



RESTORE
AMERICA'S
ESTUARIES

Fostering Inclusive Coastlines

Summary of Findings For the
Inclusive Coasts Initiative
Workshops





Introduction

Restore America’s Estuaries, with support from the National Science Foundation and our donors, completed six workshops in a series dedicated to increasing equity in grant funding and implementation. Through this series, we engaged with diverse staff from nonprofit organizations, federal, state, and local governments, and community leaders to discuss methods for limiting barriers to receiving grant funds and using funding programs to equitably distribute resources to advance coastal resilience priorities.

In addition to this series, RAE’s Inclusive Coasts Initiative (ICI) was created to lead these workshops, evaluate our current state of equity in grantmaking processes, and find other opportunities for continued learning after the workshop series was completed. The team consists of Samaya Rubio, RAE’s Community Engagement Associate, Dr. Philip McAdoo, Inclusive Coasts Initiative Senior Advisor, Daniel Hayden, President and CEO of RAE, and Briana Yancy, Inclusive Coasts Initiative fellow. They received support from the rest of the RAE staff as well as the ICI working group and from Cristina Mancilla, Environmental Program Fellow.

Thank you!

Inclusive Coasts Initiative Working Group

- Candice Abinanti, National Association of Conservation Districts
- Elizabeth Tully, Wildlife Conservation Society
- Paula Garcia, University of Puerto Rico
- Sebastian Meija, Ohio Department of Natural Resources
- Susan Park, Coastal and Estuarine Research Federation
- Sylvia Troost, The Pew Charitable Trusts



Ohio Department of
**NATURAL
RESOURCES**



THE
PEW
CHARITABLE TRUSTS



National Association of
Conservation Districts



Universidad
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The Inclusive Coasts Initiative (ICI) Team was created to lead these workshops, evaluate RAE’s current state of equity in grantmaking processes, and find other opportunities for continued learning.



The ICI team

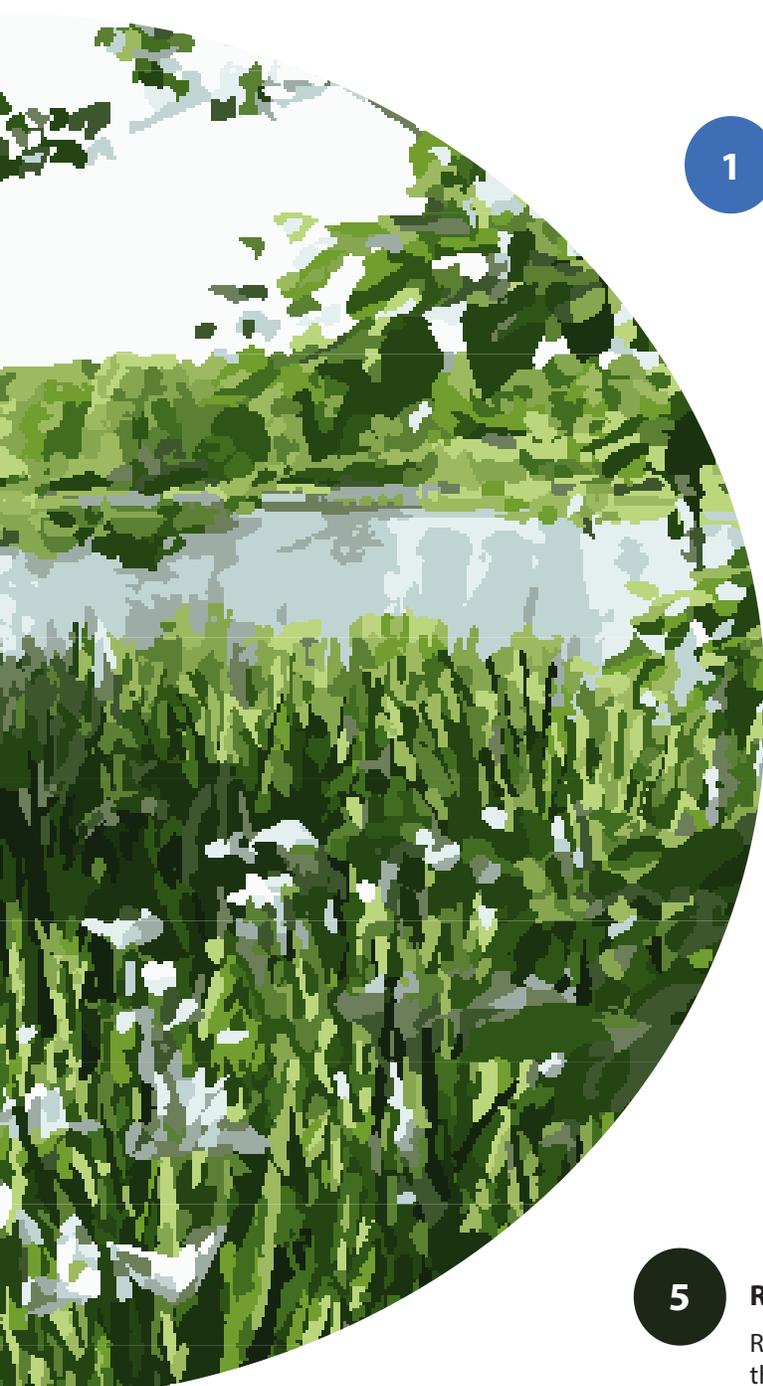
- Daniel Hayden, President and CEO of RAE
- Dr. Philip McAdoo, ICI Senior Advisor
- Samaya Rubio, RAE Community Engagement Associate
- Briana Yancy, ICI Fellow

