our communication with those donors that our community of donors, we were really intentional about that and really involved with that. So we like made personalized videos, or we were thinking about handwritten</i></p>

	<p><i>letters and like, have them on our newsletter and like giving updates, things like that. I mean, not just because they're donating, but also, you know, like, this is- as a very small and young group, not just because of our age, which is like how long we've been operating. Yeah, everything feels a lot more personal and intimate. And we, I mean, that's what that's the work that we do. So we're expecting that; so, we do want to keep that connection and community. So we stay really connected to our larger networks and share opportunities both ways."</i></p>
<p>Compensation</p>	<p><i>"What we are hoping to start doing is like when we have a house of worship that's hosting an event- so sometimes, like one of the houses of worship will host a workshop for the community that's, like in connection with their garden or their project. So there's a benefit for them, like bringing in the neighborhood, but I think we also should be probably paying them for space and time. And we haven't been doing that, but I think it's something that we will do moving forward."</i></p> <p><i>"We really wanted to honor their time and compensate them. So we had honorariums, too, which would be, you know, an incentive, but also, you know, it wasn't just like, we're gonna just take your story and run away. You know, we do want to respect you and honor you."</i></p>

Specific Barriers with Historically Marginalized Communities

As noted in the community demand section, many communities are not necessarily focused on specifically environmental issues because there are other, more pressing issues; however, many historically marginalized communities are often frontline communities for climate change or heavily exposed to environmental threats, such as poor air quality, water contamination, etc. that are in reality health issues (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, 2021). Other challenges revolve around accessibility, whether in the form of interacting with nature or professional development opportunities.

One participant spoke to how certain communities can be pigeonholed into stereotypes and how systems sometimes purposely skew data or overlook underserved communities, continuing injustice. Another participant spoke to some historical issues with larger organizations and how they've previously interacted (or not) with different groups. This organization, recognizing the need to increase representation in conservation by changing the ideas of who comes to mind when we think of conservation professionals, is still struggling with the mistrust and cynicism that many marginalized groups feel when they see DEIA efforts. In addition to this, many people from groups that have been historically left of feel frustration over expectations for them to be a spokesperson for their affinity group with regards to DEIA work.

One participant spoke to power holders gatekeeping and using systems to keep newcomers out, as well as blatant sexism and racism. One participant specifically spoke to the systemic issues around grant-writing, which should also be considered when considering other processes, like hiring, or methods of outreach.

<p>Environmental issues aren't prioritized when social issues come first</p>	<p><i>"Taking care of issues or paying attention to issues that other people don't have the capacity to pay attention to...for example, the Watts Labor Community Action Committee Center in Watts, it's a long name, they deal with social services in the community because the community faces poverty. They do social services and the Better Watts Initiative kind of spawned out of that organization specifically to address environmental issues. And like, that's what a lot of organizations in the community are about, is providing social services and they don't necessarily have the capacity to deal with environmental issues because they're not really thought of as immediate issues."</i></p>
<p>Accessibility</p>	<p><i>"There were barriers, I didn't realize that there were so many barriers to getting outdoors. So there are- transportation, there's gear, there's equipment, there's education, and then there's the economics of the black and brown community and these marginalized communities that don't have the education to get the jobs that pay to be a billionaire."</i></p> <p><i>"We what we do is take experts out to their school. So it's not just about taking animals, it's also about like, if they are creating a pollinator space, can we get horticulture out there? If they're gonna put a bee home in the next year in their pollinator space? Can we take carpenters or facilities out there and show them that that's another job that the zoo has. And it's not all about animal staff. It's like, we have a sustainability manager, our sustainability manager, he just started, I think, a year ago, he's already part of our partnership program, schools were excited about just some saving wildlife in that way. And he spoke to them about his job and what he does. And he's and they were like, you do what we do, but you're that's what you get paid for. So they're learning about different jobs and different experts."</i></p> <p><i>"So like that, that mindset, or like the pay to play options, and kind of what could be done to remove that as, like an idea of how you gain entry into the field and why we're devaluing some of those entry level positions. And so there are some of our members that are contemplating creating some sort of position statement or creating some sort of toolkit to be able to better communicate to employers why it's important to put funding towards these positions, or if you can't find funding, rather than offering</i></p>

	<p><i>them only as a volunteer or an unpaid position, partnering with someone so that you can pay this person to be able to take on this work. And so I think the kind of the unpaid and like pay equity issues are coming up more and more often. And being able to work on those, I think has become pretty prevalent in a lot of the conversations I've been having recently."</i></p>
	<p><i>"I think the thing that sometimes does get forgotten, and a lot of the collaboration or like grant opportunities is, I think part of it is like, Who are you promoting it to, and who's, you know, like, getting the opportunity to do it with I think, there for some, for a lot of groups, there needs to be more flexibility on like, the timeline of like, when you put in an application for a grant, how much feedback you can get for it, because not everyone has expertise or experience with grant applications, and it might not look good on paper, but this might be like the project that needs to be done from an equitable environmental justice standpoint. And I think part of that is also like, what is like, grant like funding, like, what language is in how, you know, who's the direct contact for funding? I think those are things that, you know, not everyone can do for whatever reasons, you know, as an organization, but I think it's, it's not as popular, or it's not as like it's not the norm yet for maybe funding wording to be in multiple languages. And so I think that's, I think that's the one thing that doesn't get talked about enough."</i></p>
<p>Lack of trust</p>	<p><i>"So but we have, because of our organization, kind of our history with-engaging outside of that more traditional idea of what as a wildlife biologist is kind of a sour taste in some people's mouths, that you do identify with these underrepresented groups and kind of not necessarily connecting with the outreach that's being done and not thinking that it is authentic or genuine on behalf of the GWS."</i></p>
<p>Injustice and systemic racism</p>	<p><i>"And like, the way that Watts is often portrayed in the media is like, as a violent, lawless place. So that's why it's like I say it's over studied, because people in the community want to like study like resistance, or like, talk about why people did what they did back then. And then there were also uprisings in 1992 and in 2020. But why I say it's under studied is if you look at like, like, we try to find data about the water quality issues or about blood lead levels or other- other data that we would need that's collected by the city, and they often skip over Watts. Or like, for example, that data that we were looking at they tested, like three homes in Watts and lumped it in with a wealthier area and said like, oh, water's fine. Okay. Okay. It's hard to find data. Okay."</i></p> <p><i>"If you even drive around the community, there's like, a lot of like pollution and trash and like, community members will look around and</i></p>

