



Photo credit: Patrick Fitzgerald (top); Shelly Douglas (bottom)



## Grounding Habitat Work in Environmental Justice, Equity, and Inclusion

Each of us has a role to play in making our communities more wildlife-friendly, sustainable, and equitable – starting with where we live, work, play, and worship.

The National Wildlife Federation recognizes that it is not possible to sufficiently restore and conserve wildlife habitats without addressing the impacts of environmental injustice. Correcting environmental inequities and failures within conservation is a primary focus of the National Wildlife Federation as doing so is paramount to our success in stewarding our planet, halting climate change, and preserving ecosystems for future generations.

Learn more [here](#) about NWF's equity and justice journey!



# About this Resource

This resource was created to help you and your community foster engagement in local environmental justice efforts and develop tools for increasing the equity and inclusivity of your community-based stewardship events.



Photo credit: Friends of the Rappahannock

**On the following pages, several key components are covered:**

**Foundational terms and definitions** (pg. 3 - 4);

Context around the **harmful history of conservation** (pg. 5 - 6);

**Strategies and considerations** for cultivating more accessible, inclusive, and diverse community events (pg. 7 - 8);

Opportunities to get involved, build strong partnerships, and **support environmental justice near you** (pg. 9).

# Foundational Terms and Definitions

Education is the first step in cultivating bold and actionable change. Below are a handful of fundamental terms, definitions, and historical context to help you incorporate a critical lens into your community-driven conservation efforts.

**Accessibility in the Outdoors:** Disability access in the outdoors is about intentionally creating more accessible and inclusive experiences for people of diverse abilities and identities. This means outdoor experiences and events are planned with a holistic lens and offer options for people with diverse abilities to attend and enjoy.

**Environmental Justice:** Environmental Justice refers to those cultural norms and values, rules and regulations, behaviors, policies, and decisions to support sustainable communities where people can interact with confidence that their environment is safe, nurturing, and productive... These are communities where both cultural and biological diversity are respected and highly revered. - *Dr. Bunyan Bryant, University of Michigan School of Natural Resources and Environment*

**Environmental Racism:** Communities of color are systemically and disproportionately affected by policies that result in higher levels of exposure to pollution like toxic fumes, dust, soot, and heavy metals, among other harmful agents.

**Equality Vs. Equity:** Equality means every person is given the same resources or opportunities. Equity considers current and historical circumstances and allocates resources accordingly to achieve an equal outcome.

Photo credit: UNC Library

## [Diversity in Nature, Diversity in Action](#)

Click the link above to read more about the inspiring contributions of Black and Indigenous leaders in the environmental movement.

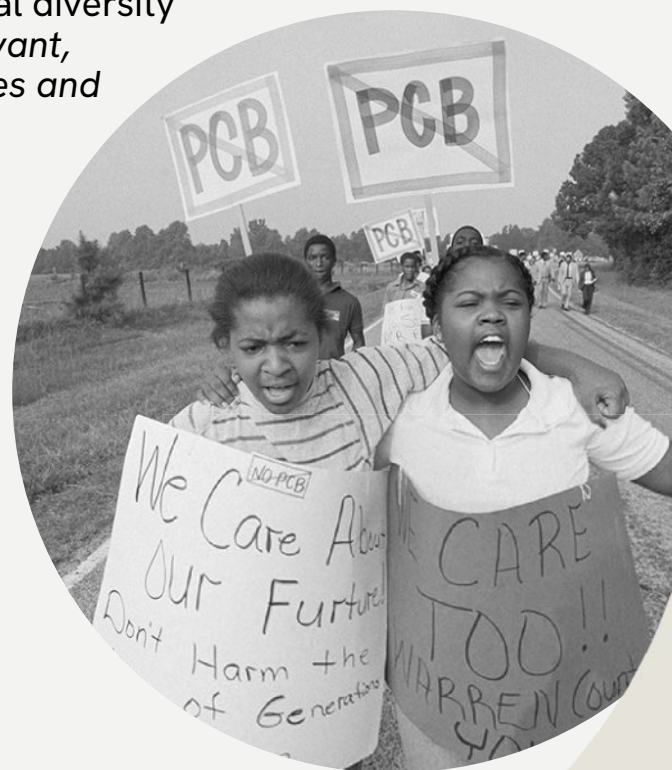


Photo credit: Natalie Cohen

**Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC):** FPIC describes processes that are free from manipulation or coercion (or paternalistic persuasion), informed by adequate and timely information, and occur sufficiently prior to a decision so that Indigenous rights and interests can be incorporated or addressed effectively as part of the decision-making process.

**Frontline Communities:** Frontline Communities first experience the impacts of climate change and environmental hazards. Often disproportionately comprised of BIPOC, low-income, disabled, and otherwise marginalized communities, these communities shoulder the brunt of the physical, health, economic, and mental burdens of climate change and environmental hazards.

**Self Determination:** The right and power to make decisions about matters that affect one's individual or community life. This includes cultural and spiritual access, governance, environmental decisions, food systems, and beyond.

**Tribal and Indigenous Sovereignty:** Tribal sovereignty is the right of American Indians and Alaska Natives to govern themselves and as governments, have the same power as federal and state governments to regulate their affairs. Tribal sovereignty guarantees that any decisions about Tribes or their affairs are made with their participation and consent.

## Creating Resilient and Equitable Cities

Click the link above to read more about cultivating resilience within communities through vacant lot restoration and relationship building.



# The Harmful History of Conservation

Beginning in the mid-1800s, white sportsmen's desire to hunt for recreation significantly influenced [the conservation movement](#) in the United States. Fish and game became the core value of land protection and a top priority of conservationists. Indigenous peoples' claim to ancestral lands across the nation was thus considered a threat to the "white way" of conservation and a hindrance to their false concept of [Manifest Destiny](#).

Conservationists of that time also became highly concerned with categorizing humankind and taxonomically defining nature. Many leading conservationists during this period were also [eugenicists](#) and racial "inferiority" then became a "science-backed" justification for racism and enslavement, as well as forced sterilization of people of color and disabled individuals, the erasure of Indigenous lifeways, land theft, and genocide.

These harmful ideologies also precipitated the notion that nature must be kept untouched and preserved from anyone considered "inferior," which eventually resulted in the establishment of our National Parks and the fabrication that humans and nature are somehow separate. On the other hand, many Indigenous cultures have *always* been rooted in deep relationship and reciprocity with nature. And while Indigenous people today only comprise 5% of the world's population, Native peoples protect almost [80% of Earth's biodiversity](#). The fact is, humans and nature have never been separate and never will be.

## [Restoring Buffalo on Tribal Lands](#)

Click the link above to read more about the history of buffalo removal, Tribal Sovereignty, and NWF's support of the return of buffalo on Shoshone Lands.

Photo credit: NPS / Neal Herbert



The guise of conservation has historically justified extreme violence and long-lasting harm, but these are not issues relegated to some bygone era. Conservation continues to act as a harmful agent of removal and remains a field that has limited access for marginalized communities.

Many of us within the environmental and conservation movement are raising consciousness around these histories and working to repair harms of an incalculable magnitude – and there is much work left. We hope you will join us in this work by educating members of your community about our collective histories and working to make your community-based conservation more equitable, inclusive, and sustainable for everyone.

Video credit: The Intersectional Environmentalist

Learn [more](#) about NWF's work to enhance Tribal and Indigenous partnerships

and watch the video below for a detailed look at the Intersectional History of Environmentalism.



# Considerations to Cultivate Inclusive Ecosystems and Communities

Planting at least 70% [native plants](#) is one of the most effective strategies to encourage a diversity of pollinators and other wildlife within your garden habitat. What strategies do you employ to ensure a diversity of community members feel included and welcomed? Try keeping these 10 inclusivity considerations in mind:

1. Diversity isn't just a "box" to be checked. Creating inclusive and welcoming events takes intention, time, and dedication. It's important to understand your own environmental justice competencies to take on this work. Have you or your team members participated in a DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusivity) or Environmental Justice training? Doing so could help build competency and capacity for partnering with EJ communities.
2. Let it be known that any racist, sexist, ableist, xenophobic, anti-Semitic, or homophobic behavior will not be tolerated at any community events. For example, if a person displays harmful behavior, kindly request that the person modify their actions. If they cannot do so, ask that they leave the event.
3. Conduct thorough and equitable outreach so all community members know how and where to participate. For example, connect with places of worship or faith-based communities, or diverse businesses and organizations. Ask them to partner and/or uplift your event in their community.
4. When partnering with communities outside your own, remember that shared decision-making is critical. All partnering groups' needs and desires must hold equal value and weight when making community decisions.

Photo credit: Friends of the Rappahannock

## [Building Habitat with Faith-Based Communities](#)

Click on the video link above to learn more about the Sacred Grounds™ program which partners with inter-faith and Environmental Justice communities to create habitat.



5. Enhance accessibility for disabled members of your community. For example, if leading a butterfly garden tour, choose locations with ADA-compliant paths, [among other considerations](#).
6. For large community events, consider the need for American Sign Language interpreters.
7. Explicitly name any physical, mental, religious, or spiritual barriers and limitations in your event descriptions, so that people of diverse abilities and identities can make informed choices.
8. Are dominant languages (other than English) present within your city or town? Bilingual events help to ensure people of differing cultures know that events are created with them in mind.
9. Develop outreach or educational materials in other dominant languages within your area.
10. Lastly, talk to your neighbors! Educate others about the legacy of environmental racism and the history of conservation. Work together to strategize ways to make community stewardship events and educational opportunities more inclusive of diverse needs, perspectives, and identities.

## [Making Monarch Conservation more inclusive](#)

Click the link above to read about community engagement in Columbia Heights, MN, and how to make your events more language-inclusive.

Photo credit: Mayor Amáda Márquez Simula





# Support Environmental Justice Near You

Relationships are the cornerstone of diverse partnerships. Identifying environmental justice efforts (protests, demonstrations, community meetings, etc.) and showing up with an open mind, ready to learn and engage when welcomed, is a great place to begin building relationships founded on trust, time, and dedication. Attending city council meetings or town halls, voting in local elections, and advocating for policy changes that uplift [nature-based infrastructure](#) in frontline communities are all achievable avenues to get involved that can make a difference in the lives of many.

Another way of supporting the work of local environmental justice organizations is through monetary donations. Encourage others in your community to give financially (in the form of fundraisers, for example) as financial support can significantly impact grassroots environmental justice efforts.

It's okay (and encouraged) to start small! More than likely, there are issues of environmental injustice or inequity happening in *your* community, in *your* neighborhood. Start on your block, learn about what's needed, and scaffold your efforts from there. It is not recommended that anyone parachute into other communities different from their own and advocate for change without first building relationships. Cultivating connections is the best way to learn how others want or need support!

Please visit [NWF's Environmental Justice Mapping Tool](#) to learn more about issues of environmental injustice in your area and identify EJ efforts and organizations to support near you. You can also show your support for NWF's Environmental Justice work by [following this link!](#)

## [Partnering With Cities to Advance Environmental Justice](#)

Click the link above to learn about developing authentic relationship with community members to build capacity, increase impact, and advance environmental justice.



# Thank you!

All members and participants in our national Community Habitat programs – including [Community Wildlife Habitats™](#), [Mayors' Monarch Pledge](#), [Sacred Grounds™](#), and [Trees for Wildlife™](#) – are deeply valued by those of us at the National Wildlife Federation. Your work is essential; thank you for learning more about how you can support environmental justice, build diverse partnerships, and enhance inclusivity at every opportunity.



Photo credit:  
Patrick Fitzgerald

This resource was authored and designed by the Community Habitat team with many thanks, support, and feedback from members of NWF's Environmental Justice, Tribal and Indigenous Partnerships Enhancement Strategy, and Education & Engagement teams. For any questions, contact us at [community@nwf.org](mailto:community@nwf.org)