Additional Support Provided By

- RAE staff
- ICI Working Group
- Cristina Mancilla, Environmental Fellows Program

Key Takeaways

Cross cutting insights from the workshop



Community Engagement is a Skill and Organizational Process

1

Invest in community engagement both as an organizational skillset and an organization process. Relationship building with new stakeholder groups requires skilled staff, patience and must be built into the programmatic processes.

Creatively Fund Multi-benefit Projects

2

Utilize grant funding to meet multiple needs of those you intend to serve, even if they may not perfectly align with the original funding goals.

Acknowledge History While Building a Better Future

3

Building strong relationships requires acknowledging the past and the impacts it has on the present and future.

Emphasize Learning by Providing Feedback

4

Providing feedback to applicants at the different levels of the application process can create lasting positive relationships and bring stronger applications into future rounds.

5

Reduce Barriers to Applicants

Reduce barriers to participation in the grant application and the program planning as much as possible. Consider your audience and try to tailor the application/event to that group.

Key Takeaways

1. Community Engagement is a Skill and Organizational Process

Investments in community engagement are a key component to successful projects yet are often neglected as part of funding opportunities and project planning. Throughout the Workshop Series, we heard from participants that dedicated time spent on community engagement was often difficult to justify in budgets for already expensive projects, but the fallout and issues that arise from not engaging properly can be even more costly. Hiring and retaining skilled individuals with experience in community engagement is critical to present and future success.

Some strategies project implementors can take to successfully engage a community prior to a project are attending pre-planned community gatherings, such as events at public spaces like libraries, city council meetings, block parties, school programs, or art events to reach people with different interests and experiences within the community. While it may be difficult to add a line item in the project budget for, “block party attendance,” getting to know the community and consistently showing up at events that are relevant to them can help to build trust and establish a collaborative relationship. This investment can also lead to increased attendance at the organization’s events, more community input for projects, and better programs overall. Many participants noted a struggle to budget time and money for community engagement and conversations at these workshops reinvigorated their desire to advocate for that time.

Another key part of community engagement that is often overlooked is information dissemination. If an organization is not reaching part of the community, the organization is missing out on different opinions and potentially key allies or partners for projects. We encouraged participants to consider diversifying the methods used for outreach like mailing letters, door hangers, posters in commonly frequented places like laundromats, grocery stores, and restaurants. Ensuring all parts of the community receive information is critical to successful engagement.

Similarly, successful community engagement is a continued commitment and should not be simply a box-checking exercise to get a project approved. One critical measure of successful community engagement is creating space for genuine feedback from community members. The engagement should occur before the final plans are made so that adjustments requested by the community can be discussed.

