

The River's Journey

**A Community Engagement Toolkit
for River Restoration and
Dam Removal Projects
in the Appalachians**



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Disclaimer: This document is intended as general guidance to support community engagement efforts associated with dam removal projects. It is not a substitute for project-specific planning, legal requirements, regulatory obligations or professional judgment. Community engagement approaches should be tailored to local contexts, community needs, and applicable laws and policies. The Nature Conservancy (TNC) does not guarantee any particular outcome from the use of this guidance.

Acknowledgements

The River's Journey was developed to support conservation practitioners and partners working toward The Nature Conservancy's Reconnecting Appalachian Rivers Initiative. Considered a focal landscape of global importance, the rivers of the Appalachian region are home to more than half of all North American freshwater species. TNC is focused on harnessing the power of experience, partnerships and collective resources to free rivers and safeguard communities. This guide and associated resources are influenced by The Nature Conservancy's Human Rights Policy and Core Value of Respect for People, Communities and Culture.

The authors of this guide are indebted to the Indigenous peoples and local communities who have cared for and sustained our earth's river systems since time immemorial and for those whose continued care and stewardship are essential to clean and connected rivers.

Version 1.0: Edited and curated by Ally Snell.

Core writing team: Ally Snell, Sarah Madronal, and Katie Kennedy

Key Contributors: Marcela Maldonado, Emily Hadzopulos, Benjamin Wegleitner, Fred Wills, Brenda Gail Bergman, Charles DeCurtis, Marea Gabriel, Beth Styler Barry, and Molly Payne Wynne

Overview and Context

Reconnected Appalachian Rivers

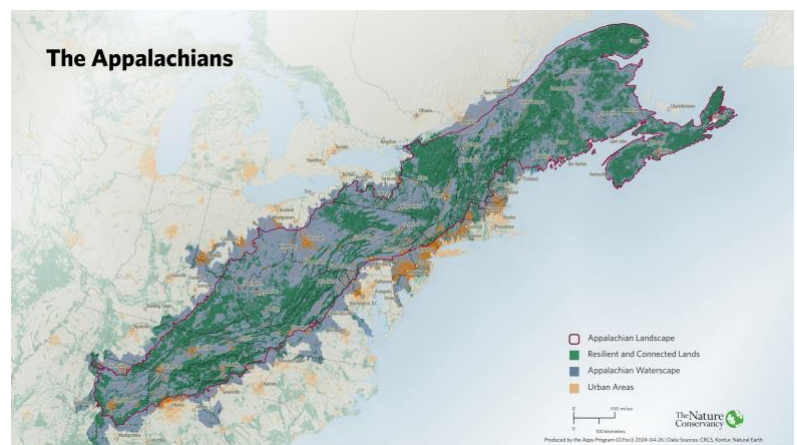
In the United States, nearly every river system is impounded, altered or regulated by a dam or other barrier, with fewer than 1 percent of river miles remaining fully connected from headwaters to mouth. This fragmentation prevents fish and other aquatic species from accessing critical habitat, degrades water quality, alters sediment and flow regimes, and can increase downstream flood risks. As a result, freshwater biodiversity has declined nationwide. Fish abundance has dropped by more than 50 percent in many river systems, nearly 40 percent of U.S. fish species are imperiled, and roughly two-thirds of freshwater mussel species are at risk of extinction. In the Appalachian region, rivers support nearly half of all aquatic species in the United States and Canada, making these declines even more consequential.

Many barriers across the Appalachians are aging and no longer serving their original purpose, and with the intensifying effects of climate change, they pose growing risks to both communities and ecosystems. At the same time, dams and other barriers are often deeply embedded in the cultural, economic and historical fabric of communities, and perspectives on their future can vary widely. Decisions about whether to maintain, modify or remove a barrier therefore require careful consideration of ecological, social and economic tradeoffs. This creates an opportunity to evaluate the future of aging infrastructure in ways that reflect both community priorities and ecosystem needs.

The Nature Conservancy (TNC), along with many local partners, is committed to protecting the globally significant landscape of the Appalachians and supporting efforts to restore the health and function of its rivers while enhancing community safety and resilience. This toolkit is designed to help practitioners engage thoughtfully and effectively with communities, dam owners and local organizations to explore options, navigate tradeoffs and advance solutions that benefit both people and nature.

Define the Appalachian Region

The Appalachians is one of the most climate-resilient, biologically diverse and carbon-rich landscapes in the world. This ancient chain of forested mountains, valleys, wetlands and rivers nurtures a rich variety of wildlife, cultures and communities. With 198 million acres spanning the continent from Alabama to the Canadian Maritime Provinces, the Appalachians is a critical 2,000-mile pathway of climate resilient lands and waters that store nearly a quarter of the forest carbon in the contiguous United States.



Who Is This Toolkit For?

This toolkit was developed for river-restoration practitioners and local organizations working to accelerate river reconnection and restoration projects in the Appalachians region of the United States as part of the [Reconnected Appalachian Rivers initiative](#), which seeks to safeguard the health of freshwater ecosystems in the Appalachians by reconnecting rivers, protecting and restoring floodplains, and addressing the impacts of aging infrastructure and flooding on human communities. As TNC and partners work across the Appalachian region to address aging dams contributing to biodiversity loss and impacting the health and public safety of countless communities, this toolkit represents a curation of theory, practices and resources to serve as a roadmap for planning and carrying out intentional and effective community engagement in nuanced and complex river restoration projects where barrier removal is a potential outcome. Whether you are a new practitioner or a seasoned one who is new to an area and wants to engage in a community around river restoration, this toolkit provides tools, templates and real-world insights to help you build trust, learn alongside communities, and design engagement and communications strategies that support informed decision-making and successful project outcomes that benefit both people and nature.

North America Principles of Equitable Conservation – The Nature Conservancy’s Values in Practice

The four Principles of Community Engagement in this guide are directly influenced by the broader Principles for Equitable Conservation—a set of six guiding principles for all of TNC’s conservation work in the United States. The intention of these principles is to challenge existing mental models on what conversation looks like in practice and to introduce human-centered approaches to how and why we work. The inclusion of these principles in this guide provides us with a starting place and a shared understanding that when we strive toward ambitious conservation goals such as river restoration projects, we need to take the time and care to cultivate meaningful relationships, accept that there are fundamental

Ground conservation in Human Rights. *Conservation is inseparable from the rights and dignity of people*

Know the local lived histories and context of where we work. *Understanding local histories is essential to avoid repeating harm and to build authentic partnerships.*

Approach conservation with Humility, Openness and Respect. *We must continually examine our assumptions and biases to be effective and respectful partners.*

Nurture relationships for impactful conservation. Long-term, reciprocal relationships are more impactful than transactional ones.

Acknowledge, share and balance power and benefits. We must acknowledge and strive to rebalance power in our partnerships.

Cultivate creativity and embrace risks. Embracing creativity and learning from failure is essential for transformative change.

tensions in the way conservation operates, and move at the speed of trust.

Part 1: Developing Your Community Engagement Strategy

Getting Your Strategies Straight: Understanding the Differences Between Community Engagement, Outreach and Public Relations

It is important when planning community engagement not to conflate it with outreach and public relations (PR). Outreach and public relations primarily focus on communicating information or messages to identified audiences, while community engagement creates opportunities for two-way dialogue and community knowledge, values and input to inform the project. River restoration and dam removal projects will likely employ all these strategies at some point throughout the life of the project. The extent of community influence and co-design will vary by project and stage—see the [Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership](#) for a deeper look into building pathways for community participation to ownership. Practitioners should be transparent about what aspects of a project have already been decided and what constraints exist, as well as what aspects remain open to influence, input and ownership.

Core Concepts:

Community Engagement is a collaborative approach that actively brings communities into conservation work through meaningful partnerships and relationship-building. The practice of community engagement emphasizes deep listening, co-creation and opportunities for sustained involvement beyond any one project. In a community engagement practice, practitioners acknowledge power and positionality and focus on cultivating reciprocal, two-way relationships that foster trust, collaboration and shared decision-making. In a river restoration project, community engagement is the deep work conducted before, during and oftentimes long after consensus points and project milestones are met. Your community engagement strategy will evolve and adapt to changing dynamics and the inclusion of new parties throughout the life of a project, but it always remains essential to maintain trusting relationships and ensure that communities have meaningful opportunities to participate at a level appropriate to the decisions that remain open to influence.

Outreach is a direct communications approach that often focuses primarily on informing, providing resources and/or information, and building a shared understanding of an issue. Outreach is an essential function of any project and follows an approach that tailors messaging into segments and audiences. An outreach practice focuses on proactively reaching identified audiences with information, resources, invitations or opportunities to participate. Throughout any river restoration project, an outreach strategy will be an essential component of delivering information and building awareness with a variety of audiences. This guide will outline ways to craft an outreach strategy, through events, engagements and touchpoints that allow for meaningful community engagement and participation.

