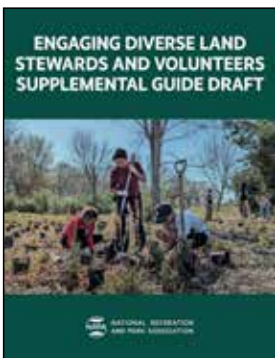# ENGAGING DIVERSE LAND STEWARDS AND VOLUNTEERS SUPPLEMENTAL GUIDE

NRPA NATIONAL RECREATION AND PARK ASSOCIATION

Cover image: A community engagement event at Blackhawk Park in Houston hosted by the Houston Parks and Recreation Department (HPARD).
Photo Courtesy of Kelli Ondracek at HPARD.

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Introduction

A group of volunteers planting native grasses and flowers during a Community Engagement Event at Sylvan Rodriguez Park in Houston hosted by the Houston Parks and Recreation Department.

Volunteers and land stewards serve a crucial role in preserving, protecting and restoring their local parks and green spaces. Their roles in park projects provide essential support to ensure a project's success through the seamless inclusion of community voices.

This resource will highlight the important role that land stewards and volunteers play in these projects, with a particular focus on how to address region-specific chal-

lenges. We will unpack the importance of utilizing local volunteers and land stewards and their immense value when it comes to addressing area-specific challenges faced in the Gulf Coast.

The Gulf Coast region, with its rich biodiversity, unique ecosystems and complex history, presents both opportunities and challenges for engaging diverse land stewards and volunteers. This guide builds upon the foundational

strategies outlined in the 2021 *NRPA's Engaging Diverse Groups in Building Community Resiliency Through Stewardship*, tailoring them to the specific needs and characteristics of the Gulf Coast area.

GOALS OF THE RESOURCE

- Increase the awareness and knowledge of strategies for engaging land stewards and volunteers to address the region-specific challenges faced in the Gulf Coast.

- Highlight the role that local land stewards and volunteers play in addressing the region-specific challenges faced by communities in the Gulf Coast.

- Build upon the existing knowledge shared in 2021 *NRPA's Engaging Diverse Groups in Building Community Resiliency Through Stewardship* resource, developed in 2021 to engage diverse land stewards and volunteers.

HOW TO USE THIS RESOURCE

As mentioned in the third goal, this resource builds upon the knowledge shared in NRPA's *Engaging Diverse Groups in Building Community Resiliency Through Stewardship* resource. Use these two resources together when considering how to address region-specific challenges and the value of including community voice in this process. They are designed to help organizations and community leaders effectively engage diverse land stewards and volunteers when focusing on a specific region. This resource highlights cases or factors that are specific to the Gulf Coast and provides tailored strategies that consider the unique environmental and cultural contexts of an area. To maximize the benefits of this resource, we will dive into the following topics in greater detail:

- Understanding and Involving Community

- Building Partnership and Engagement

- Developing Programs and Hosting Events

- Embracing Continuous Learning and Development

WHY WE NEED THIS RESOURCE

Understanding region-specific challenges allows you and your organization to better serve your community in addressing environmental challenges while also building trust. Investing in your local community will create buy in, long-term effectiveness and and a robust network of stewards to ensure the viability of a project.

BENEFITS TO YOUR AGENCY

This resource offers local park and recreation agencies a framework for engaging diverse land stewards and volunteers, which is crucial for enhancing community involvement and environmental stewardship. By providing tailored strategies that address the unique environmental and cultural contexts of the Gulf Coast region, this guide helps agencies build strong, culturally competent relationships with their community. This both broadens the pool of potential volunteers and also ensures their contributions are aligned with local needs and priorities, leading to more effective and impactful stewardship programs. The inclusion of best practices and case studies further equips agencies with practical insights and proven methods, enabling them to design and implement inclusive programs that resonate with diverse populations.

Additionally, this resource supports agencies in overcoming specific regional challenges, such as those posed by climate change and environmental degradation. By offering strategies for flexible engagement, skill-based volunteering and disaster response, the guide helps agencies adapt their programs to address local issues while maximizing volunteer participation and impact. By tailoring approaches, park and recreation agencies can effectively mobilize community support, leverage local knowledge, and foster long-term commitment to environmental and recreational initiatives. As a result, agencies can increase their impact, improve community relations, and contribute to a more resilient and engaged local population.

