

Community Engagement Transcript

Rukmini: Hey everybody. This is Rukmini from NRPA, and you're listening to the Guardians of Green Spaces podcast, the show that explores water conservation from a park and recreation maintenance lens. Today we're talking about community engagement with Viniece Jennings and Shaundon Moore, and we'll discuss everything from overcoming challenges to the big dream: your park users becoming your cheerleaders.

Could you introduce yourselves briefly for our listeners?

Shaundon Moore: Hi, my name is Shaundon Moore. Most folks locally know me as Ranger Shaundon. I'm a naturalist for DeKalb County Parks. DeKalb County is a metro Atlanta County, specifically stationed at Arabia Mountain Nature Preserve, which is by far our largest green space in the whole metro area, about 10,000 acres, which of course include the mountain we're known for, but also a whole bunch of other habitats, including lakes, streams, and wetlands as well.

Viniece Jennings: Hi there. I'm Dr. Viniece Jennings. It's, such a small world. I'm from DeKalb County where Shaundon mentioned he works, but by training, I'm an environmental scientist and also known for my work at the nexus of urban green spaces and public health.

Rukmini: Thank you both for being with us. I wanna start with some background. This episode is about community engagement, and I wanna start with just what is community? What is community engagement? And if you could then move to how community engagement is an important part of the conversation around water conservation in parks.

Viniece Jennings: Great question. Well by, you know, formal definition, you know, community often describes a group of people who live in the same location or a group of people who have common interest. But the tricky thing when it comes to community engagement is that community can be interesting to find because defined because of, The geographic level. It could be a neighborhood, it could be people within a particular county. So that scale is very interesting. But it's important to also note that communities are not a monolith. It's made of different people from different walks of life. They have different priorities and practices and knowledge bases. So community has a very rich structure in it. But it can also be interesting in the engagement process.

Shaundon Moore: Yeah. For me, I broadly would describe community engagement as relationship building. More than anything else. It's helping to form a shared understanding of what are we trying to achieve? What am I doing as kind of the steward and park manager for this space. What interests do you have out of this space and what collective benefits are we getting together?

Having the community on board with everything you're doing at your site is critical, and the success of pretty much everything we do is gonna be dependent on if the community understands or at least broadly supports what's going on.

Viniece Jennings: So I think, uh, fundamentally, you know, when we think about not only community, but the relationship when it comes to water conservation, it is really important to get back to that consciousness of just remembering that water covers a large, amount of the, the Earth's surface, it's also a big part of our own human body. So trying to separate our dependence and need on water quality is, is one that would be very

shortsighted. But when I think of the convergence between water conservation as well as communities, I think it's an opportunity to really elevate what we may perceive as the watershed. You know, from the environmental standpoint, the watershed are these different, uh, whether it's streams, rivers, lakes, that you know, compose the landscape and the water that is included in that.

And communities have this landscape of people and different social experiences. So when we really scale that up from thinking about our relationship with water, but also our relationship with one another, these are two, two very key items that have to be in congruence in order for us to make some progress.

Shaundon Moore: I agree with that. There's a disconnect that slowly forms in park environments a lot of times between like, you know, I'm gonna say the park agency, I'm gonna say the community, and I'm gonna say the, the landscape. And if we're looking at the lens of the community, the park users, if they have a negative relationship or a disconnected relationship with the landscape. First, they're not even gonna understand like, why we're doing the things we're doing, right? Like, what's the point of these maintenance projects? What's the point of like these maintenance schedules? Um, why are we closing parking lots? You know, why are we closing bridges? Uh, why are we limiting certain parts of the habitat for them to visit?

It requires just this understanding of like how the environment works, right? And then, from the community's connection to us, the disconnect is that there's a lack of trust in what we are doing, and that what we're doing is not only for their benefit, but for the benefit of them and the natural resources we're all benefiting from.

And so without that trust and relationship between us, there could be like backlash, there could be a shift in where people want to, prioritize where we put our resources and our funding, and so kind of reconnecting all of these relationships between us, between them, between the land and all of us is huge in terms of both getting the, the support you need verbally, physically, financially, and helping a lot of these to be successful.

Viniece Jennings: I could, um, also add too, when you were, when both of you were bringing up those points, I think, you know, fundamentally when we prioritize something, we should also maintain it. And that's where the valuable work of maintenance staff is so important. But while we have that in mind, you know, when we value water conservation as we value our communities, the operations of that extends beyond, um, staff on parks and in other green spaces.

So that's where us realizing. Our role as environmental stewards, but also our role as members of the community to keep in mind that maintaining these spaces is important for all of us, but for the community at large. So it really becomes this partnership of realizing we are a part of the solution, but we can also inform it as well.

Rukmini: Thanks y'all. I wanna get to what good community engagement looks like, but first I wanna get a little bit more specific about what is the problem. You know, what have we seen? Why, why are we doing this episode? Um, and so I wanted to ask you all, you know, what's the challenge here that's being met by good community engagement? What are the challenges around water conservation projects where community engagement can be the solution?

Shaundon: The primary challenge that we are dealing with is an issue of resource and capacity limitation.

As I already mentioned, we are a huge green space. In addition to that, just due to our name recognition regionally, we get thousands of park visitors, every single week. And sometimes, due to our name recognition regionally, we get thousands of visitors every single month and sometimes every single week. And so we also have an issue of upscaling of small problems. Like we often don't have little litter problems. We have huge litter problems because they're coming from thousands of people. We have lots of illegal dumpings.

We have a huge issue of vandalism, and it's mostly just due to the fact that we get so many people here that even a small percentage of people doing bad things in the park ends up causing massive amounts of damage. And so we lean on community engagement to help fill in the gaps we have and meeting these maintenance needs and supporting our conservation and restoration objectives.

They can support directly through volunteer work with us and collaborative projects with us. They can even do their own independent work with us as well, primarily with cleaning up trash, but there's some other stuff as well. For a lot of the neighbors of the space, they can support us by taking better care of the plants in their yards and limiting invasive encroachment from their yards into their preserve.

Viniece Jennings: Thank you for that. Um, something that, you know, even as, as Shaundon was speaking, but also just that larger conversation that we were mentioning before, I think the challenge can come from different angles, whether it's that disconnect between the perception and the connection that we have, not only to water resources, but green spaces in general when it comes to just that perspective of environmental quality. But, you know, there's that popular saying of trust the process.

However, if something that we have to be reflective of is do the community trust you and then do the community trust your process. So when that is missing, that's where, uh, it can really dismantle effective engagement. Because there can be concerns about, is something performative? Is it disingenuous? Is there some ulterior motive in the room? So when we think of different resources such as the speed of trust and really getting to the bottom of it, some areas really realize it comes to that exchange of understanding.

And there are different ways that this can show up in the conservation space. So for example, place-based conservation speaks to a community that's being engaged and actually is in partnership with conservation efforts. Right. But there's also that, that piece of really thinking about the conditions, but also the processes that are involved in authentic engagement and the way that shows up, when I think of some previous research or projects.

Thinking of how, what, are the best ways to communicate with this group of people? What are the mediums, what are the times of the day, of the 99 problems that this community is thinking about, why is this important and how does this become a bridge to those issues? Because it really causes you to really think about not only what were the challenges that you planned to address through a project, but what were the challenges they were facing prior to, to you, engaging with them.

So there are different ways that, um, the construct of place-based conservation, can be described and, but it really speaks to the community being a part of the project for the community's benefit as well. So with that insight, whether we've seen place-based conservation and coastal areas, marine ecosystems, but also when we think of populations who have some cultural or social understanding that we may not necessarily understand at the moment, that becomes really important because it, it, when you, when that isn't happening, you're leaving a

lot of that know that local knowledge, on the table. And that part is gonna be a big, ingredient of the social fabric for that project to really mobilize with the community.

Rukmini: Can either of you provide an example of that, just something to help folks visualize what does that look like?

Shaundon: The type of engagement that you do is obviously gonna be dependent on the type of park you manage and your local community at minimum.

It's best to start with your core constituency who is directly utilizing or benefiting from the services that the park provides. And usually that group is the easiest to reach. 'cause all you gotta do is be present. So what we do is that we'll actually just station ourselves at the main trail heads or parking lots during the highest activity periods of the week.

And we just sit there and chat with people. And sometimes we'll bring, you know, bottled water or tea or something as an extra incentive for people to talk with us. But really just there to say, hi, welcome to the space. If you have any issues, questions, or concerns, we're here to receive those. And it's a small act, but it's had very powerful results.

And you start to shift your mindset from feeling okay with, you know, litter and vandalism to, more corrective and more positive actions to the landscape. And that's what you want to do, right? Because again, we're relationship building here and relationships take time to form, but it always starts with the, hi, my name is such and such, and that is what these face-to-face onsite interactions are designed to do.

If you don't have the type of park where people visit regularly to recreate or something, sometimes you have to create invitations to bring people to the space instead. Socials have been one of our most successful and popular ways of achieving this. We've done potlucks, we've done chicken and waffle socials. The chicken and waffle socials are actually kind of funny. Because, you know, some colleagues, you know, feel a bit weird about why what's chicken and waffles have to do with your job?

And what we've been able to achieve with chicken and waffle socials is that we've given an invitation for people to come listen to us. Um, we have busy lives. Time is a valuable thing. And just putting it out there, Hey, master plan meeting, this is your time to give your opinion. The average person is not gonna invest their time in coming to a, you know, hour and a half master plan meeting.

But when you host a chicken and waffle social, give people an opportunity to fellowship, to meet with other local community members and chat with us and meet us as Rangers and park staff. We can also work in the opportunity to say, Hey, while you're enjoying your food, we wanted to let you know that we have a master plan coming up that's actually being drafted.

And this is your opportunity to give your thoughts on the trajectory of how you think this place should be maintained and things you like and dislike and maybe this is also the opportunity to share why bridges have been closed and why parking lots have been closed. We also utilize these socials to explain why we've closed off certain bridges and closed off certain parking lots for stream bank restoration projects and the whys and the hows and the what's of that project so that they understand, that it's not just for us to be a nuisance on them and

their, you know, park visitation, but that there's a legitimate reason and to explain that and other maintenance issues like our mowing schedule, right?

We've utilized these social gatherings to share critical information and educate the community and park users on how we are maintain maintaining the space, why we are maintaining the space and what they can do to support. And when you utilize all of these different methods, you start to form a committed base of park users.

And since most of these people are probably already invested in the park space, it's a lot easier to get them on board to support other objectives. We have a community of volunteers, I'm gonna call them at Arabia, that I call our community rangers, and they are fantastic. Again, we're talking over 30 miles of trails, right? There's no way the park staff are hiking all of those every single day. But leaning on these community members, we now have a whole cohort of them that are sending us regular updates on things that they are noticing at the preserve, wildlife issues, vandalism issues, park maintenance issues, uh, with facility issues. And so they basically act as extra eyes and ears.

We've, you know, went from a staff of what is basically five at the preserve, with the addition of our community stewards, we'll call them, you know, have somewhere up to 12 to 15 staff members effectively and what we are able to accomplish and it allows us to more efficiently direct the resources, our park resources.

Viniece Jennings: So, there, there are different ways that people interact with, with water resources that can be in parks. They can also be even in their own residential areas that align with these spaces. And some research out of, out of North Carolina showed even the different preferences that people have from a landscape perspective.

And the reason that is important from the social aspect is because neighbors, there's, there's been research, for example, in journals such as *Frontiers of Water*, *landscape and Urban Planning*, *society and Natural Resources*. Just talking about that social influence of people's preferences with water resources.

But this is important because those behaviors may encourage or they may strain water resources, right? So that's why really tapping into that social ingredient is really important. But even to one of the points that was made earlier, I think this is a tremendous opportunity for people to see and understand and, and, uh, be reminded of the tremendous work from people that are in, maintenance operations for these spaces, because that overlaps even some of the physical, but also the social expectations of parks and recreation.

So for example, in my work on, urban Green Spaces and Social Cohesion, we've seen how some social byproducts or different outcomes are really, really important for communities. That could be opportunities to develop place, attachment, belonging, empowerment, and even social support.

However, if that space is not well maintained, is this gonna be a space where you feel comfortable with your kids are playing, where others may get into this water resource or use this water resource? So those are really important because that shows critical ways that park maintenance and operations overlap the satisfaction that people have with their communities and the opportunities to be in these spaces.

Rukmini: That's a perfect segue into moving into what success looks like. And so, yeah, I'll just ask it very plainly. What happens when things go well? What does it look like?

Shaundon Moore: Success can be hard to quantify, and oftentimes it doesn't manifest until a few months or even years down the road. But there are some broad patterns and signs that you would like to see and that we are starting to see here that are pointing to yeah, this community engagement is working. It's helping our park operations overall, and I can give you two broad buckets for that at least.

The first broad bucket, I'm gonna call the litter to visitor ratio. Generally, we want to see less time, less staff time being invested in dealing with litter issues and more park visitation.

Right? And when you see that ratio increase towards the park visitor side, that's a hugely positive sign. Not only are you engaging more people and bringing more people to this space, but their overall impacts collectively are lessened as well. Which points to that, there's a behavioral shift that has occurred, and also now that this behavioral shift has occurred, you can now redirect your park resources into other things, those bigger projects.

So those, more hidden projects that aren't front facing. And I use litter 'cause it's the easiest example. But you know, there are lots of other, I'm gonna call them petty park maintenance issues that we all deal with, the vandalism, the illegal dumping, all the other stuff as well. We basically get to invest less time into that and focus our efforts elsewhere, which is very valuable.

The second bucket is again, around this staffing capacity and increasing the amounts of staff resources that we have. Overall combining the, the less upscaled, litter and vandalism issues and the increase in staff capacity we are getting through these community members who are now invested in the space, not to mention the subset of volunteers who are now publicly advocating for the space as well and helping to attract more, resources and funding to this space.

Combine all that together, we've effectively been able to increase operational capacity at our park, substantially. And that's something that shouldn't be ignored.

Viniece Jennings: I would, uh, also add, there are different layers to what success can look like, uh, from an environmental standpoint. I'll admit it. I've been, I've been a nerd a while, but I think just really reactivating opportunities, for environmental education and environmental stewardship. Our first environmental literacy, realizing the value of water resources, realizing how our actions are connected to the quality and quantity of water resources is something that we cannot underestimate.

From the standpoint of, um, community engagement, I think the success is really when there's an exchange of knowledge and resources and support, not only between the community, but also with, staff when it comes to park maintenance and operations, because we're relying on each other in terms of really being partners in that shared goal of protecting water resources, but also uplifting the community.

Even with those particular pieces, it's really that relationship that's built on a mutual respect and understanding of the expertise and knowledge of both of those groups. But realizing, during different times of, of transitions, whether that's at a state or or broader area, this becomes an opportunity for communities to really advocate for their park resources, making sure that they show up for times, even if, park operations needs funding.

So again, it becomes this symbiotic, understanding of the value of these spaces, the value of the water, but also the places that we're all fortunate to reside in.

Rukmini: I think we just have one last question here, which is about best practices. So I think, y'all have shared some really great examples of where things have gone well and we also explored, you know, what happens when things don't go well. And so I think sometimes people struggle to take the first step or know how to improve a relationship that may not be working.

And so I wanna ask you both to share your best practices and your principles when it comes to doing robust community engagement.

Viniece Jennings: Great question. I think, uh, some best practices. Start with, just be humble. In terms of really just realizing that you, in, in any relationship, you are having an opportunity to learn from someone else, and that requires you to really, have an interest in understanding them, have an interest in understanding their world, and how the two of you can attempt to be cohesive in that.

So I would say to really, um, to be humble about it, but also to have that spirit of learning, the spirit of really being open to, to the information that you shared, to acknowledge any disconnects that are already existent so that you can really address any possible elephants in the room.

When I used to teach, community-based research, I would often tell students, you wanna make sure, that your project is not the expensive gift that someone did not ask for. This is something you're very passionate about, but if it's not really, addressing a need, if it's not something that's a priority, you can't be very surprised when it, you may not get the support that you want from a, uh, research perspective.

Sometimes people may use the, the step or practice of doing a community needs assessment where you really gauge what is important, and even from the environmental lens when it comes to water resources or different environmental projects, what is gonna be the impact on the community? Really thinking about that. So that once you have that baseline of knowledge, you're in a better position to communicate that within as well as outside of your organizations.

It becomes that part where when you engage the community, they become a part of the cheerleaders for the work that's being done. You know, because then you don't have to, expend as much time to say this is what we're doing and this is why, why it's important. When you have those community advocates who know the resources that you're helping to preserve, when they know how much your staff is doing, they become a part of your advocates. And that's really important when we think of budgets, when you think of, um, competing interests that are going on, the community can become a big part of the cheerleaders that are making you to do your work more effectively, but also have funding for it.

Shaundon Moore: and yeah, it's about building that regenerative relationship is something I always say, right? And that we are both have agency and are active cogs in this environment, in this ecosystem. And, you know, good. Productive, healthy community engagement, you start to form that regenerative force where people aren't just like benefiting from it.

Now they're actually contributing to it, right? They're not, they're cheerleading for it. They're, they're not just supporting it, but then they're like telling their friends about it and telling their family about it and telling their communities about it. And, and that they're becoming advocates on your behalf.

They're becoming stewards on your behalf. And it also makes our job a lot easier. We can invest our resources much more efficiently. and everybody benefits. Of course, the environment benefits 'cause everybody's just loving on the environment.

Rukmini: Thank you, Viniece and Shaundon, for sharing your expertise on community engagement and its impact on park maintenance, including on water conservation projects. Check out our other episodes on water conservation tools, including gray water reuse and sustainable turf on guardians of green spaces. We appreciate everyone listening and reminder: answer our key question, and you could win a \$50 NRPA store gift card.

The Guardians of Green Spaces Podcast is created by the National Recreation and Park Association with support from the Scotts Miracle Gro Foundation to support park and recreation staff implementing water conservation best practices and tools. The Scotts Miracle Gro Foundation supports efforts for social and environmental change in communities across the country.