Public Relations is the practice of maintaining or improving the reputation of an organization, individual or company reputation to the public through strategic communications and relationship development. A public relations practice focuses on the communications and outreach strategy that helps to earn public acceptance and approval. Projects may use public relations strategies to communicate clearly during periods of heightened public attention, controversy or conflict, while managing organizational and project reputation.

As practitioners, it is essential to understand the differences between these three strategies and recognize when and how they are being applied to your project.

Build Your Community Engagement Foundation: It's All About Values

River restoration and dam removal projects are complex, lengthy and often surface deeply held beliefs and emotions from all parties. As Emily Vogler notes in the introduction of her comprehensive *Dam Atlas*, dams and other river barriers can often represent a community's concerns, desires and identities. Underlying these perspectives are **values**: the principles, priorities and qualities that bring meaning to people's lives. In short, **values are what people care about and use to judge what is important, desirable or worth protecting**. Values are shaped by lived experiences, culture, identity, relationships and the environments in which people live and work. **Values holders** are the individuals, groups, organizations and communities who hold and express values relevant to a given decision.

As practitioners engage in this work, it is essential to recognize that the values we bring to the table are part of a broader set of community values, and not inherently more valid or important than any others. When river restoration practitioners work with communities to identify and articulate a **shared set of values**, they can bridge gaps in understanding, reduce conflict and create a productive foundation for navigating difficult decisions. **Identifying a shared set of values does not mean everyone holds the same values**. Rather, it means sharing our own values, inviting others to express theirs, and identifying a set of values that participants can collectively agree to carry forward.

Understand the Community and Values First

As you develop your community engagement approach, take the time to fully understand what values surface among the various interested parties. The **audiences mapping tool** will help you identify the full list of all interested parties involved (community members, agencies, Tribal communities, property abutters) to begin building shared values.

Table 1 identifies some of the common project values sets that often surface at river restoration projects, as well as common values-holders, example measurable attributes for these values, and the types of experts that can be consulted to assist with measuring and assessing project performance against these values-based attributes. Not all the values presented in the table below may be relevant to every project, nor will they comprehensively cover all potential values sets. Further, while values and values-holders will be project-specific, reviewing this list of community members who often hold each value set can help ensure that all relevant voices are included in project scoping and design process.

In addition to your community conversations, **Table 1** includes examples of some ideal experts to consult. In each case, experts will ideally understand the local system and be able to develop models (conceptual, at least) based on known attributes to objectively assess current and predicted future conditions under all identified project scenarios. However, it may be difficult to find experts that have the time and resources to contribute to the project in this way. Identifying internal capacity, hiring external capacity, or collaborating with partner capacity with experience in collaborative decision-making can ensure that values are captured well and measured sufficiently given available resources.

Table 1: Values, Values Holders and Performance Measures

Common Project Value Set	Common Values Holders	Example Measurable Attributes	Experts to Consult	Challenges, potential for conflict
Ecological Health and Function	Project leads, other conservation organizations, concerned community members	- Species (migration and other vital rates, expected population size, condition, food availability) - Habitat (quality, quantity, connectivity, spatial distribution, persistence) - Abiotic conditions (hydrology, hydraulics, sediment, nutrients, temperature, DO)	Biologists, ecologists, hydrologists, geomorphologists, and other scientists who are familiar with the local system.	- Potential for conflict with recreation values (preferred sport fish, slack water areas for accessible boating, favorite fishing or swimming hole at base of dam, etc.) - Aesthetic or species concerns—connection to the views/species that are inhabiting the area now that may change (especially for lake dams) - Conflict with rare species and removal, allowing invasive species into habitat - Limited ability to address contamination issues as they relate to fish consumption advisories.
Personal and Community Safety	Community leaders and concerned community members, liable property owners	Measures of flood risk, property damage, structural integrity, safety risk, hydraulic jump, history of drownings, FEMA claims in the floodplain relative to major flooding events.	- Dam safety experts, hydraulic and structural engineers - Local public safety agencies	- Concerns over increased flooding/property damage - Trespass concerns (potential for drowning)
Personal Property	Upstream and downstream property owners	Erosion rates and extent, inundation rates and extent, qualitative measures of aesthetic viewshed	- Hydraulic engineers, geomorphologists; - social scientists to elicit qualitative measures; property owners to provide qualitative assessments	Concerns about loss of or changes to waterfront property, concerns about more water downstream after dam removal/less water upstream. Potential impacts to property values.

Historical Value	Local historical societies, long-term residents	- Qualitative measures of historical value - Remember to include the complete scope of history, not just post-colonial.	- Social scientists to elicit qualitative measures; residents and historical society staff to provide qualitative assessments, community elders, - Indigenous people and tribal communities	- Loss of identity (for example, if the dam is a historic barrier that helped shape the town's industry- loss of that identity). - Loss or destruction of cultural resources (documented and unknown)
Indigenous Sovereignty and Cultural Value	Current and historically local indigenous people and nations	Quantitative or qualitative measures of cultural value and identity.	- Tribal and indigenous scientists and representatives - Indigenous community members and leaders	- Local indigenous communities may not have access to historical territories and lands. - Threat to potential archeological sites and cultural resources - Threats to sovereignty
Spiritual Value	Current and historically local indigenous people and nations, Faith-based communities, other local communities or groups	Qualitative and quantitative measures of land/ water use for spiritual practices (e.g., baptisms in river, local ancestral fishing practices)	- Tribal and indigenous spiritual leaders, faith-based community leaders, - Other local communities	- Scrutiny of faith-based practices - Lack of access to river/ riverbank for practices
Recreation	Local and regional recreation organizations, local river users	Boatable days, recreation access, recreation quality, sportfishing quality, sportfish population health	Recreation scientists and experts; social scientists to elicit qualitative measures; fisheries management scientists	- Community may not want to encourage recreation use by "outsiders" or welcome additional traffic into their community. - Types of recreation/use interests may be in conflict (e.g., pontoon boating and whitewater paddling) - Loss of impoundments, fishing ponds, wildlife habitat

Aesthetics	- Local community representatives and residents - Anyone with connections to the landscape	Aesthetic measures	Social scientists to elicit qualitative measures; local community representatives and residents to provide qualitative assessments	- Misperceptions about creation of stagnant mud flats, loss of “waterfall” features or impoundments. - Concerns over change/ degradation of aesthetic value of landscape
Clean Energy	Local community representatives and residents	Clean energy access, generation, and rates	- Energy scientists and experts - small hydro owners or former owners	- Misconceptions about hydro being “green”; - limited understanding of economic viability for different types of energy generation; - Concerns about revenue gained or lost
Costs	Funders; anyone invested in the success of the project, local community members and residents (tax burden, loss of revenue)	- Upfront costs, full project costs, access to funding - ongoing maintenance of the project site	Engineers, scientists, and financial experts, municipal/county business office or CFO, federal agencies	- Liability & legal risk - Specific elements of a project are eligible/ineligible depending on funding sources; fundraising challenges - Concerns about local revenue gained or lost - Concerns over perceived or real local tax burden - Lack of info on cost of long-term repair vs removal
Urban Development and/or Remediation	Local businesses, municipal officials, community groups	- Businesses benefiting from restoration/redeveloped site - New riverine access or recreation opportunities, - Former Brownfield sites remediated	Local businesses, town/city planners, engineers, state regulators/remediation experts	- Balancing urban or community renewal/redevelopment opportunities with ecological values and flood risks - Historic district/ designations considerations

But What About Outcomes?

As river restoration practitioners, we value healthy, functioning river ecosystems, and there is strong scientific evidence that free-flowing, barrier-free rivers best support this value. However, communities often hold a wider range of perspectives, which may not align cleanly with any single solution or outcome. Anchoring your community engagement and outreach strategies on values rather than predetermined interventions or outcomes creates space for those perspectives to be expressed on equal footing and allows communities to define a shared vision for the river and evaluate alternatives in a transparent, systemic and collaborative way.

Once a shared set of values has been identified, this understanding can serve as the foundation for developing and exploring a range of creative alternatives and understanding their likely consequences. Where the future of a dam or barrier remains open to decision, full dam removal should be considered alongside other feasible alternatives. Being open to considering multiple alternatives—such as partial removal, fish ladders or diversions—establishes trust and demonstrates that your interest is in finding solutions that reflect shared values rather than advancing a predetermined outcome. An important caveat to note is that in some projects, dam ownership, safety, regulatory or decision-making authority may narrow some of the feasible options. When possible, exploring a broad suite of potential alternatives, including but not limited to full dam removal, can be a critical step in building understanding, support and agreement among interested parties.

Table 1 (previous page) also includes sample measurable attributes that can be used to determine project success in respect to community engagement. Measurable attributes should be based on identified project-specific values. Scientists and practitioners can help develop these attributes, but all attributes should be directly linked to value sets and therefore approved by values holders. To do so, a practitioner could ask a values holder: “If we assessed your stated value with this measure, would you be satisfied that your value is being represented well?” If the answer is no, there may be an additional attribute to collect (proxy measures are often sufficient if true measurements are difficult or too expensive), or there may be a lack of clarity on the fundamental value set. Continue to iterate until values holders are satisfied with how their values are being represented.

Because every project and community is unique, use **Table 1** as a starting point and a guide to help identify who should be engaged, what values may need to be considered, and how those values might be represented in a community engagement effort. Once you have done the work to understand and account for common values sets in a project, you will have a better understanding of who to engage, how to incorporate local and outside expertise, and how to navigate potential conflicts.

When Values are in Conflict

Even with the most careful planning, river restoration projects will eventually encounter some level of resistance, critique and conflict from various audiences. Changing and removing river barriers for the benefit of both people and nature requires working within a complex web of ecological, social, safety, engineering and economic factors influencing decision making and participation. It will be nearly impossible to account for all the factors influencing community sentiment from the outset.

When opposition, resistance or conflict arise, it’s important to thoughtfully consider the origins and reasons. When the source of conflict is power dynamics, it is likely that an individual or entity is experiencing some eroding of real or perceived power due to some aspect of the project. Depending on the source of conflict, this may mean pausing and waiting, identifying influencers who can help manage and mitigate the conflict, or

gently listening to understand underlying fears and concerns. **For more information on this process, review the tools and guidance listed in [Principle 4: Prepare to Repair](#).** Conflict, opposition and resistance may feel like a setback, but it's often an indication that more work needs to be done to build trust and establish stronger relationships. Much of the resources in this guide are dedicated to helping practitioners embed principles and actions into their projects that help establish trust. This is work that takes time, but it is work that will build a secure foundation for long-term project stability and durability.

Part 2: Planning Meaningful Opportunities for Engagement and Relationship Building

The River Connection Journey Framework

Community engagement is not a single step in a river restoration project; it is an ongoing process that evolves as a project moves from early exploration to design, permitting, construction and beyond. TNC's Field Guide to Conservation in Cities in North America (2018) states that "Well-facilitated community engagement is key to weaving together seemingly disparate goals, actors and efforts to create a stronger, more cohesive whole. Authentic engagement brings people together to develop a better understanding of their shared skills, networks and needs. Relationships formed through community engagement grow best when those involved commit to being attentive to the relationship over time. Communities want to know that practitioners are capable and dependable, that they will uphold their commitments, and that they'll stick around when circumstances change. When you undertake community engagement, plan to sustain any relationships you forge for years." Successful community engagement relies on the ability of the practitioner and partner organizations to develop, strengthen and maintain interpersonal connections. This work takes time and thoughtful building of engagements and activities.

It will be important to figure out in the early stages of planning your project what opportunities will exist for meaningful community engagement and input. Meaningful engagement means "that people who are or have been impacted by an issue are essential partners in developing, implementing and evaluating the effectiveness of strategies to address the issue. While there are many ways to measure whether engagement is meaningful, the ultimate test of "meaningfulness" is whether the participants feel a sense of belonging in the process" (Collective Threads, 2025). Not every aspect of your project will offer meaningful engagement opportunities. For example, many barrier removal projects will involve a private owner and a handful of surrounding property owners as the main interested parties and values holders. In situations such as these, your community engagement strategy begins with identifying what opportunities exist for meaningful engagement for both the interested parties, as well as the community and the public, *at any phase in the project journey*.

The River Connection Journey Framework outlines how project leaders can integrate the values-driven principles of community engagement as outlined in this guide to every aspect of the project cycle. The framework offers a model, based on the flow of a river, that incorporates the associated principles, actions and resources covered in this guide and their most relevant placement within the timeline of a river restoration project. Consider this model as a framework for how community engagement integrates into every step of a project, from scoping to post-implementation.

River Connection Journey Framework

River Source

Project and Community Scoping

The journey starts here. As you plan, scope and fundraise for a potential barrier removal project, use these early stages to perform desk research on the community, identify your audiences and build out your engagement strategy.

Relevant Principles: Demonstrate Curiosity, Invest in Relationships

Mainstem: Rapids, Eddys, Flow

Project Design and Permitting

Chart your course wisely and take this time to invest in relationships and co-creation of outcomes. Lean into values work to bring the community along, attend to different needs and dynamics, and plan for any challenges. The river journey at this point can still take a different turn; focus on communication and collaboration.

Relevant Principles: Invest in Relationships, Collaboration Through Communication

Branches and Tributaries

Project Implementation

You are officially in the active project implementation stage. You have reached the mainstem of your river journey, but as with any project, there remains potential for confusion and conflict (rapids), times to take a pause to reflect and iterate (eddys), and periods of flow where the project moves through toward completion. Continue to nurture relationships, communicate and provide feedback channels, and be prepared to repair should conflict arise.

Relevant Principles: Invest in Relationships, Collaboration Through Communication, Prepare to Repair

Continuing Downstream to the Mouth

Post-Implementation

The end of the project doesn't necessarily mean the end of the work. Keep building and nurturing relationships. Implement your long-term stewardship plan for the site by bringing others in. Evaluate the measurable attributes you co-created with values holders.

Relevant Principles: Invest in Relationships, Demonstrate Curiosity

Successfully leveraging the framework and principles of community engagement as outlined in this guide happens with building a foundation of trust, which takes time, effort and resources. Engagement activities and actions should remain responsive to local context and community input and critically should find ways to involve community values and voices in tangible (as opposed to symbolic) efforts.

The goal of the River Connection Journey Framework is to help practitioners come to a place of shared understanding and accountability to those values and being transparent and honest about conservation intentions and interests along the way by incorporating community voice and interests throughout the life of the project.

Project Actions with Affiliated Tools and Resources

Project and Community Scoping	Project Design & Permitting	Project Implementation	Post-Implementation
Action: Research local community, history and context. Tool: Conducting Exploratory Conversations Action: Assess Your Capacity for Relationship Building Tool: Internal Assessment for Community Engagement Capacity and Motivations. Action: Understand the people, relationships and power dynamics. Tools: Audience Mapping Tool. Dam Atlas Chapter 3: Making Decisions (Vogler) Voice, Choice, and Action- Working with Indigenous Communities (Nature United)	Action: Clearly articulate your project for a variety of audiences. Tool: 5 Part Narrative Structure Worksheet Action: Plan thoughtfully for engagements, outreach and events Tools: Guide to Inclusive and Effective Community Outreach Tip Sheet for Meaningful Community Engagement (Groundworks USA)	Action: Provide regular updates and feedback opportunities throughout the project. Tool: Guide to Inclusive and Effective Community Outreach Action: Accept that some conflict or challenges may happen and be prepared to address concerns and issues before they become conflicts. Tool: Webinar: Bridging the Gap: Repairing Relationships for Stronger Community Engagement (Tamarack Institute) Conflict Navigation: Guide Towards Transformation (Yas Hassan, Tamarack Institute)	Action: Evaluate the measurable attributes you co-created with values holders. Tool: Values Table (Part 1.) Action: Implement your long-term stewardship plan for project management, incorporating values of holders and community members. Tool: Planning Your Community-Based Citizen Science Monitoring Project for Dam Removal and Watershed Restoration (Center for Community and Citizen Science- UC Davis)

Part 3: Guiding Principles and Associated Resources for Community Engagement in River Restoration and Dam Removal Projects

Every river restoration project is unique, bringing context-specific circumstances and relational dynamics that need to be understood and acknowledged. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to effective and equitable community engagement in the context of dam removal. Practitioners in this space can draw upon several other established ways of being and working in community, as well as lean into their own lived experiences and local connections. In this guide, we have elevated a series of guiding principles for community engagement that are tailored to river restoration projects and are influenced by The Nature Conservancy's Principles of Equitable Conservation. In highlighting these principles, we draw upon the work of Walker, et. al. (2024), who defines principles as “the criteria for evaluating whether equity and/or justice have been met.” Practitioners who consciously ground themselves in reciprocal relationship building, attend to positionality and power dynamics, and uplift thoughtful, community-informed actions are inherently working toward an equitable outcome.

Each of these principles comes with specific examples, tools and resources that demonstrate how these principles operate in practice. By leaning into these resources, practitioners can act on the principles and leverage the associated tools at specific intervals within the project's lifecycle (see River Connection Journey Framework). These principles and associated tools can be approached sequentially yet overlap and are present throughout various stages of a project.



Principle One: Demonstrate Curiosity

Before embarking on a project, take time to research the local lived history and context of the community. Build trust by opening lines of inquiry and communication with all interested parties (stakeholders). Demonstrate curiosity by learning more about the deep ties and connections to the river and dam. Historically, in river restoration projects, the focus and attention from the conservation community have largely been on the permitting process and ecological impacts, not the culture, history and socioeconomic implications of dam removal (Matanzima and Mosuo-Tsietsi, 2023). As noted in the values section, community engagement work is deeply personal and relational, regardless of the type of project, and oftentimes dams hold layers of meaning and significance to a community.

Before you begin having initial conversations with interested parties, take time to learn about the local history, culture and economic profile of the region—known as “desk research.” Much context can be gleaned from an afternoon of searching through existing information available on the internet, through local news sources, and from historical societies. Many river towns have relied on dams and hydropower for a significant portion

of their industrialized history, and dams can hold symbolic, if not economic, significance to a community. Dams and other barriers could also hold significance for the indigenous peoples of the region, past and present. If you are new to the project area, start by making connections with the local historical society and other social and cultural organizations. Think about expanding beyond the types of groups that you would normally partner with, and consider other constituencies in the community who may not typically be involved in conservation projects—such as school groups, young families and faith-based institutions, for example. These groups often hold deep expertise and knowledge about the place and can help shape the broader picture of the community and ties to the river and dams. The **Conducting Exploratory Conversations Guidance** is a great way to start thinking through and documenting formal and informal conversations with local elected officials, organization and business representatives, and community members. The initial conversations you have will help shape the fuller picture of the different audiences and players in the community.

The [Dam Atlas](#) (Vogler, 2022) is a comprehensive and deeply researched toolkit for understanding community values around dams, and how to build toward a shared set of values using a structured decision-making approach. The authors of this toolkit strongly recommend the Dam Atlas as a comprehensive guide for practitioners and communities to jointly make decisions around aging dams. Even if your project outcomes are already determined, it is highly worth reviewing this toolkit for building your community engagement practice.

To engage in a curiosity-first based mindset in any conservation project requires practitioners to interrogate the notion of “expertise” when working with communities. Throughout any project, you will engage with subject matter experts on all technical aspects, such as engineers, hydrologists and ecologists. When equitably and effectively engaging the community in your work, consider the expertise of a lifelong resident who has built connections and networks and is willing to share these insights just as valuable as subject matter expertise. Many larger river restoration and dam removal projects employ some form of community advisory group—made up of local residents, elected officials and business owners who have a connection to the river and the project. It is worth spending time in your exploratory conversations to identify who could surface as a key local partner on behalf of the community and finding ways to engage them and compensate them for their time and expertise. Having a community sounding board to help shape project engagements, messaging and storytelling will greatly support your activities and actions laid out in the **River Connection Journey Model**.

As you begin to identify community groups, local organizations and agencies, complete the **Audience Mapping Tool** exercise with your team. Your desk research and exploratory conversations should inform this exercise, which will be the basis of how you can understand local values, who holds power in decision making (and who doesn’t), and how to build out meaningful engagement opportunities and shared values sets with these groups. This tool will also help you to organize your approach to community outreach and communications. By having a clearer understanding of your audiences, you can work toward building a shared set of values as mapped out in **Table 1**. The work of developing shared values takes time but is an essential first step toward building trusting relationships and setting your project up for long-term success. In her *Dam Atlas*, Emily Vogler provides a comprehensive set of tools and activities to work with the community toward shared values and decision making. [Chapter three of the Dam Atlas](#) clearly outlines the steps with template agendas, activities and timelines.

Demonstrating curiosity as a project manager can also look like seeking out existing sources and channels of information. It is likely that much of what you are seeking already exists, so as you conduct your exploratory

conversations and build out your audience map, make a point to participate in community meetings, and ask about events and existing opportunities for involvement. Taking the time to understand the local and lived experiences of the community where your project is located will go a long way toward developing a set of shared values, establishing transparent and clear communications, and mitigating potential future conflicts. Engaging community members as subject-matter experts early in project scoping helps not only to co-create potential outcomes, but also to build a shared vision for the project that accounts for local values and perspectives.

Principle One Resources:

- [Conducting *Exploratory Conversations* Worksheet](#)
- [Audience Mapping Tool](#)
- [Dam Atlas Chapter 3: Making Decisions \(Vogler, 2022\)](#)



Principle Two: Invest in Relationships

Building reciprocal and equitable relationships is more of an art than a science, and should be considered foundational to any conservation project, regardless of scope and outcome. In many western conservation contexts, the work of restoration, protection and mitigation puts humans and nature in opposition to one another; or at best, human impact is something to be “managed.” By approaching the work of conservation primarily through the relationships we have to each other and to the land, we are prioritizing the connections that are paramount to lasting and durable outcomes. So much of the work of investing in relationships takes time and sustained effort, which is why project leaders need to budget for the personnel and resources to ensure that this happens.

Investing in relationships begins with understanding the **fundamental difference between transactional and reciprocal relationships**. In many business contexts, transactional relationships are the norm and are most readily applied; “You do X, and I will do Y,” or “I’ll give you X in exchange for Y.” Generally, there is a shared understanding of an exchange, and that the relationship exists largely within the confines of the need/request or project. While not all transactional relationships are one-off, they operate within specific confines of the transaction or repeated transactions. Think of the relationship you may have with an auto mechanic. Most likely this is a relationship that exists within the confines of a need (car repair or maintenance) with an agreed-upon transaction (fee for service and parts). Transactional relationships are not inherently good or bad—in most cases, they offer expediency to a project.

A reciprocal relationship is one that is rooted in the practice of developing ongoing trust, mutual respect and investment, and meaningful opportunities to co-create outcomes or influence decisions where appropriate. These relationships exist beyond one specific need or transaction and evolve and develop over time. Power and positionality are attended to and renegotiated throughout. Reciprocal relationships allow for development and realization to occur—they may start as transactional but develop and evolve to something more substantive over time. An example of this would be the relationship you may develop with a new neighbor who has moved into your neighborhood. At first, you may interact for a simple transaction—borrowing a cup of sugar or taking in their mail. How much time you invest in getting to know your neighbor

and looking beyond one-off requests to collaborate on a project, or help one another during a time of crisis depends on the investment in the relationship.

In the context of a river restoration project, some relationships may focus on a specific transaction or requirement—or example, permitting, licensing or coordination with a landowner—but can be embedded within longer-term collaborative relationships. Practicing equitable community engagement may start with leaning into existing or new transactional relationships, such as reaching out to local officials and landowners based on their relationship to the barrier in question. Taking the time to invest in sustained dialogue—not only with immediate interested parties, but also with other groups identified in your exploratory conversations—will help to build out the basis for a longer-term and sustained relationship. In completing the **Audience Map**, you will have an idea of all the interested parties involved and their relationship to the project and decision-making authority.

Working with Indigenous Communities

In any conservation project—and especially dam removals and river restoration—working with local Indigenous communities should be included in your strategy and outreach. The need to approach relations from a place of learning, humility and trust building is paramount in working with Indigenous communities.

The Nature Conservancy has [developed a resource](#) in partnership with many Indigenous communities around the globe, outlining a framework for self-learning and engagement relevant to any project and practitioner.

Taking the time to invest in long-term relationships that exist beyond the scope of one project or initiative is perhaps one of the most essential elements to durable conservation outcomes. Developing and maintaining long-term, reciprocal relationships is a practice that requires resources and personnel- and as such should be considered a vital part of any organization's operations.

The **Internal Capacity Assessment Tool** is meant to serve as an internal resource that provides practitioners with a series of reflective questions to consider at the very early stages of community engagement, when you are conducting those initial meetings. Even if you are deeply familiar with a place, these questions can help you recalibrate your relationship to the inherent power dynamics and positionality associated with a complex river restoration project. Further, community engagement as a practice is an investment, and this tool guides practitioners toward effectively budgeting community engagement in a project.

Assessing internal capacity toward relationship building represents an important moment to reiterate the critical need for practitioners to understand their own values and biases and how these show up in the work. Each of us as individuals has a specific view of the world and of the places where we work. Even in a place that we know well, there will be new insights and understanding to gain from other people who see that place from a different view and different set of experiences. River restoration projects are an excellent means to build curiosity, empathy and humility. Rivers are complex, and so are people. We can expect that when rivers and people intersect, we will all have a lot to learn along the way.

Principle Two resources:

- [Internal Assessment for Community Engagement Capacity and Motivations](#)
- [Voice, Choice, Action \(Indigenous Communities\)](#)



Principle Three: Transparent Communications

As practitioners, we are often kept busy with simply managing a project as complex and multi-staged as river restoration. The various permissions, processes, and reviews span months if not years of work. It is far too easy to forget that throughout the many steps of a project, misunderstandings are often borne out a gap in communication. Crafting a sound communications and outreach strategy, that builds upon the tools of relationship tending found in Principles 1-2, can go a long way towards mitigating conflict and misunderstandings. As we have shown, strong, reciprocal relationships start with trust, and trust begins with both parties having a clear understanding of each other's goals, interests and values.

Communicating clearly and transparently is both a principle and active practice in which you must be prepared to show “behind the curtain” of your process. There will undoubtedly be legal and financial aspects of the project that cannot be shared, but the more clearly you communicate the steps and the ultimate vision for the project—in a way that can be understood by anyone in the community—the less likely your interested parties will have confusion. Using the **5-Part Narrative Structure Worksheet** will help you clearly articulate the *why* behind your decision making and desired outcomes. It is essential to keep in mind that your goals as a project lead and practitioner may not be the shared goal of every party in the community. There are often many times in conservation work where habitat and restoration goals are positioned as being in direct conflict with people-centered goals, such as economic development. Walking through the resources in this section will help you to better tell the story of the “why” behind the project, allowing for multiple audiences to first understand your perspective and goals, which can in turn open the door for the community and interested parties to come to you.

As much as you possibly can, think about how you externalize the long-term vision for a project, not just the immediate impact of a community witnessing a barrier removal or alteration. Effective and transparent communications necessitate more than a few key talking points and a website. The **River Connection Journey Framework** identifies specific project moments and what communications tools can be used to clearly articulate and demonstrate all aspects of a project, as well how you can bring the community and other interested parties along in the decision-making process through clearer communication of opportunities, goals and shared values.

Putting Principle 3 into practice requires planning and incorporating Principles 1 and 2 before you are ready to go public with your messaging. If you are unable to enlist additional support to help craft your messaging and communications, the included **Guide to Inclusive and Effective Community Engagement Communications** offers specific guidance and additional resources on how to draft communications and plan inclusive in-person events for your engagement and outreach.

Principle Three Resources:

- [Guide to Inclusive and Effective Community Engagement and Communications](#)
- [Five Part Narrative Structure Worksheet](#)
- [Tip sheet for meaningful community engagement](#) (Groundworks USA)
- [Virtual Community Engagement Guide](#) (Nature United, 2022)

Principle Four: Prepare to Repair

There are many factors that contribute to eventual conflict—large and small—which can hinder, or in some cases, prematurely terminate a project. It is important to accept that no matter how careful or intentional your community engagement and communications practice, there will still be the opportunity for conflict to arise. Principle 4 reminds us that conflict doesn't mean the end of a project, but rather a practice that reminds us that repair and restoration are deeply embedded parts of community work. You won't always get it right, but being **prepared to offer repair** and re-establish trust will help you move through difficult situations.

Having taken community values into account (see Part 1) and co-created success measures with the community and interested parties, practitioners will have a better understanding of where potential conflict can arise and how in incorporating a shared set of values can help mitigate potential conflicts later in the project journey.

Below are the common types of conflicts experienced with individuals and communities in river restoration projects:

Threats to power and autonomy –specifically regarding community sovereignty in decision-making	Lack of respect or recognition for community norms, culture or power dynamics, etc.	Threat to personal connection to land, water, communities and organizations, etc.	Threats to Resources—fear of economic disruption, infrastructure changes or increased use of limited resources (e.g., lake water-level changes, increased traffic in a public park)
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The question of whether these conflicts are perceived or actual rests solely in the experience of those feeling unheard or taken advantage of. The reality of a conflict is irrelevant if the project stirs up a community feeling threatened in some way. Perceived threats, if left unaddressed, quickly become conflicts. When conflicts arise, it is best to pause, collect insights from the community and your trusted advisors, and assess alternatives in a transparent format that addresses concerns. The River Journey Framework identifies these periods as rapids, being experienced in the implementation stage of a project. When you encounter rapids, find the eddy and reassess the flow of the project. Perhaps it is time for a pause, or the need for more public engagement and information sharing. Bring in more data and information, explore options and be open to dialogue.

Conflict is an inevitable aspect of any project, but especially in complex river restoration and reconnection efforts. Rivers are places that evoke a deep sense of culture, identity and emotion. We have built our communities and cities alongside rivers, harnessing their power for transportation and energy generation since the dawn of humanity. Any project that proposes to change or alter the landscape or path of a river is going to elicit strong responses. Principles 1 through 3, with their associated resources, should help you to set up a project that attends to community needs and values and is open about your overall goals and long-term vision.

Eventually, practitioners will reach the stage where the expected and intended outcomes may be at odds with those of the interested parties and community members. It is at this point that your project will rely on both communications and community engagement strategies to clearly message project goals and outcomes and provide productive opportunities for dissent and conflict to be addressed and incorporated into next steps, thus navigating the “rapids” as described in the **River Journey Framework and Values work**.

When practitioners are willing to show vulnerability, be transparent about where rupture may have occurred, and move at the pace of the aggrieved parties, repair can lead to stronger relationships and greater trust. Move intentionally and address harm (perceived or actual) with those who were most directly harmed. Aim for transformational experiences rather than transactional ones with partners. The **Relationship Repair Model** outlines how you can approach the conflict through structured one-on-one and group conversations.

Addressing potential conflict proactively through a communications and outreach strategy begins with better understanding some of the potential pain points for interested parties and communities, as well as highlighting the benefits of river reconnection and restoration. Being able to effectively tell the story of your project requires a blend of deep community engagement practice with public relations strategy that still provides opportunity for community involvement. See the tools and resources in Principle 3 to help you clearly and effectively communicate the story of your project.

It is important to keep in mind that in some circumstances, repair isn't possible with certain groups or parties, at least in the short term. Reconciliation and repair ultimately depend on willingness from both parties. When that willingness is not present, it's important to create space and step away. In many cases, the passing of time or rotation of staff or key interested parties may eventually create new opportunities for reconciliation. As such, it's important to have patience, to foster and build adjacent relationships, and to maintain a long view. In the **River Connection Journey Model**, this is the space for easing into an "eddy. Take time to fully understand what led to conflict and rupture, and give the harmed parties space. Depending on your circumstances, you may try to approach the project with a different outcome or timeline in mind. Rivers are resilient and will often respond similarly to a restoration effort that occurs in the short term versus one that occurs a decade or two later.

Principle Four Resources:

- [Relationship Repair Model for Practitioners](#)
- [Bridging the Gap: Repairing Relationships for Stronger Community Engagement](#) (Tamarack Institute)
- [Conflict Navigation: Guide Towards Transformation](#) (Yas Hassan, Tamarack Institute)

Conclusion

River restoration and dam removal projects are more than infrastructure, habitat or engineering. They represent the hopes, fears and values of communities living within the riverine ecosystems. Across the Appalachian region in North America, communities hold deep and varied connections to their rivers. These waterways support ecosystems, shape local identities, tell stories of culture and industry, and influence how people experience and understand the places they call home.

The purpose of this toolkit is not to prescribe a single approach to community engagement, nor to suggest that every project will follow the same path. It offers a framework, set of principles and collection of resources that can help practitioners approach this work with greater intention, humility and care. Effective community engagement is not a box to be checked or a phase of a project to complete. It is an ongoing practice of listening, learning, relationship-building, communication and adaptation.

Throughout this guide, four core principles emerged: demonstrating curiosity, investing in relationships, collaborating through communication, and preparing to repair. Together, these principles encourage practitioners to build relationships grounded in trust, transparency and shared accountability. When communities are meaningfully involved in shaping decisions about their rivers, the resulting outcomes are often more durable, equitable and reflective of the values that matter most to those affected.

The reality is that this work can be challenging and time-consuming. River restoration projects often involve uncertainty, competing priorities and difficult conversations. At times there may be disagreement, resistance or conflict. These moments should not be viewed as failures, but as opportunities to deepen understanding, strengthen relationships and revisit the values that brought people together in the first place. The practice of equitable community engagement asks us to remain curious, stay open to learning and recognize that trust is built over time through consistent action.

As you move forward in your work, remember that communities are not simply audiences for conservation. They are partners, knowledge holders, leaders and co-creators of the future. By centering relationships and community values alongside ecological goals, practitioners can help create restoration efforts that reconnect more than rivers. They can reconnect people to place, strengthen community resilience, and build lasting support for healthy, thriving freshwater ecosystems across the Appalachians.

The journey of river reconnection does not end when a project is completed. Like a river itself, the work continues downstream through stewardship, partnership and continued learning.

Appendix A: References

Key Concepts and Definitions

Throughout this guide, we refer to terms defined by several sources, including The Nature Conservancy's integrating equity module, part of the [Conservation By Design](#) series of trainings, and The Nature Conservancy's framework for developing and improving conservation strategies.

Equality, Equity and Justice: While often discussed together, these three terms are different concepts. TNC defines **equality** as equal treatment, access, opportunity and distribution of resources and services. No one receives more or less than the other. This protects people against direct discrimination, but a one-size-fits-all approach rarely works out well in practice because not everyone has the same life circumstances or needs.

Equity is defined as the principle of fairness. Equity involves recognizing that people and communities are different and need different support and resources to ensure rights are realized.

Justice takes the next step to address systems change or transformational equity.

Social Identity: Refers to those aspects of a person that are defined in terms of their group members, history and self-awareness. Social identity may include but is not limited to aspects such as: Indigenous identity, race, ethnicity, religion or belief system affiliation, nationality, age, sexual orientation, gender identity, language, education level, socioeconomic status or class, military status, disability, geographic location, migration or visa status.

Human Rights: Rights that are inherent to all people, regardless of their nationality, place of residence, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, national or ethnic origin, race, religion, language, age, ability or any other status. We are all equally entitled to human rights without discrimination (OHCHR)

Human Well-being: A state of being in which one's needs are met, they can act meaningfully to pursue chosen goals, and they enjoy a satisfactory quality of life (Gough & McGregor, 2007).

Right Relations: Reciprocal, respectful relationships between people and all life.

Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC): An international legal standard of assessment for interactions with Indigenous Peoples and traditional communities—and decision making impacting them—to ensure we respect their right to self-determination. FPIC is an ongoing process, not just something that is done at the beginning of a project. The United Nations has developed a [manual](#) on FPIC for deeper learning.

Interested Parties: Interested Parties are individuals or groups with an interest in the socio-ecological system. These interests may relate to, potentially affect or be affected by the conservation work in that system, or the Interested Parties may have something to gain or lose if conditions in the system change. The term “interested” denotes parties that may affect or be affected by work you do in the system. It does not mean the party is actively engaged or even aware of the work. Interests may be financial, moral, legal, personal or community-based, and may be direct or indirect.

Spectrum of Community Engagement: The Nature Conservancy has adapted a [Spectrum of Community Engagement Rubric](#) toward equitable conservation practices, which is informed by the groundbreaking [Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership tool](#) developed by Rosa González of Facilitating Power.

The premise in both versions of this tool is that community engagement is not a means to an end used by organizations and parties in power to advance a specific agenda, but rather a model that allows for institutions, agencies, governments and interested parties to be met accordingly in a spectrum of collaboration and co-creation. What these frameworks offer is an approach toward community engagement that meets communities and interested parties where they are and provides a mechanism for elevating community-driven solutions while local governments and non-profits can acknowledge and attend to power dynamics and focus on the process of collaborative change.

Selected Resources and Further Reading

Community Engagement

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Conflict Resolution

- SEEDS Community Resolution Center (501(c)(3)), a non-profit community-based organization that has been providing mediation, facilitation, training and restorative justice since 1983. <https://www.seedscrc.org/>
- Tamarack Institute – Resource Hub <https://www.tamarackcommunity.ca/resource-hub-home>
 - [7 Steps to Repair Relationships For Stronger Community Engagement](#)

Appendix B: Tools and Resources

- Conducting Exploratory Conversations Worksheet
- Audience Mapping Tool
- Internal Assessment for Community Engagement Capacity and Motivations
- Guide to Inclusive and Effective Community Engagement and Communications
- Five-Part Narrative Structure Worksheet
- Relationship Repair Model for Practitioners

Conducting Exploratory Conversations Worksheet

The practice of demonstrating curiosity applies to both the initial research—which can be done individually—and conversations with community members, local agencies and organizations. While a baseline understanding can be gleaned from research, having exploratory conversations is an effective way to introduce yourself to a community and begin the process of understanding (which helps build trusting relationships—Principle 2).

The easiest place to start is to have conversations with organizations and individuals you may already have ties to. For example, if you represent a conservation interest, start by connecting with the local land trusts and river or watershed-based organizations. If you are new to a region and have no direct ties, you can start having exploratory conversations with official municipal entities, such as the town offices, planning board and conservation commissions. These entities should be included in early conversations regardless of your existing contacts in a community.

Below is a sample list of key interested parties most likely to be informed, advised or involved in a dam removal effort. This list presents a great starting point for having exploratory conversations:

Local Government	Non-Profit	Businesses
Mayors/ City Councils	Civic organizations (Lions Club, Rotary, etc.)	Chambers of Commerce
Conservation Commissions	Historical Societies	Outdoor recreation businesses (guide services, campgrounds, etc.)
Schools and School Boards	Area conservation organizations and land trusts	Forest products industries
Planning and Zoning Commissions	Regional Conservation Partnerships	Hydropower industries
Public Works	Faith-Based Organizations	Commercial Fishing
Parks and Recreation	Youth Organizations	Manufacturing
Tribal government and Indigenous Communities (those with federal and/or state recognition, and those without)	Social Clubs	Local Hospitality/Tourism/ Retail businesses
State/Federal government	Hunting and Angling Groups	

Exploratory Conversations—Best Practices

- Unlike focus groups or formal interviews, exploratory conversations are informal, open-ended and may or may not focus directly on the project at hand. Keep in mind the goal is to start to better understand the context and community where you intend to host the project.
- You may want to take some brief notes during your conversation, but to be fully present, it is best to listen and make conversation.
- Be prepared to discuss topics that aren't related to your project. Remember, you are trying to learn. Ask the individual or group about their area of expertise or their connections to the place to start the conversation.
- As you introduce yourself to different individuals and groups, asking to have a conversation is the ideal first step. Always be transparent and introduce yourself, your role, and why you are interested in learning more from their perspective to inform a potential or existing project.
- Make sure you set up your exploratory conversations in a venue that is convenient to your contact. It is likely that for most contacts who are working in an official capacity (such as a town manager or engineer), you can schedule a zoom call during their workday. When connecting with other individuals, groups, business owners and community members, you should be flexible with timing and offer an in-person visit first.
- Individuals working in a professional capacity often have the ability to take time out of their workday to have an informal conversation related to their area of work, and thus it would be considered part of their employment. When working with community members and others, you should, at a minimum, offer to buy coffee or lunch as compensation for their time, and consider monetary compensation if you intend to go longer than 30 minutes or if it requires individuals to have an opportunity cost associated with taking time out of their day to speak with you.
- There is no set length of time when you should start or conclude exploratory conversations. This is a practice to have throughout the project, as you may be introduced to different groups and interested parties. What is essential is starting your project with these conversations.
- Be sure to record any insights gained from these conversations after they conclude, and while it is still fresh in your mind. Eventually, they can help you fill out a bigger picture of interested parties and stakeholders and can contribute to the interested assessment and database tools explored in Principles 2 and 3.

The River's Journey: Audience Mapping Tool

Early in the project scoping, you will be conducting desktop research, participating in community events and meetings, meeting with local committees and community groups, and getting a sense of all the different interested parties involved. This tool is designed to help structure your investigations and conversations to better understand who your various audiences are relative to a project. Once you have a sense of the different interested parties, you can map out shared values, areas of potential alignment (or conflict), and begin to craft your communication and outreach strategy by identifying core messaging for each audience.

Begin with your sphere of influence as illustrated below. This helps to visualize the levels of influence on a project and then map out these different entities in the audience map.

Directions:

1. Start with your core project team and spend about 15 to 30 minutes brainstorming individuals, groups, agencies, organizations and entities that fit into each circle in the spheres of influence. Use flipchart paper or a whiteboard and fill it with as many names as possible.
2. After you have an exhaustive list, you are ready to identify your audiences into distinct groups. The mapping tool breaks down these different groups based on not only influence but also proximity.
3. Start to assess who on your list is considered a **primary decision maker** and circle these names. These are usually the entities and individuals who can “make or break” any aspect of the project. For example, the property owners and abutters of a given project site, the local town or municipal government (depending on jurisdiction), and the state environmental, public works, and/or transportation agencies. Add these names to the appropriate column in the Mapping Tool. Note that this will most likely be the smallest audience, as actual decision makers who determine outcomes tend to be a smaller group.
4. Next circle the **decision influencers**. This can be a difficult audience to identify without having spent time learning the nuances of a community. These are individuals, organizations, groups and entities that can influence the outcomes of a project without having direct decision-making authority. For example, this could be other conservation groups, local higher-education institutions, local river users who have access to the project site for hunting/fishing/recreation, and regional Indigenous communities. This is a potentially large and diverse audience. In trying to identify who makes up this audience, think of these entities as your subject matter experts, consultants and local potential allies.
5. The following circle is made up of **tertiary messengers and influencers**. To understand this audience, it may be helpful to think of those who can influence the public opinion on your project, and those who

Sphere of Influence



- Primary Decision Makers
- Decision Influencers
- Messengers and Tertiary Influencers
- Peripheral Audiences

carry social capital in each community. Examples in this group would be local businesses, the public, farmers and ranchers, and larger regional or statewide hunting/fishing/recreation groups that may or may not have direct access and connection to a project site.

6. Lastly, your **peripheral audience** consists of entities that you should keep informed of the project. For larger organizations leading the work, this could be your internal leadership or board of directors. It can also include other local or regional groups that may have an interest in the project, such as schools, faith-based organizations, neighborhood associations, or other conservation, environmental or recreational groups, etc. It will be important to identify groups and communities that might not traditionally show up for conservation projects as an audience, so you have a better understanding of the complete history and community encompassed in a riverine environment. Doing the work to learn more about all audiences will help to build trust, forge new relationships, and ultimately lead to a project that has greater and deeper community representation and involvement.
7. Once you complete this tool, we recommend testing your assumptions with external partners and local trusted collaborators. They may help your project team identify gaps, who is missing, and who needs to have a voice in the project.

Notes on Power and Positionality When Mapping Audiences

As you aim to better understand the various audiences involved in a river restoration or dam removal project, know that this tool does not necessarily account for power distribution, the positionality inherent in project personnel, and how as conservation practitioners we sometimes can show up in a community. It is important to acknowledge that power in each project is not always equitably distributed, particularly among those most impacted by a proposed conservation strategy. **Power** in this mapping tool is concentrated at the inner circle and among the primary decision makers, who may or may not be those most impacted. Throughout your community engagement practice, you can address some of the power imbalances by creating opportunities for listening and receiving feedback, especially from the more peripheral audiences. Taking the time to focus on building shared values with values holders is another way to address power differentials in a conservation project.

Positionality in this tool refers to how our individual identities shape the world around us, and especially how we see ourselves and our experiences (and biases) relative to others. Positionality can show up in this mapping tool simply in the way that knowledge-holders are identified. For example, as scientists and conservation practitioners, it is natural that we may inherently value others who work in the same field over, say, a local knowledge holder who isn't a conservationist. Positionality in this tool also shows up in who we often choose to collaborate with, ranging from project scoping to data gathering and application of conservation interventions. You can address positionality and bias by expanding your audiences and building relationships with communities that are invested and impacted by the work, but that don't have direct decision-making authority. Practitioners can address positionality by developing a community advisory board for your project, and bringing in local community leaders as subject matter experts to ensure that we uplift all types of expertise.

Audience and Key Messaging Map

	Primary Decision Makers (determine outcomes)	Decision Influencers (can influence outcomes)	Messengers & Tertiary Influencers (can influence public opinion)	Peripheral Audiences (keep informed)
Organizations, Communities, Agencies, People, Groups	Add your list here	Add your list here	Add your list here	Add your list here
Proximity	Immediate Impacted Area	Town/Municipality/County	Regional and statewide	Anywhere
Values				
Potential Contributions				
Potential Collaborations				
Potential Conflicts				
Goal for Engagement and Involvement				
Key Messages				
Platforms				
Additional Notes				

Internal Assessment for Community Engagement Capacity and Motivations

Early in the project stages where you are understanding the various decision makers involved and having exploratory conversations, practitioners should do an internal assessment to ensure that there is the capacity to conduct sustained and authentic community engagement. At the heart of community engagement and project success is the ability to not only build but maintain trusting relationships, and this requires a sustained commitment of resources on behalf of the practitioner. This worksheet consists of two questionnaires to help you assess your capacity for this work and align your intentions with how you can show up in a new community.

Internal Assessment for Community Engagement:

Consider these questions to help you understand, budget, and plan for community engagement work.

Do you have existing staff or staff hours that can be dedicated to community engagement work?

- If yes, does this person have strong interpersonal and communication skills? Do they have affiliation or representation with some or many of the communities with which you are seeking to connect? This includes cultural and linguistic backgrounds.
- If no, are you prepared to budget for and seek out external assistance in the form of a community contractor, advisory committee or consultant?

Do you have a budget to support community engagement work—such as paying for mileage, meeting supplies, food, translation materials, printing and signage?

- If yes, great! Don't forget that providing food is a basic way to make meetings and events accessible.
- If no, you may need to pause and assess how to move forward with your project. See if you can partner with other local conservation organizations, local universities or other non-profits that have deep community expertise. Perhaps you can secure a grant to fund activities or offer an exchange of services to a local organization. At a minimum, a low- to no-cost way to begin incorporating community voices in your project is to create a local advisory committee.

Do you have staff, partners, board members or other affiliates who have community engagement experience?

- If yes, engage with them if they aren't already a part of this project. Start with what expertise you have in your immediate circle.
- If no, use this guide as a starting point and continue to seek out training opportunities for community engagement practitioners. Remember, community engagement is an ever-evolving field of practice.

Understanding Your Intentions and Motivations for Community Engagement:

Showing up authentically is essential to building lasting, trusting relationships. As you begin to reach out and make local connections, ask yourself these questions internally to help you understand how you may be showing up in these early exchanges. Misunderstandings can happen when we present ourselves and our projects in ways that don't clearly align with our intentions.

Keep in mind that as the project grows, shifts and changes, or as people you have connected with move on from their roles, you may have to revisit these guiding questions to reassess how you are approaching relationship building.

- Why do you want or need to connect with this community (or communities)?
- Who are the people and audiences you are trying to reach?
- Do you have adequate capacity, **and** do the partners have adequate capacity to engage and build relationships?
- What cultural backgrounds do these individuals or communities come from?
- Do you have any shared experiences with this community or individuals in the community? What does that look like?
- Are there folks within your circles who have lived experience with any of the communities with which you are trying to connect? If you identify internal expertise, the equitable approach means offering compensation for their time and resources.
- What do you want to exchange with collaborators or community members?
- What expectations does your organization have with respect to collaboration with communities? What expectations should your new partners have of you?
- Do you have any unanswered questions about community related to your specific collaboration? If so, refer to Principle ONE - Demonstrate Curiosity and do some research or lean on existing collaborators for insight.
- What resources are available to compensate collaborators and partners for their time and labor?

Guide to Inclusive and Effective Community Outreach

Getting Started—Crafting a thoughtful community engagement strategy should begin when the project is first being scoped (see **River Connection Journey Framework** for project steps). Once you have completed the **Audience Mapping Tool**, you should have a good idea of the major audiences and influencers in a particular community, which will help shape your outreach and engagement strategy. For lasting, durable conservation efforts to be sustained, relationships and being an active presence in the community are core practices that should continue beyond the life of any project or initiative. These relationships developed will also help you to better understand the shared values being held by the community and interested parties in respect to your project. With this understanding, you can develop resources directly tailored to the specific concerns and interests of the community involved in your river restoration project.

Step 1: Understand Your Audience and Develop Your Communication Strategy

- First, complete the **Audience Mapping Tool** to better understand the key players, context and power dynamics at play. This will help form the basis of your communication strategy.
- Through **Exploratory Conversations**, you will begin to identify who your local allies and supporters are. These people and organizations/offices should help you shape your outreach strategy. They will offer key insights and may identify potential areas of conflict that the project team may not be aware of.
- Planning engagements and activities is complex and involves managing a lot of details. This simple **Events and Partnerships Management Template** helps keep all the details and important contact information in one location.

Step 2: Crafting Transparent Communications and Messaging

- Before you communicate about the project both internally and externally, it is crucial to have all the major timelines and details of the project in order. There will always be sensitive details that can't be shared publicly, so be mindful of what details are available to specific audiences. Depending on how many partners are involved in the project, it will be essential to have a key messaging document to refer to and to form the basis of all external communications. The **Audience Mapping Tool** is a great starting point for developing those key messages.
- To ensure accessibility to your project, you will need some public-facing web presence so community members and stakeholders can find information on their own. Try to create a public-facing website. It can be as simple as a WordPress or other free website hosting platform, or at a minimum, a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) document in PDF format that can be accessed somewhere online if your organization doesn't have capacity for a website. Refer to your key messaging document to create something public-facing and be sure to vet this with appropriate stakeholders prior to publishing.
- In all communications about the project, remember that the dam removal is not the end goal but rather river restoration/reconnection. Focus on the opportunities that dam removal will provide for the community. If possible, have a way to allow community members to provide input on what they would like to see post-dam removal (cultural, historical, recreational opportunities).