Understanding and Involving Community

Volunteers prepare to plant native grasses and flowers to restore this coastal prairie during a Community Engagement Event at Sylvan Rodriguez Park in Houston hosted by the Houston Parks and Recreation Department.

As a park and recreation agency, you are tasked with serving your community. As a member of it, you will know it better than most. As you are directly involved in your community, note that your experience or that of your colleagues is not universal. It is not effective, considerate or safe to make assumptions about community needs without consistently engaging with your community in good faith. It is important to note that the perception of the history in your community and the role your organization plays in it is fluid. Building trust in relationships and collecting accurate information both take time. It is important to invest time and resources in both endeavors to ensure their success. In doing so, you will be able to effectively mobilize community support and leverage local knowledge and stewardship while fostering long-term commitment to environmental and recreational initiatives.

UNDERSTANDING YOUR COMMUNITY

- **Demographic Profile:** Gather data on the communities you serve, including cultural backgrounds, economic conditions and environmental concerns.

- **Local Networks:** Map out existing community organizations, schools, religious institutions and local leaders that can facilitate engagement.

To effectively engage with a community, it's crucial to understand the populations you serve. This can be started by collecting demographic information and creating a demographic profile of your community. Understanding the nuanced experiences of different people in your community can allow you to engage with them in good faith.

While you may enter this work with the best of intentions, it is important to note that an understanding of a community's history also brings an understanding of the varying treatment of its members. The creation of a demographic profile of your community should be done in consideration of its history.

When building a demographic profile of your community, you can examine the following factors:

- **Cultural Backgrounds:** Identify the cultural and ethnic groups in your area. This information helps tailor communication and engagement strategies to resonate with different cultural values and practices.

   For the Gulf Coast region, there is a large variety of cultural and ethnic groups, including Hispanic and Latino communities, African American populations, Vietnamese immigrants and Indigenous tribes. Recognizing these diverse backgrounds can help in crafting culturally sensitive outreach materials and engagement strategies that respect and reflect the unique traditions and values of each group.

- **Economic Conditions:** Understand the economic status of the community to better address potential barriers to participation, such as transportation or financial constraints. This may involve analyzing income levels, employment rates and economic disparities within the community.

   The Gulf Coast region includes a mix of urban and rural areas with varying economic conditions. Coastal cities like Houston and New Orleans have more affluent neighborhoods alongside economically challenged areas, while rural towns may face additional economic constraints. By analyzing income levels, employment patterns and economic challenges specific to your local area, agencies can tailor programs to address barriers, such as transportation, access to resources and financial constraints.

- **Environmental Concerns:** Determine the specific environmental issues, that matter most to the community, such as coastal erosion, flooding or pollution. Engaging with community members to understand their environmental priorities can guide the development of relevant volunteer opportunities and conservation projects.

   The Gulf Coast faces unique environmental issues, including hurricane damage, coastal erosion and pollution. Engaging with local communities to understand their specific environmental concerns — such as beach preservation, flood management or pollution control — allows for the development of targeted conservation and restoration projects that are relevant and urgent to the community while also addressing environmental need.

Your agency can better understand the relationships between community members and organizations and other groups by creating a map that is informed by the demographic profile. *The Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership* by Rosa González of Facilitating Power is a fantastic resource to map and understand the role that different local networks play or have been assigned to play.

- **Community Organizations:** Map out and connect with local community-based organizations, neighborhood associations, environmental groups and other organizations that share common goals or have established trust within the community. These organizations can be invaluable in mobilizing volunteers and spreading awareness.

   Examples include the Coastal Conservation Association, Texas Master Naturalist and the Mississippi Coast Audubon Society (MCAS). These organizations can provide valuable support and help mobilize volunteers from their established networks.

- **Schools and Educational Institutions:** Schools can be key partners in engaging youth and their families. Partnering with local schools, colleges, trade or vocational schools and universities can facilitate educational programs and student volunteer opportunities.

- **Religious Institutions:** Faith-based organizations often have strong community ties and can serve as a bridge to diverse groups. Engage with local churches, mosques, synagogues and temples to reach congregants and incorporate their values into your programs.