The same set of approaches should be used to gather post-project feedback as it will help inform future efforts. We gathered post-project feedback from the ICI Workshops and found that the most effective and desired portions of them were the small breakout group sessions. Based on that feedback, we decided to focus our energy on facilitating those conversations and de-emphasize bringing in external speakers.

2. Creatively Fund Multi-benefit Projects

Another way implementors can create mutually beneficial relationships with communities is being open to multiple benefits from a project. Sometimes communities have a strong desire to see something implemented in their area that might not strictly align with the set mission, but they are important to the community. An example of multiple benefit project is adding a space for children to play safely while working with them to install permeable pavement and rain gardens. This project would meet the community need for a space for children to play while also meeting the goal of reducing flood damage in an area. Meeting community needs strengthens relationships and encourages future collaboration.

One example of a mutually beneficial project is from RAE’s National Estuary Program Coastal Watersheds Grant program. Project implementor, the Lowlander Center, an organization dedicated to supporting Southern Louisiana’s lowland people and places through education, research and advocacy, received funding to plan and permit marsh restoration. That funding not only catalyzed restoration, but also provided direct economic benefits by employing Elders for their traditional Indigenous and ecological knowledge and helped the communities strategically choose restoration projects that protected sacred sites. While cultural site preservation was not a goal of the National Estuary Program Coastal Watersheds Grant Program, the Lowlander Center’s proposal contributed to coastal restoration while meeting a community’s economic and cultural needs.



Left to right – Kristina Peterson, Lowlander Center; Katie Dehart, Atakapa-Ishak/Chawasha Tribe – Grand Bayou Village; Suzanne Van Cooten, NOAA; Deputy Chief Crystlyn Rodrigue, Grand Caillou-Dulac Band of Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw; Elder Chief Shirell Parfait-Dardar, Grand Caillou-Dulac Band of Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw; Dr. Eugene Turner, Louisiana State University



Marsh in southern Louisiana showing land loss

Key Takeaways

3. Acknowledge History While Building a Better Future

Community engagement does not happen in a vacuum, as a community's history can have a significant bearing on their willingness to spend time with, and getting to know, organizations trying to engage with them. Often, a community, especially those that have been historically marginalized or disengaged, will be reluctant to work with nonprofits or government entities because of broken trust. One strategy to work with reluctant communities is to acknowledge the hurt that similar organizations, possibly your own as well, has caused. We encourage compensating community members to provide feedback on potential projects. Afterward, come to the community with a plan for how the proposed project will be different from past engagement. Acknowledging the harm of environmental organizations is critical if you want to create a strong working relationship for the future.

One of our workshop speakers, Heidi Nutters from the San Francisco Estuary Partnership, discussed some of the lessons she has learned from working with communities who have experienced generations of unfair treatment in the San Francisco Bay area. One of her key suggestions was to start building trust while project planning and design in the early stages rather than engaging further along in the process. Heidi also explained how important it is to be cognizant of the historical injustices perpetuated by organizations, including conservation groups, in communities you are working with. Heidi's takeaways ring true in urban and rural areas, reminding organizations that conservation work is not without its own history of oppressive policies in varied locations across the country. To successfully create strong relationships with communities, we must acknowledge the historical injustices as we build for the future.

"We do a disservice when we don't put equity front and center"
- Heidi Nutters

4. Emphasize Learning by Providing Feedback

Many grantors run competitive awards programs that seek to select the "most worthy" projects. This involves generating lots of interest and then weeding out proposals. Many grantors than can claim how oversubscribed their program was and how much unmet demand there is – all essential data points for raising more funds. However, how does this help the organizations that applied? They have used precious resources to apply for a grant only to hear "no."

We need to refocus the grantmaking process to not just a competitive one, but also a learning opportunity for submitters. Grantors should block time to provide feedback to applicants and grantees to improve their applications in the future. The feedback can focus on what they needed to do better in their application and approaches for future applicants. By providing feedback, we can help improve the overall applicant pool for future funding rounds and make grant programs more equitable. This feedback exercise can also help even the field for applicants who may be applying for funding for the first time with those who may be consistent recipients of large-scale funding. Equally important is blocking out time for feedback during the grant management and reporting process to ensure grantees are completing requirements correctly. For many organizations managing grant funds is routine, but funding organizations need to expand the number and types of organizations that can effectively manage funds. This experience managing projects will also help increase the organizational capacity of submitters, ideally leading to an increased likelihood of getting future grants.

In RAE and CITGO's Caring for our Coasts grant program, we have been able to provide feedback to applicants during the application window so they can adjust their applications before reviews. The feedback process has led to more projects designed to benefit marginalized communities receiving funding because the applications are competitive. Not only have we provided feedback before the full review and selection process, we also provide feedback after the selections have been made, which gives both selected and unselected applicants a chance to review their applications and have them ready for the next round of funding. This process creates a positive relationship between grantee and funder and has helped to improve the program's reputation for equitable funding.

Key Takeaways

5. Reduce Barriers to Applicants

Funding organizations have many requirements that they pass down to grantees. Some of these are necessary, but they may not add value to the overall program or the funded projects. To the greatest extent possible, funders should design their systems from the perspective of the awardee, focusing on how the process or data makes the program and awardee stronger. The workshop series uncovered some ideas to help funders reduce barriers at the application, management and reporting stages.

One common obstacle is the requirement for match. The idea of match is to show that the applicant has a co-investment in the project and is not reliant solely on the funder for the project costs. Underpinning that idea is a skepticism of organizations that apply for grants. Match requirements can be met in creative ways. The first way is to think of a grant program as a pool of grants not just a series of grants. One creative method to meet grant programs' match requirements is to create a match bank. With this approach some organizations that are overmatched serve as a "bank" for others who cannot fulfill the requirements, which helps them as a collective meet the match requirement.

Another creative method for meeting the match is the grantee serving as the match bank. At RAE we have a match bank for our federal awards programs like Southeast New England Program and National Estuaries Program Coastal Watersheds Grants that by federal policy must have match. However, RAE is in fact the grantee, and then we sub-grant to other organizations, which allows RAE to act as match bank. In these programs, applicants can request a full or partial waiver from the non-federal match requirement. If an organization applying for one of these programs fills out a match request, it does not guarantee that their request will be granted. RAE also ensures that the request for match does not positively or negatively impact the applicant's chances of receiving funding. The choice to creatively meet match requirements enables organizations to apply for a grant before they can find match and to fund organizations that might not

have access to match funding. This creativity is one way that funders are attempting to improve access and equitable distribution of grants to organizations who may not have as much reserve funding to apply for federal funds.

Other barriers to funding for community-based organizations include legal status requirements. For some organizations, becoming a 501c3 organization requires a significant amount of time, especially for organizations with a small or no staff. For example, Charlotte Clarke from Common Ground Relief in New Orleans spoke at the "Designing Your Program" workshop and explained that while her organization is doing incredible work, they are often ineligible for funding because they have not obtained 501c3 status, which can serve as a high burden for smaller organizations. Many private funders and foundations have the opportunity to waive these requirements with little risk to grant making quality. If providing the organization a grant is too big a step, some grant programs may allow for the organization to be contracted to do similar work instead of receiving a grant.

Application and reporting requirements can serve as a similar barrier for organizations with small staff, as they may not have the time or capacity to organize all of their activities and maintain a healthy reporting relationship with funders. Minimizing and streamlining application requirements so the application matches the amount of funding will encourage applicants to apply. It is helpful to remember that time is money for applicants and they must feel like their time is worth the money. There is a similar situation with reporting requirements, giving multiple options for organizations to choose how often they would like to complete reports (ex: quarterly or monthly), can open opportunities for organizations with smaller staff to participate in grant programs. Another barrier that can be reduced is the final report format. Creative methods like video, client testimonials, or extended conversation may be just as effective as a formal, written report for some grant programs.



Match Bank Concept



**Funding entity has
match
requirements**



**Awardee accepts
requirements at
the grant level**



**Applicants for the
sub-award apply
for a match waiver**



**Awardee nets out
the over match
with the
undermatch to
achieve
requirements**

Overview of Workshop Series

RAE created the ICI Workshop Series with regular feedback from participants and partners. RAE selected the topics discussed at workshops with the ICI Working Group, a group of influential professionals with diverse careers in the conservation and restoration community as well as an initial survey sent to early workshop participants.

Through working group meetings, we decided on the topics:

- Improving equity in grantmaking;
- Rethinking your application process;
- Partners, community, and program design for funders workshops
- Understanding your community;
- Building partnerships with your community;
- Designing your program for implementors

We narrowed these broad topics by examining current research around best practices as well as presentations from knowledgeable guest speakers. At the end of the presentations, we encouraged participants to ask questions of speakers before joining breakout sessions to meet fellow attendees and discuss the topics and how they relate to their own experience.

Thank you to the speakers at the workshops:

- Ms. Margaret Gordon, Co-Director of the West Oakland Environmental Indicators Project
- Kirin Kumar, Deputy Director of Equity and Government Transformation on the California Strategic Growth Council
- Susan Park, Executive Director of the Coastal and Estuarine Research Federation (CERF)
- Mariah Davis, Deputy Director of the Choose Clean Water Coalition (CCWC)
- Sydney Godbey, the Manager for the Northeastern region of the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation
- Sierra Fernandez, Strategy, Evaluation, and Learning Associate for Keecha Harris and Associate
- Suzanne Simon, NEP Coastal Watersheds Grant Program Director at Restore America's Estuaries
- Rubie Coles, the Program Director for Diverse City Funds
- Alex Rodriguez, Environmental Justice Specialist from Save the Sound
- Heidi Nutters, Senior Program Manager of the San Francisco Estuary Partnership
- Charlotte Clarke, Co-Director of Common Ground Relief in New Orleans



What's Next

The enthusiastic response to the ICI Workshop Series, along with feedback from participant surveys, catalyzed our decision to create the ICI Community of Practice (COP) groups. Our workshop attendees reported that the most impactful portion of the workshops were the breakout group discussions and peer feedback. As a result, the Community of Practice groups will provide a unique space for people across sectors to communicate, question, and share lessons learned.

Participants in these groups are encouraged to share their experiences with varying topics selected by their peers. Each session focuses on broadening the conversations from the ICI workshop series and deepens the connection between the concept and the implementation in individual organizations. The participants bring ideas and leave with a sense of empowerment to implement changes based on their conversations with their peers. Already, we have heard consistent positive feedback from attendees reporting that they have made adjustments to their own grant programs, outreach strategies, and communication methods. The ICI team is looking forward to the concepts discussed reaching the implementation stage through the Communities Of Practice.

Community of Practice groups, are split into three broad groups based on job category

The three categories are:

- **Community Engagement and Environmental Education Professionals**
- **Program Managers**
- **Restoration Professionals**

RAE created these categories by monitoring job boards and surveying staff of organizations likely to attend these sessions. Thus far, the Communities of Practice have been successful, with a large uptick in registration numbers compared to registration numbers for the ICI Workshops. Attendees are also more diverse than those at previous workshops, especially in terms of geography.

As of the date of the report, we have held three rounds of monthly Community of Practice meetings. The first sessions focused on establishing the intent of the group, coming to consensus about topics each group would like to discuss, and creating a layout for future meetings. The second and third Community of Practice sessions delved into the topics established in the initial meetings, with participants coming with questions and concerns and leaving with peer feedback, as well as a desire to implement ideas within their own organizations.



The ICI team has many plans for the future of these workshops, like paying experts to come to Community of Practice sessions to help facilitate conversations, creating and monitoring a platform for participants to discuss with their peers between sessions, and co-facilitating sessions with passionate members of the groups. We look forward to seeing the continued success of these sessions.

One of the many things RAE is doing to ensure success is readjusting promotion practices to help reach participants. We found that the earlier and wider we promoted the workshops the higher the registration numbers. Another note we will be continuing to implement is having multiple avenues available for feedback. We had great success with short surveys on Zoom during the ICI workshop series and have expanded the methods for feedback for the ICI Community of Practice groups to include access to editing guiding documents, and hopefully creating a communications channel for participants to use between sessions that will be monitored by a member of the ICI team.

We look forward to the future of the Inclusive Coasts Initiative. We plan to continue to motivating professionals in environmental restoration and conservation with the knowledge and experience they need to feel confident making changes to their organization to align themselves with equity and access concepts.