- Ensure that you create your plan for outreach and communications with local stakeholders, and whenever possible, leverage local existing forms of communication, such as town/county newsletters, local radio stations, newspapers, and town/municipal social media channels. In your research, you should have spoken to enough individuals to find the best ways community members communicate and receive information.
- Think beyond the usual partners (conservation commissions, state/county/municipal agencies) when seeking ways to promote information and updates about the project. How can you reach groups that wouldn't normally be in the loop? Consider partnering with local schools, senior homes, places of worship and social organizations that are deeply rooted in the community as places to start.
- The “what” of how you describe your project is just as important as how you describe it. Transparent communications in complex river restoration projects are difficult to navigate when tensions can run high and there are sensitivities and nuances to consider. It is important that you focus on telling the story of how you came to your decisions every step of the way and provide the appropriate opportunities throughout the process for the community members, property owners and other advocates to be involved in the decision-making process. You can use the **5-Part Narrative Structure Worksheet** to help you best tell the story of the project, how you got to this point, and what the plans are for the future.

Step 3: Invest in Outreach and Engagement Activities

- Once you have created the basis of your communications strategy, determined your audiences and drafted key messaging, you are ready to build an engagement and outreach plan for the life of the project. Depending on the various stages of your project, public engagement and outreach may have to be layered, flexible and adaptable to the situation.
- An effective public outreach campaign will offer community members and interested parties multiple ways to engage, and targeted messaging/asks should be carefully crafted in ways that make the ask clear, specific, time-bound and reasonable.
- A core component of any outreach and engagement campaign will involve in-person meetings and events. These do not have to be very involved or expensive affairs. Consider working with the local community center or library and offer monthly “coffee chats” or drop-in sessions for community members to ask questions and learn about the project. Plan on attending different existing community events (like cultural fairs, old home days, etc.) and offering a table of information about the project. Your network of interested parties can offer insight into the best way to not only get information out in the community, but to solicit input or feedback on the project.
- When attending or hosting in-person events, take care with how you show up in appearance, and try to be respectful of local norms and customs. Always choose a location for when you first meet people and groups that are comfortable and convenient for them and be sure to dress appropriately for the situation. For example, if you are meeting with a group of farmers during the day (when they are likely busy), try to meet up on their property instead of somewhere else, if that is more convenient for them. If you want to engage families, consider participating in existing events that bring families together with the community. Whenever you are hosting an event, focus group or information session, think of the opportunity cost it takes people to leave work or a commitment to

take time with you, and try to minimize or compensate them for this inconvenience, such as offering childcare and food during evening or after-work meetings to eliminate barriers to community participation.

- You should be ready to accommodate different accessibility and linguistic/interpretation needs for any community meeting or event. Don't assume that there aren't multilingual speakers in your community or people who need reasonable accommodation to attend and participate in a meeting, such as ASL interpretation. Incorporate funds into your budget for transcription and translation of your printed and digital outreach materials. Working with community partners will help you get a better understanding of what languages are spoken in each community. School district offices will be the best resource to better understand these needs, and working with local or regional disability and accessibility advocacy organizations can help you better prepare to make meetings more inclusive. When booking a space, always ensure it is accessible for individuals who use mobility devices. The Perkins School offers a [comprehensive guide](#) on accessible events.
- In many contexts, offering virtual meetings and events is a great way to include more people, particularly when transportation and accessibility are an issue. Nature United, a conservation organization in Canada, [created a guide on](#) how to make meetings inclusive and accessible, particularly for rural and indigenous communities.

Step 4: Provide Regular Touchpoints and Feedback Opportunities

- Consider that your outreach should involve regular opportunities for the community to provide feedback (if feasible) or stay engaged and informed on your progress. Ensuring you have a regular presence in the community, whether by attending local town meetings, having an educational booth at local community festivals, or scheduling regular informal "coffee chats" at public locations are all ways to create regular touchpoints throughout the life of the project.
 - Once your project is under way and some of the physical changes to a project site become noticeable, people will undoubtedly have questions and comments. This is a great time to consider writing local op-eds or newspaper articles about the why behind your project. Consider offering more proactive engagements that bring the story of the river project front and center. Get creative and work with local schools and arts organizations to partner with community members on providing visuals to what a cleaner, connected river can look like.
 - For some projects, you may want to consider offering a simple e-newsletter that sends monthly or quarterly notices on the project. Be sure to include pictures and diagrams and always provide an email address where questions can be sent. The more you keep an open dialogue with the community, the more likely you will be able to attend to local values and needs when working through your project.
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Other Resources, Templates and Examples

Natural Resources Outreach Guides

1. [National Audubon Association Tools of Engagement](#) (2011)
2. [NH Association of Conservation Commissions Outreach Guide](#) (2025)

Public Websites for Active Dam Projects including key messaging and FAQ examples:

1. [Hadley Falls Dam \(state-owned hydro\), Goffstown, NH](#)
2. [Mayo Mill Dam \(town-owned hydro\), Dover-Foxcroft, ME](#)
3. [Ridges to Riffles – Indigenous Led Conservation Group focused on the removal of the 4 Klamath River Dams, OR](#)
4. [Statewide Dam Removal Partnership \(NJ and TNC\)](#)

How to write a public FAQ:

1. [American Rivers \(pages 32-34\) of the National Dam Project Manager Guide \(2016\)](#)

Hosting accessible in-person and virtual events

1. [Nature United Guide to Inclusive Virtual events](#)
 2. [Perkins School for the Blind Guide to Accessible Events](#)
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Telling the Story: 5 Part Narrative Structure Worksheet



Clearly articulating your proposed project—including the steps and thinking that led you to specific conclusions, outcomes and paths—is an essential part of communicating transparently and effectively.

To help clarify and organize your messaging, use this worksheet to break down how you concluded your proposed project, including all of the key factors and evidence for your decision making. Being able to clearly explain the *why* behind your river restoration project, the benefits, the tradeoffs and other external factors allow you to also identify opportunities for the community to participate in decision making and shaping outcomes.

Exercise objectives:

- Shift discussion from the dam itself to desired outcomes for the river.
- Surface common interests.
- Identify opportunities and concerns.
- Share your vision for the future of the river, to invite others in.

Go Deeper

Emily Vogler's Dam Atlas, Chapter 3: Making Decisions maps out sample meetings and workshops practitioners can set up with key parties and community members utilizing a Structured Decision Making (SDM) process for community co-designed projects.

Part 1: The Situation and Goal

Setting the stage. Why this project, and why now? What opportunities and issues/concerns are at the forefront? What is the goal?

Part 2: Your North Star

What principles and foundational wisdom are guiding you to this proposed outcome?

Part 3: Show Your Work

What options did you pursue and consider? What do the research and evidence tell you? What have you learned?

- Keep it concise. This is also an opportunity for you to engage the community in the broader ecological, socioeconomic and cultural aspects of river restoration.
- Walking through the *Dam Atlas* Decision Making Matrix internally and then sharing these findings will help you identify and articulate the benefits and trade-offs of different river restoration outcomes to better illustrate the full picture of opportunities.

Part 4: Benefits and Tradeoffs

Clearly articulate your findings from Part 3 and explain both the benefits and trade-offs.

Part 5: Outcomes and Invitation

State your intent—what you are hoping to achieve. How do you envision the future of the river? Include tangible ways that the community and other audiences can be involved, informed or invited to serve in an advisory/steering capacity.



Relationship Repair Model for Practitioners

The work of relational repair is an act of courage. It requires us to acknowledge our failures without excuses, to prioritize the well-being of the people we work with. Committing to repair can be a long, slow process that should happen at the pace of those that were harmed when the rupture happened. However, even though change is slow and sometimes invisible and uncertain in its outcomes, successful repair will lead to stronger, deeper relationships with partners.

When you choose to repair a ruptured relationship with an individual or organization, you need to be prepared to show up with a willingness to be vulnerable and own *your* role in the rupture. Clearly communicating and articulating the problem or roadblock that caused the rupture should be your first step, even just internally in your organization.

The **Relationship Repair Model** below outlines a clear process practitioners can take to get started on relational repair:

- Recognition – What Happened?
- Clearly acknowledging what occurred and the impact it had on others, without minimizing or deflecting.
- Responsibility – What can you (and/or your organization) own?
- Regardless of original intent, acknowledge your role in what happened without excuses or blame shifting.
- Apology – How can you show care about the impact of your (or your organization's) actions?
- Express genuine regret for your actions and their impact. This is a time to be vulnerable and transparent.
- Repair – How can we move forward in our work, collaboratively?
- Acknowledging that some relationships cannot be repaired, this can be the hardest part of conflict with partners and can require a longer timeline.
- Accountability – What concrete actions are you (or your organization) willing to take?
- Create a plan and timeline with the folks you harmed
- How can I repair this relationship?
- What would working toward a trusting relationship look for you?