- **Local Leaders:** Identify and build relationships with influential local leaders, including elected officials, community activists and business owners. Their support can lend credibility to your efforts and help in rallying community members around your initiatives.

The stakeholder engagement framework below illustrates the relationship between influence and impact. This can be helpful to consider how your agency approaches part-

nerships and recruit stewards and volunteers. Depending on the type of program or event, it may be more advantageous for you to seek out those who have high impact and low influence, while other cases may be better suited. Consider those who fall differently into the framework.

STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT FRAMEWORK
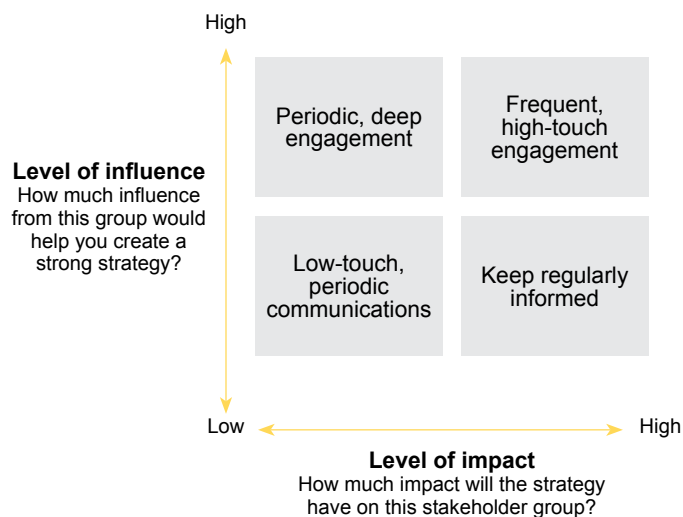
Taken from Community Wealth Partners' *Engaging Stakeholders in Developing Strategies Field Guide*

Both a community demographic profile and network map can be used to understand community needs. This can be used for outreach, and it will help you to have culturally considerate conversations around how community members engage with green spaces. Understanding local needs can be done various ways, such as performing a needs assessment for both your community members and your local environment. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) provides guidance and tools to complete an environmental assessment. It can be found here. By evaluating the needs of your community, local environment and volunteer capacity, you can begin to build programs and events that will provide impactful opportunities for stewardship and volunteerism.

UNDERSTANDING LOCAL NEEDS

- **Environmental Issues:** Assess the specific environmental challenges faced by your region, such as coastal erosion or pollution.

  o The Gulf Coast region is particularly vulnerable to coastal erosion, which affects both natural habitats and human infrastructure. Engage with local experts and agencies involved in coastal management, such as the Gulf of Mexico Alliance, to develop and promote initiatives aimed at preserving and restoring coastal ecosystems.

  o The Gulf Coast is experiencing increased frequency and intensity of hurricanes and rising sea levels. Partner with climate scientists and local emergency management agencies to develop volunteer programs focused on disaster preparedness, response and long-term resilience planning.

- **Volunteer Capacity:** Evaluate the availability and interests of potential volunteers, considering factors like time constraints and skill sets.

  Volunteer capacity in the Gulf Coast and other regions is influenced by the following factors:

  o **Time Constraints:** The diverse schedules of residents — ranging from shift workers in industries like oil and gas to students and retirees — require flexible volunteer opportunities. Offer a mix of short-term projects and ongoing roles to accommodate different availabilities. Also consider environmental time constraints, such as heat waves or hurricane season.

  o **Skill Sets:** Leverage local expertise related to coastal and marine environments. Volunteers may have skills in areas like marine biology, environmental engineering or disaster response. Create roles that utilize these skills in meaningful ways, such as monitoring wildlife, conducting habitat restoration or participating in educational outreach.

- **Motivations and Interests:** Understand the environmental and community priorities of your volunteers. For instance, residents in coastal communities may be particularly motivated by projects related to hurricane recovery or beach cleanups. Tailor your programs to align with these interests to foster greater engagement and commitment.

By contextualizing these steps for your agency's specific region, you can develop more effective and relevant strategies for engaging local communities, addressing environmental challenges and maximizing volunteer impact.

Building Partnerships and Engagement

Volunteers come together to restore coastal prairie by planting native grasses and flowers during a Community Engagement Event at Sylvan Rodriguez Park in Houston hosted by the Houston Parks and Recreation Department.