	<p><i>like think or not think but feel, think, know that they are being neglected by the city. So there's like a general feeling of neglect in the community on behalf of their elected officials.”</i></p>
	<p><i>“Navigating the political loopholes? Okay. So like, Great Outdoors, Colorado won't give us funding, and they get their funding from the Colorado lottery. So last year, they had 17 million. I asked for 100k. They said they would give me the 100k. And then they were like, Oh, well, you're not partnered with Denver parks and recs. And I was like, okay, and then Denver Parks and Recs was like, Are you sure that your real 501 C three, the director took me to coffee. He was like, How are you 501 C three, though. And I was just like, what? And she was just like, well, it's just, you know, as a black woman, so hard for you to like, have a real, like a board and a budget and to keep your status going. And I was like, what, like, why is it so hard for anyone to do this? Like, why is it so hard? And she was just like, well, it's just, it's just hard to believe. And she's like, well, in order to get in with us, you have to get in with My Outdoors Coalition. And I was like, Well, what is that? And she was like, well, it's just like a group of outdoor organizations that you have to just become a part of. So it sounds like I created what they have. But they don't believe that I created my own in Colorado, and it's bipoc owned and led. So they I can't get funding until I'm a part of these other two organizations. And these other two organizations aren't accepting new organizations into their group...And then we also have noticed that the same people that sit on these boards, sit on the other people's boards, so they're, they're the gatekeepers, and they know each other, and they pocket the money. And then they tell the smaller organizations, we don't have anything for you unless you join us. And then we're gonna tell you how to use your money.”</i></p>
	<p><i>“There's federal money, their state money, there's local money. And we still we're still like getting it and not just my tribe. I'm saying like, we as bipoc outdoor organizations are not getting the funding. Really quick- my grant director. I hired his company. And he has like 20 grant writers. And he told me the reason why- because my dad is the nonprofit guru. And I said, How come my dad struggles and he says, I will tell you, your dad's not getting funding because he's a black man...I was like what, and this was coming from a white gentleman that has been doing nonprofit and grant writing for years. And he was like, the person that runs it, they see it's a chocolate person. And they're like, next. I'm like, why are you serious? I don't know if that sounds- like its 2023.”</i></p>
<p>Being selected as spokespeople for their affinity group</p>	<p><i>“I think one of the other big pieces is trying to just expand representation beyond kind of like the very small pool of people that have been identified to kind of speak, quote, unquote, on behalf of their identity or affinity</i></p>

group. And got to moving beyond that representation kind of solely being in the DEI space. So bringing in more representation and things like our keynotes at our conferences, or the work that we highlight to our publications and, and working to expand those networks, but also kind of recognize the work that a lot of people have done that is that emotional tax on top of their work as a student in the field. And I think, once we're able to kind of shift past some of that and kind of make those connections for people that DEI isn't the only topic that people want to talk about, if they identify as one of those underrepresented groups, will will hopefully be kind of a step that's necessary for us to get to the next stage of being able to actually support everyone in a way that is helpful for their unique journey within the wildlife profession.”

Challenges

When it came to challenges, all participants stated that funding was an issue on many different levels. Participants spoke directly to the difficulty of finding enough funding to spend an adequate amount of time relationship building or with funding not lasting long enough to effectively train community members to take over or continue the project, a huge barrier to sustained engagement in community conservation. Multiple participants spoke to the difficulty of applying for grants; many groups doing EJ work who might benefit from these grants, do not have the expertise or resources to successfully apply and receive these grants.

All of the smaller organizations spoke to the challenge of not being a certified non-profit. It becomes a catch-22, as it requires time, money, and knowledge to become a non-profit, but many smaller organizations working to become a non-profit do not have many resources, making the process to become a non-profit even more difficult. This is a huge accessibility barrier to EJ work in conservation.

Other challenges noted were around building trust in new communities and working with organizations who might have conflicting goals. One participant specifically mentioned the struggle of not being from the community that they are working with and notes the importance of understanding the unique nature of each community when you work with them.

