**Heritage narratives: A community engagement tool**

**Purpose/Goal:**

**Heritage narratives** are “broad renditions of a community’s history…the character of its people (both past and present), and its trials and triumphs over time” ([Bridger, 1996, p. 355](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1533-8525.1996.tb00743.x)). These stories emerge when people in a community are trying to develop a response to a new challenge. There are often multiple heritage narratives told by different groups in a community, which can constrain land planning practices when proposed actions conflict with a community’s heritage narrative.

By learning of these diverse stories of a community, it is possible to better understand the reasons for current approaches used in environmentally related initiatives and any conflicts that exist between groups involved in these initiatives.

* For example, in Detroit, Michigan, residents who declined to have a street tree planted in front of their house by a non-profit organization indicated they had challenges with property upkeep due to the city’s declining population and economy, and little help from the city to care for street trees. Therefore, they wanted more decision-making power about the types of trees planted, and assistance with (or information about) tree maintenance before accepting a tree ([Carmichael and McDonough, 2019](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/08941920.2018.1550229?casa_token=oaI4v6v6tTIAAAAA:ugHbJxfyUPjhydvSE25A66zhwRM5ULU1DKT-xg5GKk1iCraZUKXLNjdxzsc-CbiJfERMJW7zbwsk)).

**Advantages/Strengths:**

Understanding heritage narratives is helpful when:

* An organization or agency is working with a community or group with whom they have previously had conflicts regarding land use or environmental decision-making.
* Cooperation between groups with diverse histories in an area is needed, and the relationship is new or not yet well-established.

**Limitations:**

* In cases of existing conflict between groups, it may be helpful or necessary to use a trained facilitator to elicit heritage narratives from all involved and guide dialogue about how to build bridges between groups based on this knowledge.
* Where a new relationship is being developed between groups, one group may need to identify “key informants” in the other group or community to serve as a trusted liaison.

**Number of people:**

* It is usually best to identify heritage narratives in one-on-one conversation or in small group dialogue (e.g., 4-5 people) and to collect narratives from at least a few people in each relevant group/community. However, you can continue this process with as many people in a community as necessary to understand the full range of relevant narratives. You’ll know you can stop when you are not hearing any new narratives in dialogue.

**Amount of Preparation:**

* It may take time initially to identify who you want to gather heritage narratives from—in essence, who is part of the groups or communities you need to work with? Be sure to hear narratives from at least a few people in each group (e.g., renters and owners; volunteers and board members).
* Once you identify participants, schedule a time to talk with them and be prepared to take detailed notes (or have someone with you who can), or audio-record the interaction to listen to the narratives again later (ideal).
* Alternatively, you can schedule a time to go door-to-door with a leader in a community, if you want to talk with a variety of residents in an area.

**Technique Length:**

* Usually between 20-30 minutes, can be shorter or longer depending on the situation.

**Resources Required:**

* Notepad to take notes and an audio-recorder (if the participant consents to be audio-recorded).
* An open mind and ability to listen intently to the participant’s story. People may stop talking honestly with you if they get the impression that you are not truly interested in understanding their perspective. Instead of judging their stories, stay curious.

**Steps in Process:**

1. Identify participants, or leaders in a community who can introduce you to participants.
2. Ask a few key questions and take detailed notes or audio-record the interaction:
3. What is special about this community (be as specific as possible in your language—e.g., this neighborhood, this organization)?
4. What are some of the major challenges you are facing in this community? Why?
5. What have been your experiences with [natural resources] in this community? (Again, be as specific as possible: Experiences with trees? Parks? Wetlands?)

**Follow-up:**

* Highlight key themes, phrases, or ideas in your notes taken during the interaction. If you audio recorded the interaction, listen to it afterwards and write down key themes, phrases, or ideas (e.g., noteworthy positive or negative experiences with trees)
* Share your findings with the participants you collected narratives from to check for accuracy and to discuss next steps for managing the land in a way that is responsive to the narratives they shared.

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