PHOTO BY KELLI ONDRACEK/PHOTO COURTESY OF HOUSTON PARKS AND RECREATION

This work builds on top of itself; by understanding and involving your community, your agency is creating a foundation from which to build lasting partnerships and engage with stewards and volunteers. Mapping your community networks lets your agency individualize its approach to partnership building.

APPLYING TAILORED STRATEGIES

Build Relationships

- **Partnership Development:** Identify and connect with local organizations and leaders to better understand how you can leverage your work. For example, see if there are different organizations that require community service hours or if stewardship and volunteer experience can be utilized for education credit or employment experience. Your agency may collaborate on

a project or connect at an event your local organization is hosting.

The Gulf Coast has many organizations, community groups and networks of partners committed to maintaining the health of the Gulf Coast ecosystems.

- **Cultural Engagement:** Implement strategies that reflect the cultural values and practices of your target communities, ensuring respectful and meaningful interaction.

This can be done with different focuses. For example, in the Gulf Coast, where wetlands play a significant role in their ecosystem, planning an opportunity for World Wetlands Day increased volunteerism and stewardship. You can do this for specific species as well; for example, portions of the Guld Coast are stopping grounds for migratory birds. Recent scientific studies have found that on average more than 2 billion birds migrate over the Gulf Coast each

year.[1] Building an event that cleans up spaces in time for the migration of hummingbirds, kingfishers and other species not only addresses an environmental need, but also provides an opportunity for partnership with ornithological groups like a local Audubon society or bird watching group.

Customize Volunteer and Stewardship Opportunities

- **Activity Planning:** Design volunteer programs that align with the diverse needs and schedules of your community members. It is important to keep volunteer capacity in mind to inform your opportunities and projects.

Combining community need with community voice allows your organization's programs to flourish. Through continuous conversation and examination of community need, you can shape stewardship and volunteer opportunities that have long-term resonance and durability. By building community into your approach, you are ensuring that creating relevant and engaging opportunities will have impactful results.

DEVELOPING PROGRAMS AND HOSTING EVENTS

- **Implement and Adapt**

Once you gain a better understanding of community need and building partnerships, you can begin crafting and modifying initiatives that serve to address local needs. In the Gulf Coast region, programs that focus on habitat restoration or environmental resilience fall into a larger plan. In Houston, the Riparian Restoration Initiative gained traction when it was included in both the Houston Climate Action Plan and Resilient Houston Plan. Through community input and collaboration, the Houston Parks and Recreation Department (HPARD) has addressed safety and maintenance concerns. Maintenance of the restoration areas vary based on existing vegetation, and HPARD adapts management methods to site conditions and community feedback. This allows for the continuous engagement of volunteers and stewards in the work.[2] Reviewing local and state master plans can be helpful when designing initiatives or programs. The Texas General Land Office has a Texas Coastal Resiliency – Master Plan that may be helpful to Texas agencies to review.

LAUNCH INITIATIVES

- **Pilot Programs:** Start with pilot projects to test engagement strategies on a smaller scale before expanding.

- **Feedback Collection:** Use the feedback mechanisms described to gather input from volunteers and community members.

While launching initiatives may seem like an overwhelming prospect, it does not have to be. Your agency can consider modifying initiatives based on community feedback or looking into larger city plans, such as restoration or sustainability plans, to see how a program can help reach goals the city has set. This also provides an opportunity to build on existing partnerships and have collaborative conversations about what has worked for others.

EVALUATE AND ADJUST

- **Monitor Progress:** Regularly assess the effectiveness of your engagement strategies and volunteer programs.

- **Continuous Improvement:** Be prepared to adjust based on feedback and changing conditions, incorporating lessons learned as described in the guide.

This work is iterative and ongoing. By approaching it from a perspective of continuous growth, your agency can build robust programming that can shift as your community needs and local environments change. Building monitoring tools and spending time reflecting on a program's successes and opportunities for growth allow your agency to continuously adapt. NRPA's Evaluation Resource Hub has different resources and guides for how to approach evaluating your program. Other resources, such as *Codesign Framework*, provide practical evaluation tools. Though they have an educational focus, coupling the resources in Codesign with those published on NRPA's Evaluation Resource Hub can provide guidance and inspiration for how to best evaluate your agency's stewardship and volunteer programs.