<p>Funding</p>	<p><i>“We need funding. Because one of the like, in environmental, with environmental issues, the only when you can get things done a lot of times if you sue, and we don't have money to hire a lawyer, so we're constantly like looking for like pro bono, and like a lot of what we do requires like legal help or legal aid. If we had funding to hire a lawyer, I have a feeling that we could like actually win some of the cases that we're investigating. We also need funding because we are a young nonprofit, we don't pay anyone to run the non-profit. It's just a bunch of volunteers.</i></p>
	<p><i>“We haven't done as much evaluation as we would have liked, in part, just because of funding.”</i></p>
	<p><i>“The funding structure, just generally and, you know, in our country, I guess like, yes, it's really hard for people, I think, to do some of this, like pre work that's so critical, like the relationship building before jumping in. I think, sometimes, you know, people like, well, we don't have funding to do that work. And that's where you get to scramble too. I mean, we've kind of had that because of being a large organization, we've had a little bit of a cushion to say, like, like, we need to do this first. And we've sort of managed to make that work. But I can also see where there are times when that's really hard. I think funders are more and more recognizing the importance of it, but I still think a huge barrier.”</i></p>
	<p><i>Funding is definitely like an obvious (challenge) that we would need...and big conversations we've had in various, like conferences with other groups, it's like, the funding has to be can only be for one year? Or unless it's, you know, a lot of a lot of funding is like, one or two years, but with planning with implementing with like, outreach for especially for like, some big projects, like, at least on the city level, you know, two years is not enough. If you have I think a project is ready to go maybe one or two years is doable, because it's shovel ready, you put it in, but then like, you have to think about who's going to maintain it? Where's your workforce development happening? Are you training any of these community members to continue and have certification or moving up in that workforce in that career and not just like, like helping them put in a tree; there needs to be like a long term planning. So is there resources expertise that can be provided to the community, or at least funding that will help community members get training to help them build out?</i></p>
<p>Not being a certified non-profit</p>	<p><i>“(Being a non-profit) gives their organization credibility to apply for certain things because if you don't have a 501c3, nobody cares. Nobody is going to give you free anything. Nobody is going to send you backpacks and trekking poles and camping gear, because they can't write it off.”</i></p>

	<i>“Because we are a young nonprofit, we don't pay anyone to run the non-profit. It's just a bunch of volunteers.”</i>
Community dynamics	<i>“Being not from the community is something that is a problem like, or, you know, because it's like, things run so differently in any community that you enter, and like, trust and honesty and respect is like such a big part of how things run in Watts.”</i>
	<i>“We also like coordinate with other environmental groups, like there is one group that's called Watts clean air and energy, and they work on getting Eevee charters in the community as well as like air pollution issues. We have trouble organizing them because they don't really like us. Like, the, the, what I'm saying is that one of the problems and oh, I should have said this. So one of the problems that we face, like as the Better Watts Initiative is like, we're all young people. And like, a lot of the people in the community have bad blood going back like 30 years. And like, they just don't like us because they don't like the founder of our org, or they don't like one thing that we did, and then we have to redo like, you know, I mean, it's just like, very difficult.”</i>
	<i>“Like there are other organizations in the neighborhood that don't trust us, like, something that Watts, they are a lot of competing interests, a lot of like, racial and ethnic, I guess you could say, like wars or competing interests, like, for example, there are organizations in the community that serve like largely Latino groups, and then community organizations that serve like the black population. And like the Better Watson Initiative was founded out of an organization that is largely black -are thought of as black even though it's not majority black. So like a lot of people in like different ethnic groups don't always trust the organization, it's like a weird dynamic but like it makes sense for like the community contexts like yeah, just how things are, like things are divided block by block, gang line by gang line.</i>

DEIA Work Internally within Organizations

When it comes to DEIA work happening within the organizations themselves, many participants spoke the importance of building EJ and DEIA work into the vision, mission statement, goals, and strategy of the organization, as well as each team. The larger non-profits spoke to the evolution of their organization as they began to center communities and EJ principles in their work. They began moving toward more community-based, grassroots work, which meant a wider range of roles among the members of their organization and more members working on a community level.

They spoke to the importance of being led by more diverse groups of people with different lived experiences, ensuring that members of historically marginalized groups have both a voice and decision-making power. They also discussed making sure that the workplace allows members to be authentic in how they show up to work and creates a safe environment that honors different ways of knowing, learning, and being. In a similar vein, they discussed the importance of capacity-building, both in areas like leadership trainings and in becoming more skilled in actively applying DEIA work.

<p>Capacity-building (specifically around DEIA work internally)</p>	<p><i>“Some of the big things we’re trying to accomplish through some of these partnerships...so like I mentioned, the leadership piece, trying to identify ways to be those types of positions, kind of demystifying that process and making them more accessible to a wider range of people. But also making sure that there’s some structure in place so that people can get there and feel like they belong in those positions, or at least feel like they have the ability to be successful. That kind of in tandem with that thinking about professional development, programming, and how we can better serve more than just kind of the traditional group of people that go through those programs. So how can we partner with organizations or identify ways to connect with people at a younger age, or before they even get to the college level to kind of think about thinking about how to engage and expose them to the different opportunities that are available, but also kind of connect them with the representation piece, but also opportunities for like hands on experience and mentorship.”</i></p>
	<p><i>“We’re also prioritizing for this fiscal year working with a consultant. So we can kind of have that, that outside perspective to get a better perception of where we are now, what we’re able to do kind of with our current capacity, and what kind of where we should prioritize our efforts and things like that.”</i></p>
	<p><i>“That was the whole point of our training consultant that we had hired, training on an ethical interview, it’s like, how do you like, honor them? I guess that’s yeah, building that trust and like being trustworthy.”</i></p>
<p>Importance of Integrating DEIA work into the</p>	<p><i>“Communicating diversity, equity inclusion in a way that’s impactful...you understand that it’s something that needs to be done, but</i></p>

<p>organization itself, not just the work it does.</p>	<p><i>maybe don't understand that it is very much tied to the work collectively rather than a separate issue from it."</i></p>
	<p><i>"I'm working with five other biological societies right now. And we're focusing in on kind of this idea of the the lack of leadership pathways for more diverse individuals, and the support structures that are necessary in order for those people to be successful, but also equipping our current leaders with a more inclusive mindset. So they're able to understand what changes need to be made now to allow for us to have our inclusive leadership moving forward.</i></p>
	<p><i>" I think part of that comes from what I was just mentioning, in terms of the, the transparency piece being an organization that garners like trust, and a sense of belonging from its members, because regardless of what we're doing, if people are not really connecting with it, or it's not kind of changing their feelings about engaging with the organization, it's not really going to be worthwhile at that point. So kind of changing overall, just the the general environment of the organization, whether that's for staff members leadership, that at every point, wanting it to be a place where people have a sense of belonging, but also dignity and respect and engaging in their professional society. So really kind of centering that at the work we're doing rather than kind of only focusing on the quote unquote, science that we're trying to support."</i></p>
	<p><i>"We recently hired someone from the Mashpee (Wampanoag tribe) and he's been brought on as a consultant for a lot of the work that we do. And so that's kind of one step for us. But we're hoping that for some of the other work that we do, especially for like dam removal, then we have a Native perspective on on our, our language and our messaging as well. So, okay, we're growing a lot of our community engagement."</i></p>
<p>Importance of tracking data and evaluation</p>	<p><i>"That's why we create these surveys every year. But we track data every year and see if we're pushing the needle or not, how are we going to figure out how to make it better. So that data is being collected all throughout the program. And then also, through my school partnership program, I'm also looking at demographics to make sure that we are a collection of the community as well."</i></p>

	<i>“We're constantly evaluating and making sure we are being inclusive in our programming.”</i>
Access to Services	<i>And then one of the other big pieces is kind of thinking about how are we delivering services? And how are we kind of thinking about, in kind of the - based on the last couple of years making sure that we're not just reverting back to what we were doing pre pandemic, so kind of taking all that information into account. And we're trying to think about things like virtual conferences, are those things that we need to be more commonplace? Do we need to think about hybrid models that are going to be more impactful? Do we need to kind of break down the idea of having these big annual conferences that only allow some people to participate? Do we need to do more like localized events to so that we can actually impact people where they are without having to endure the costs and it's sometimes the the physical and health considerations that go into attending these conferences, so kind of remodeling that structure is one of the other big projects we're trying to work on at this point.</i>

Partnership Possibilities and Opportunities for Collaboration

What could a partnership look like? The participants gave many examples of current collaborations and also specific ideas around what a partnership with the NWF could look like:

How a larger non-profit can fit into community conservation	<i>“We collaborate with a lot of community groups and local residents and so some of them will reach out to us asking for guidance on what environmental impacts there are and what should we advocate for and then some of the more kind of like organized communities have their own advocacy group and we collaborate with them. And so we both kind of, they obviously have a lot more knowledge about their local neighborhood. And then we can bring some of the technical resources or like advocacy resources. And that's how we collaborate on some of those projects.”</i>
	<i>“What are the organizations already doing? And where can our work potentially help uplift work that's already happening or connect dots among local organizations or local community members that are already doing work where we can sort of help to, you know, just provide some additional support.”</i>

	<p><i>“We also do a lot of our work focusing on different developments happening in the watershed and making sure that developments are complying with different federal regulations as it relates to water quality, but also making sure that their outreach and their solutions are equitable.”</i></p>
<p>Collaborating to build knowledge and connection to nature with their communities, especially with building access to nature by making people feel safe:</p>	<p><i>“So for me, it would be really nice to get people to come out and do an educational clinic for us...so for instance, we have the fourteeners-Colorado has 14 (thousand) foot peaks that you could climb and we had the gentleman come out and do an educational class on how to climb, how to prepare yourself for a fourteener. And we need the same thing for wildlife and conservation. Hey, can you come and educate? We need a representative to come out or we can host a zoom and say, Hey, we're going to host a wildlife conservation education course and it's two weeks. It's three weeks. It's one day.”</i></p> <p><i>“Another thing is that my program, my Adventure Club, Black Girls Hike has a 12 month adventure fitness program specifically for black women to help lose weight. And one of the things that we've noticed is that black women have a fear of getting into the outdoors. And so my adventure guides and my program leaders actually have a video that we send out every month to say, Hey, ladies, we're just checking in, we want to prepare you, here's how you pack your bag. And so if we could get a three to five minute video to say, “Hi, ladies, we're so excited to work with you. Let's just give you three, three tips to help you with conservation or, you know, three tips dealing with the wildlife.” And then we can have that and then send it every single time we have a new cohort, we can send it okay. And it's just not. And it builds credibility, it builds access that we could have all the time. You know what I mean? Like we could be like, Hey, this is from the National Federation, Wildlife Federation, you know?”</i></p>

Pollinator gardens and native plants	<p><i>“I was asking Kate (works for the NWF currently) for resources, because we do have schools that don't have the money to like actually build the pollinator space. And since we are a low budget section of the zoo, because we don't want to charge anything. It's actually just like getting the, let's say, the boxes for a pollinator space. Or let's say, like, the wood for the bee boxes. Because as this program grows, our zoo's probably not going to have the capacity to support that, because right now, like- If one of our schools wants to recover their pond area and so what we were like, okay, let's do this. So we invited our water quality specialist. And she scoped out the ponds, she saw what plants needed, what we need to start to do to restore it. And so what the school is going to do is come to the zoo, come to our Texas wetlands area, pick out their own plants, she's gonna give them the micro invertebrates to put in that pond. And then we're gonna go to the school and plant that pond area, and they're going to be so proud because they got these plants from the Houston Zoo, they got these macroinvertebrates they're gonna track it, and it's gonna be so fun. But in the future, I'm like, okay, so if I have, let's say, 30 classrooms who wants to do the same project? How am I gonna get that many plants? Yes, we do have an overgrowth of Texas wetlands or pollinator plants or things like that. But as this program expands, how will I get that part?...but I asked Kate like for grant information if schools are willing to go that route...so it's like information like that, or support of how to help out a little bit with the pollinator spaces. Yeah. Also, like, y'all are experts in your field, even bringing y'all to the classroom.”</i></p>
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	<p><i>“So there's a part of our river that somehow not a lot of people know about, but it's part of Boston, and it's a nice green space is called Herder Park, and Alstead Briton?. It's pretty long, it's pretty big. It has a lot of green space there actually. DCR owns it. And they're planning, they have like a new master plan on how they want to like we organize the whole thing where to add more green space and trees, but there is a very big community garden that's been there since like 1970 something, okay. And Alstead Brighton is a very diverse neighborhood. It's like, lower income. There's a lot of renters there too. But a lot of diverse like, there. There's like, five, six dominant languages being spoken. And so it's very unique. And a lot of them use the community gardens. And there's also a pollinator garden. And just this week, I was in conversation with pollinator network, I think. And they were, they're thinking about ways to collaborate with us and seeing how, because it's right by the river, they want to bring some of the youth groups that participate in their after school program, and how to connect that with the pollinator garden and then kind of connected with the river in green space and all of that. So there are a lot of Yeah, and they're hoping to build more pollinator gardens in Boston, but I'm not sure. I think they have to look for funding.”</i></p>
<p>One participant talked about the role she holds in coalition-building and integrating organizations that serve the community outside of the environmental sector</p>	<p><i>“The role is kind of to connect with those towns and city staff to think about different policy changes and solutions to build climate resiliency at the local, local, so that, like, how can we make your tree ordinances stronger, your wetlands ordinance stronger? How do you implement a stormwater utility fee, so that you can pay to fix your roads and stormwater management and as well as to kind of connect with non traditional environmental partners on our end, at least because a lot of the work that we've done in the past, you know, collaborates with other environmental based organizations. But when we think about climate resiliency, you have to think about who's being most affected, and who's being, you know, who's on the frontline doing the work. And so right now, it's a big push for us to connect with different community groups.”</i></p>
<p>Being mindful of how to center EJ work at all levels of projects and partnerships</p>	<p><i>“White people who like have organizations and they're like, they've been funded, like multiple times, you know. And so part of like, one of the things that we're trying to figure out for our organizations for our environmental justice work is like, who are we collaborating with on our funding? Like we're, we have resources, and we have connections to different parts, different funding agencies, but who are we actually collaborating with, to do those projects and to do that with and who are we getting our resources from -Who are we hiring as consultants? Are</i></p>

	<i>there women led or bipoc led groups? So I think it's kind of like spreading the wealth in that way.”</i>
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Acknowledging Different Forms of Knowledge and Storytelling

“Part of our watershed in the past, I'm not sure if you're familiar with, we have what we call a natural Valley storage area. And it's just this network of wetlands that are late. I think she was our Executive Director, like very early on in our organization, the Army Corps of Engineers was figuring out a plan to manage flood for the area. And they wanted to think they wanted to be able to build a dam is what they wanted to do to manage flooding. And then she had gone out and met with them. And this is someone who, you know, she grew up in your 30s or 40s. So she like only has a high school education. But it's like a super local grassroot kind of person. And she went to meet with the army of engineers and basically showed them an example of like, she had like two cups with water. And then she's like, so you want to build a dam and then she like puts a rock in one of the water like floods, so she's like, this is what you're gonna do to it. Instead, if you preserve all the wetlands, which act like a sponge, and she puts a sponge in a cup, and it absorbs all the water, like this is how you're going to measure blood. So there's actually a network of like, I'm gonna say the number wrong like 80,000 I can't remember but it's like right smack dab kind of in the middle of our watershed that they're all preserved wetland area.”

Speaking to the Themes & Recommendations

Some specific questions were asked by both interview participants and National Wildlife Federation Staff for this report to and will be answered here:

1. Is more on-the-ground support needed? While being face-to-face often makes interactions easier, it will depend on the resources, needs, and preferences of individual communities. More localized support will be helpful for building personal connections and relationships with community members. Some communities will not need such in-depth interactions, while others will benefit greatly from more on-the-ground support, due access to technology (such as with rural or low-income communities), knowledge around a project, or differing cultural values around relationships and interactions. However, many of the participants spoke to the positive outcomes of in-person interactions and said that it was easier to build new relationships in person. They also spoke to the challenges of relationship-building during COVID when everything was moved online.
2. What are the needs around community-driven conservation? The biggest takeaway around addressing needs in community-driven conservation is to make sure that the members of the community you are trying to work with have a seat at the table. This means identifying community collaborators who will have an interest in your project, learning how to best engage them, and understanding the dynamics of the community

(What tensions exist between certain groups or organizations? Who has a relationship already built with who and how does the relationship work?). This allows community members to be directly involved in the decision-making process around a project and is helpful to an organization who wants to implement a project in a certain community because community members have special knowledge of their area that will influence the success of a project and because community members often have the power to stop or undermine a project if they do not agree with it.

While each community is unique and engagement techniques will differ for each community, the best practices below provide a checklist to consider when building a relationship with a community. While the best practices below provide quick takeaways into addressing the needs of community-driven conservation, the literature review and results section of the report delves into this topic more deeply. Resources for further study are located at the end of this report.

3. How can a large nonprofit like NWF best work in community and support communities? Are there broader guidelines or themes that emerged for the best role for the NWF to play in communities? The answer again is (surprise!) that it is based on the individual community and their needs. Several of our participants discussed how their large non-profits are working to support local organizations by allowing them to take the lead, basing projects on community demand and fostering effective autonomy among community members for the continued success of a project. Many participants pointed to the leverage points that established organizations already have access to, like the ability to spread resources, build capacity and/or provide a platform to spread information, gain exposure, or network, depending on the support that each community needs. A key theme that emerged was really to listen first to the community and let them tell you. Another was to partner with non-traditional organizations to meet the needs of communities.

One of the most powerful actions a large non-profit can take to support communities is to work to align their missions, visions, and project work to DEIA efforts and work towards inspiring a sense of belonging for people from diverse backgrounds, especially those who are not currently being represented. While many organizations understand the importance of DEIA work, unless they are taking action internally (i.e. hiring a diverse workforce at all levels of the organization, looking at dismantling colonialistic systems through which their organization is run, increasing access to resources on their platforms), it will be hard for them to equitably support communities effectively.

Key Takeaways

In addition to answering these specific questions, there are some key takeaways to the research.

-Trust and relationship building were noted as being integral to effectively engaging with communities, especially when working with communities who have been historically ignored

and misrepresented. Many of the participants cited just showing up consistently and actively listening as the two main steps to really building trust. It was also noted that it can take a very long time to build trust (up to a year) before some communities will really open up to working with an unfamiliar organization. When considering project funding and budgeting, the time and effort that it takes to connect with the community and become familiar with them is often not included. However, this step is necessary for true community-based projects to successfully take place. When creating a project plan, a timeline and budget for relationship-building with the community and funding should be included. “Trust-by-association” was mentioned by several participants as a way to build trust a bit more quickly among community members; partnering with organizations in the community that are already trusted builds trust by affiliation. This can be especially helpful in tight-knit communities.

-When thinking about partnering with local communities, choosing organizations that fall outside traditional environmental organizations is something all interviewees mentioned as being central to their EJ work. They all discussed the intersection between environmental and social wellbeing. Some of them discussed how many environmental issues are social issues, even when they are not noted as such, like air quality or access to green spaces in a neighborhood. When issues are only mentioned from an environmental lens, people are less likely to act, not out of a lack of concern, but due to other daily life concerns taking precedence, like work expectations or caring for their children. Interviewees mentioned partnering with organizations that serve the community with issues such as health or energy equity, to help highlight the connection between conservation efforts and human welfare.

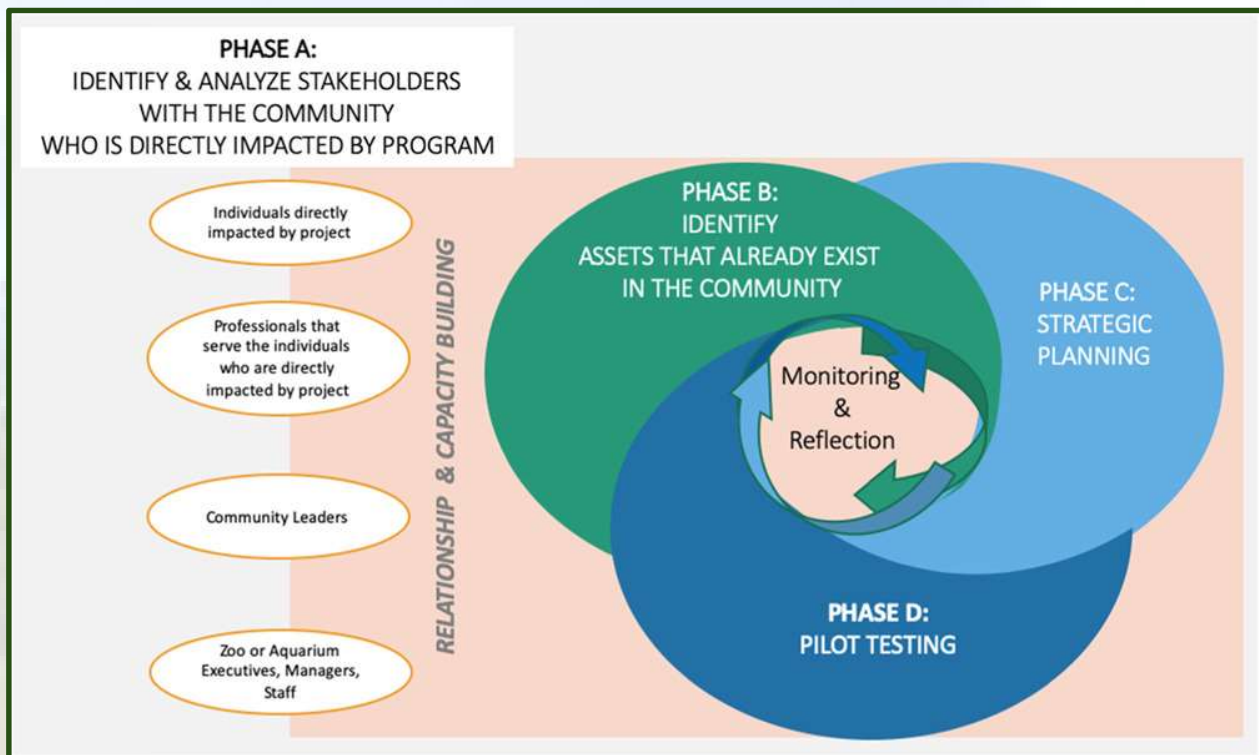
-All interviewees talked about the different methods of outreach that they used to reach community members and stressed the importance of being flexible in order to meet the community where they are at; for example, going to a meeting that’s already being held instead of creating a new meeting for people to attend. Having several modes of reaching different groups, maybe in-person, via mail, via zoom, etc, as well as multiple languages increases accessibility. Looking for ways to make it as easy as possible for the community to give their input and be involved centers the community in project work instead of leaving them on the side. Organizations that serve the community will have insights around the best ways to reach community members in their specific area, which is another reason that partnering with them is beneficial.

-Many interviewees discussed how organizations, especially smaller grassroots organizations, can share resources and knowledge when partnering, as there is usually some financial stress around being a small organization. They suggested that sharing non-monetary resources, like meeting spaces, expertise, or time, is a way to grow a reciprocal relationship that is beneficial to both parties, allowing them to grow while being supported. Many participants mentioned the possibility of using materials made by the NWF to support equity and inclusion in nature within their communities. One participant discussed the fear of nature that many women, BIPOC women specifically, feel, which is a huge hurdle for getting them outdoors for their own mental and physical wellbeing. She suggested a video about tips for safety in nature or having a member from a regional NWF office come to talk and/or give an environmental education workshop.

A large non-profit like the NWF can support smaller organizations by providing them with grant opportunity information and assistance with grant writing, as well as assistance becoming a 501c3. One of the major challenges spoken to in the research was around the difficulty that smaller organizations, especially those who do not have a background in conservation or experience with finding funding in general, and grant writing specifically, have in successfully receiving funding. A small organization who is not yet certified as a non-profit might have a fantastic project, but does not have the skills or expertise to write a winning grant proposal. Increasing access to funding is integral to centering EJ work and larger non-profits can use their experience and resources to help close that gap.

In addition to resources and expertise, the NWF could also provide a platform for smaller organizations involved in EJ work to reach a larger audience; this increases access both to community members who would be interested in joining their organization and/or their organization’s activities and opportunities for funding and collaboration for them.

The Five Principles of Sustained Engagement are part of a larger model for effectively codesigning projects with community members (shown below). A large emphasis is placed on correctly identifying and engaging collaborators (previously known as stakeholders) during phase A. As the participants discussed, building trust and relationships before trying to create a program is really important for ensuring that community members support the project, can lend useful knowledge to the project, and will benefit from the project.



Codesigning Conservation for Sustained Engagement Model, Cranston (2022), adapted from Driskell (2002) and Burns et al. (2012).

When engaging with communities that have been historically marginalized, it is important to make sure that they are actively involved in collaboration; that they have a voice and a place in decision making, especially when projects affect them and their communities. Trust and relationship building are priorities. This means that a community-based project done equitably will have a longer timeline than traditionally given; budgets and grant applications should consider this and integrate extra time and resources for building a strong foundation with the community.

Best Practices:

From the research, I have compiled a list of best practices around building authentic relationships both with local organizations and community members (because they are closely interconnected and often one and the same- the organization is part of the community, and the organization is made up of community members.) Once communities have been identified as marginalized in some way (and this is not necessarily how they would identify themselves), they are often seen as needy or lacking; however, these communities have been surviving, thriving and dealing with their own issues despite racism, sexism, homophobia, ableism, etc. for decades. Not treating them as equals and partners perpetuates inequalities and ruins the authenticity of the relationship, because each side is not able to show up as their full selves. Because of this, this list does not separate historically marginalized groups into a specific group or special category. This is not to ignore the injustices that have been perpetuated against many groups in this country for years; it is to give communities the opportunity to show up as they want to and to make their own decisions about how they identify.

1. Listen.
2. Who is the messenger? Audiences will respond differently to different messengers; does your messenger make sense for your audience? Will they be able to identify and connect with each other?
3. Build relationships with trusted community leaders and include them in project plans and conversations.
4. Build trust first.
5. Sustained feedback, follow up and engagement
6. Importance of capacity building and networking.
7. Treating community members as experts; community members own their own data
8. Providing compensation for their time and expertise (not always monetary, can be through resource access, information diffusion platforms, knowledge and expertise sharing, etc- but should be wanted/needed by the recipient)

9. Increasing accessibility and removing barriers to communication and participation (i.e. providing scholarships, support, multiple language resources, multiple avenues for communication based on what works best for each community)
10. Authentic communication during outreach; this is going to require internal capacity-building, awareness around mindsets and active reflection on biases, and consistent personal and organizational trainings and practices around topics such as conflict resolution, sensitivity, crucial conversations, cultural competency, etc.
11. Importance of evaluation and continual assessment within a program.
12. Transparency.
13. Each community is unique!
14. The community should lead.

Moving forward

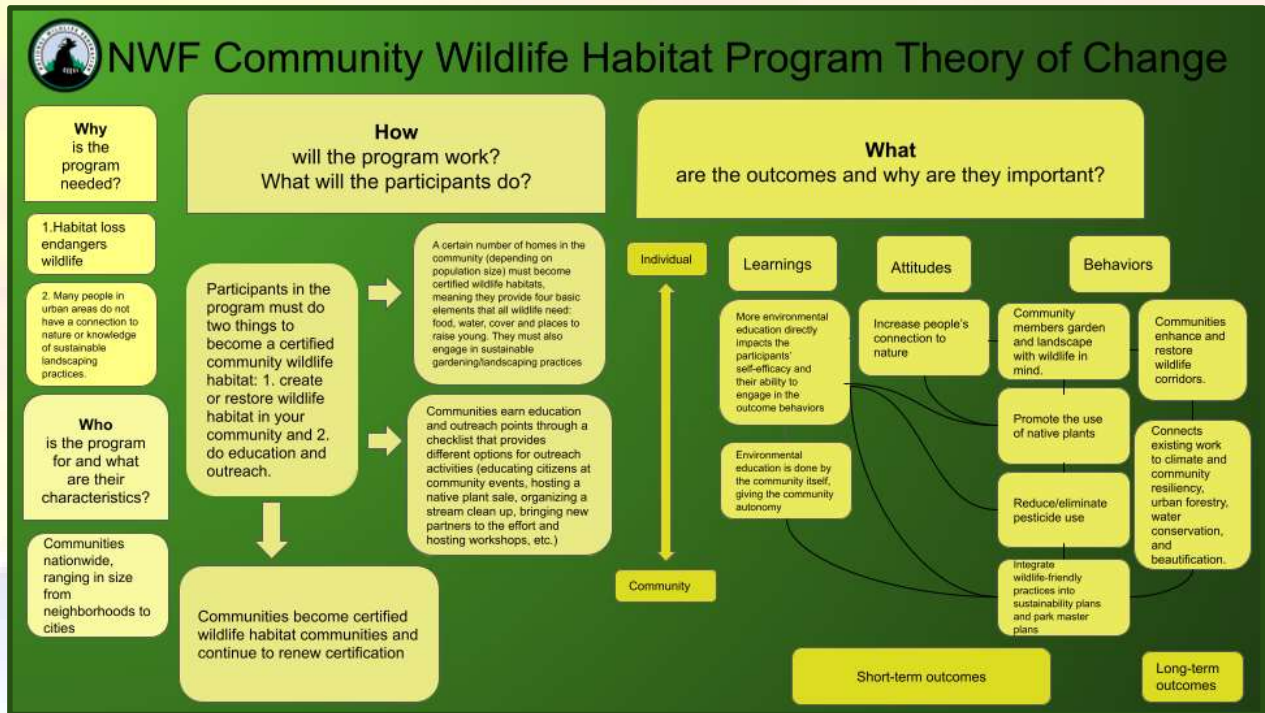
Following up with the organizations that were interviewed- Continuing to build the relationship and explore deeper partnership opportunities will be key in the equitable application of this research. Some of the organizations listed [actionable ways](#) in which the NWF could help them (like making blog posts to highlight their work). In keeping with the research around building partnerships with historically marginalized organizations, one of the ways to provide adequate compensation for their time and effort would be to listen to what they have specifically stated as their needs and engage in a mutually beneficial, reciprocal relationship to build trust and decolonialize traditional research tendencies of soliciting information without compensation, as well as not providing feedback or continuing engagement (as some of our participants spoke to).

For many of the suggestions given by participants, there is an overlap in the goals for the Community Habitat Team's programs and the organization's goals and looking for this overlap is going to be really helpful with building reciprocal partnerships. For example, the Houston Zoo Schools Outreach Program is already partnering with schools who have done pollinator gardens or re-scaped an area using native plants. The Community Partnerships Team could partner with the Houston Zoo further as they expand their school program; there might be an opportunity for the school to become a Certified Wildlife Habitat and NWF could help with native plants acquisition or expertise around pollinator gardens. This would build trust with the community and this ongoing relationship opens the possibility of Community Habitat Certifications or more native plant sales. There is an additional opportunity to increase the children's understanding of conservation jobs and who can be a conservationist, really centering EJ work in this partnership.

Evaluation

Another key component in continuing to EJ work in programming is evaluation, both internally and externally. Defining what each concept means as explicitly as possible is a necessary first step, i.e. What does diversity mean to the team?, What does centering EJ communities mean to our programs?. Often, terms like “diversity”, “low-income” and “need” get conflated when referring to community outreach; identifying a community based on need, race, income level, or climate change vulnerability, while related, is very different. Sometimes, one word is used as an indirect reference to something else (diversity = race) or could mean many things, like “urban”. Being very clear and specific about what each word means when engaging in EJ work ensures that there is no confusion around goals, increasing the ability to choose attainable goals and to meet the goals. Having a baseline around where each program is at and a clear connection between program inputs and program goals, with EJ work being explicitly stated in the vision will help give a clearer picture of gaps and leverage points in the program as it evolves. Logic models and Theory of Change models will help in giving a visual overview of this.





Using data that the team has already collected and exploring how to use that information to inform programming would also be useful. For example, the Community Wildlife Habitat Program already has lots of data around community type, population size and location. This information could be used to begin categorizing communities and recording specific needs for comparison, or formulating evaluation questions (How do rural, suburban, and urban communities differ in their program needs or interactions with the program?).

Continuing Outreach and Relationship-Building with New Organizations

In addition to the organizations that I interviewed, I [compiled a list of organizations](#) that I reached out to, with contact information, with the hope that they might be open to future contact/collaboration. As many participants suggested, using existing connections with organizations to find new connections would also be very helpful. Another approach would be to identify a specific community that the Community Partnerships Team wants to work with and begin building relationships by going to events being hosted by community members and organizations.

Applying best practices to the stages of building community partnerships- 1.

Identifying collaborators 2. Outreach 3. Relationship building (could take up to a year) 4. Identifying community assets and goals (focus groups, surveys, research, through many different, diverse channels). 5. Program planning 6. Cycling through previous steps; reassessing and adjusting.

Exploring non-traditional partnerships- Continue to explore partnerships with organizations that bridge the gap between environmental and social issues.

Resources

As the Community Partnerships team moves forward, here are some resources to help continue engaging in DEIA and EJ work, as well as community conservation:

[Five psychological principles of codesigning conservation with \(not for\) communities - Cranston - Zoo Biology - Wiley Online Library](#)

[11 Lessons We've Learned as Equity, Inclusion, and Diversity Consultants in the Outdoor, Conservation, and Environmental Sector | Blue Sky Funders Forum](#)

[Participatory Asset Mapping Toolkit](#)

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/1747016117733296>

[Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Racial Justice Resources for Nonprofits - River Network](#)

[Resources For Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Justice \(DEIJ\) – The Ecological Society of America](#)

[8 Ways Environmental Organizations Can Support the Movement for Environmental Justice](#)

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