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1   Kyle Horton, Benjamin Van Doren, Frank La Sorte, Emily Cohen, Hannah Clipp, Jeffrey Buler, Jeff Kelly, and Andrew Farnsworth. (2019) *Holding steady: little change in intensity or timing of bird migration over the Gulf of Mexico.* Global Change Biology

2   *NRPA Nature Based Solutions for Environmental Resilience Programs.*

Continuous Growth

As mentioned in the previous section, this work is ongoing. We encourage you to embrace this work's continuous nature and explore engagement opportunities. This can be in the form of studying best practices and cases studies, as well as participating in a community of practice or simply building out your partnerships. While your agency is serving your community, there are many agencies out there doing similar work. Connecting with them through networking calls or NRPA Connect will allow you to innovate your approach and continue to engage stewards and volunteers.

UTILIZE CASE STUDIES AND BEST PRACTICES

Learn From Successes

- **Case Study Analysis:** Review the case studies included in the guide to identify successful approaches and practices that could be adapted to your context.

- **Best Practices:** Apply proven strategies from the best practices section to enhance your engagement efforts.

Two volunteers help clear invasive species in a forested section of the Robert C. Stuart Park Nature Preserve during an event.

Share and Collaborate

- **Knowledge Sharing:** Share your experiences and outcomes with other organizations and community groups to foster collaboration and collective learning.

- **Collaborative Projects:** Consider partnering with other entities to amplify your impact and address shared challenges.

Conclusion

Engaging diverse land stewards and volunteers within any region requires a deep understanding of the region's unique challenges and opportunities. By fostering strong relationships, tailoring volunteer opportunities, addressing specific local needs and continuously adapting strategies, organizations can build effective, inclusive programs that enhance environmental stewardship. The Gulf Coast region is a great example of how the inclusion of community voice and regional need can engage volunteers and stewards.

By adapting strategies to the unique needs and characteristics of the Gulf Coast region, park and recreation agencies can significantly enhance their ability to mobilize community support. Tailoring approaches to address specific environmental and cultural contexts not only strengthens community engagement, but also fosters long-term dedication to both environmental stewardship and recreational activities. This targeted effort leads to a more profound impact, improved relationships with local residents and a more resilient and actively engaged community. In turn, agencies can achieve greater success in their mission to preserve natural resources, enrich community experiences, and build a stronger, more cohesive local population.

Resources

- *NRPA's Engaging Diverse Groups in Building Community Resiliency Through Stewardship*

- *NRPA's Community Needs Assessment*

- *The Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership*

    o Charts a path for enhancing local democracies by encouraging deep participation, especially from marginalized communities. By strengthening these democracies, we can better tackle major challenges and effectively navigate economic, ecological and social crises.

- FEMA's Environmental Assessment Tools and Templates

- Community Wealth Partners' *Engaging Stakeholders in Developing Strategies Field Guide*

- *NRPA's Nature-Based Solutions for Environmental Resilience Programs*

- NRPA's Evaluation Resource Hub

- CoDesign Framework

    Research framework and approach that emphasizes the co-creation of research objectives, methodologies, data collection and dissemination among researchers, educators and technology developers.

- Texas General Land Office's *Texas Coastal Resiliency – Master Plan*

DIVERSITY, EQUITY AND INCLUSION DEFINITIONS

The following list has been developed and published with permission from Justice Outside. Find additional definitions online at Brandeis University Social Justice Definition Resource. NRPA also published an updated *Equity Language Guide* in July 2024, which can be referenced as needed.

Ally: Someone who makes the commitment and effort to recognize their privilege (based on gender, class, race, sexual identity, etc.) and works in solidarity with oppressed groups in the struggle for justice. Allies understand that it is in their own interest to end all forms of oppression, even those from which they may benefit in concrete ways (OpenSource Leadership Strategies, "The Dynamic System of Power, Privilege, and Oppression" 2008).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

● Repeat or affirm stereotypes about a socially marginalized group

● Position the dominant culture as normal and the other as abnormal

● Exclude, negate or nullify the thoughts, feelings and reality of a person belonging to a socially marginalized group

● Minimize the existence of discrimination against a socially marginalized group

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

AUTHORS:

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT:

DESIGN:

FUNDING: