Promoting Equity in Outdoor Recreation and Community Engagement around Arsenal Wildlife Refuge

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Preface

This document was prepared for U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service staff for the implementation of the recommendations and application of the deliverables of the Listening to the Community Project. The final report centralizes around amplifying community voices of diverse backgrounds, therefore the phrases marginalized groups or special populations refers to people of various and diverse identities including, but not limited to: individuals living with disabilities, individuals in low income or economically disadvantaged groups, LGBTQ+ community members, BIPOC, undocumented individuals, English learners, houseless or unhoused individuals, those historically marginalized, silenced, or oppressed by frameworks or larger institutions, amongst others. Finally, we would like to emphasize that the statements in this report do not necessarily reflect those of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service or the Rocky Mountain Arsenal National Wildlife Refuge and are those compiled through the social science research led by Lacy Consulting Service LLC.

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Introduction

The Rocky Mountain Arsenal National Wildlife Refuge (RMANWR) has focused efforts to align with community interests while maintaining natural landscapes and conservation goals in an urban setting. As part of their commitment to community engagement, staff felt that hiring an external consultant to conduct focus groups in the surrounding communities and interviews with staff would result in outcomes that would inform the movement from concept to action. Lacy Consulting Services (LCS) was contracted to assess the Refuge's Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) engagement with communities neighboring the Refuge. Specifically, the project scope focused on understanding the demographics, interests, and perceptions of the following areas that neighbor the Refuge: Aurora, Green Valley Ranch, Commerce City, and Montbello. Here, we present a complete synthesis of our work.

This final report is the culmination of three project deliverables that focused on local community engagement and the Rocky Mountain Arsenal National Wildlife Refuge: 1.) The demographic report (Appendix 1) of the four neighboring communities utilized census data to better understand the diverse identities found in these areas; 2.) The gap analysis (Appendix 2) identifies and explores the differences between the community and Refuge staff perceptions on the status of engagement and partnerships; and 3.) This final report comprehensively features the most salient concepts or takeaways from the overall project to elevate community voices such that it shapes RMANWR's engagement strategy. In addition, we provide further context by connecting our findings with the literature and previously conducted studies at the Refuge to demonstrate how the emergent themes from our interviews and focus groups reinforce existing calls to improve equitable engagement moving forward.

In this document, we first provide background about the RMANWR relevant to the aims of the project. Then, we address the results of the project posed with evidentiary support of participant quotes and documented literature for key emergent themes of the community focus groups and staff interviews. In addition, a combination of a GIS-based network analysis and statistical analysis of socio-economic data was used to measure equity of access to the RMANWR. The discussion section highlights the application of the ideas summarized in the first two deliverables. Lastly, we conclude with final thoughts for the future of RMANWR engagement and partnerships.

Background

By design, as an Urban Refuge, RMANWR is intended to "improve lives by expanding access to green space, education, and outdoor recreation for Americans living in and around cities" (USFWS, 2021). Furthermore, community needs are the first criteria of focus the U.S Fish and Wildlife Service

(USFWS) has outlined in working towards removing social and historical barriers to strengthen communities and conservation efforts (USFWS, 2021). RMANWR has made efforts, through the USFWS 10-Year Urban Wildlife Strategic Plan, to also expand the definition of traditional conservation by making the commitment to engage new ethnically diverse audiences and create positive conservation experiences. Within the conservation sector, there has also been new movement in researchers and practitioners exploring new ways of conducting more inclusive and participatory conservation that meet locals interests while also reaching environmental objectives through incorporating indigenous knowledge (Hernandez & Spencer, 2020), co-developing projects (Nel et al., 2016), focusing and relationship building (Stern & Baird, 2015), and decolonizing the early conceptualizations of nature that created the conservation movement (Mullenbach et al., 2022).

Initial efforts to amplify community voices at the Refuge began shortly after the completion of remediation in 2010 when a study investigated the ways in which Refuge staff, visitors, and local community perceive the Refuge's history in influencing restoration and management practices (Havlick et al., 2014). In 2014, the implementation of the Understanding Urban Audiences: Community Workshops in seven wildlife refuges, including the Refuge, found similar perceptions to the previous 2010 study where visitors and land managers favored restoration as the primary focus and value of the Refuge (Havlick et al.,2014; Dietsch et al., 2014). Citizen groups, mostly members from the Refuge's local neighboring communities, prioritized cultural and historical features of the Refuge (Havlick et al.,2014; Dietsch et al., 2014). In response, there was an expansion in goals to promote the Refuge's ecosystem services, community advantages, and the direct benefits that natural spaces provide to people and neighboring communities (Scholte et al., 2016).

USFWS has already created other opportunities to introduce more diverse audiences to USFWS, through expanding Refuge volunteer opportunities and Refuge partners (Sexton et al., 2015). To address the issue of urban community participation in conservation efforts, USFWS developed Conserving the Future: Wildlife Refuges and the Next Generation in 2011 (USFWS, 2011). The program was a call to action for the Refuge System to work beyond traditional conservation goals, revive established partnerships, increase wildlife-dependent recreation to diversify and increase the number of conservation supporters (USFWS, 2011). Other ongoing efforts to improve visitor Refuge access are underway through the Rocky Mountain Greenway Project (Sexton et al., 2015). It was started in 2012 as a federal, state, local, and stakeholder-led project to create infrastructure additions along 56th, creating greenways, and walking access points based on user feedback to increase visitation for previously

inaccessible audiences (Sexton et al, 2015). These efforts meet some of the accessibility needs and voiced interests of the community.

Currently, the Refuge has expanded even further through centering diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) to advance their engagement and community work through the Promoting Equity in Outdoor Recreation and the Community Engagement around Arsenal Wildlife Refuge Project: Listening to the Community Social Science Research Module. When specifically framed in urban conservation work, DEI principles are highly necessary to offset the historical exclusions of marginalized communities in participating and accessing natural spaces (Garrard et al., 2018; Mullenbach et al., 2022). Additionally, within conservation and scientific organizations themselves there are several aspects of systemic discrimination and lack of representation perpetuated by internalized biases and the legacies of colonialism, racism, ablism, and misogyny (Chaudhury & Colla, 2021). There is documented pushback within government agencies in the efforts for environmental justice and DEI focus conservation practices (Tarin et al., 2021).

As this is a document intended for application by USFWS, it is important to pose some common ideas of organizational DEI pushback. To begin, a common area of pushback is against more inclusive, historically marginalized or underserved, minority, or BIPOC-focused initiatives being perceived as violating an agency or organization's obligation to be impartial to race, and therefore promoting more colorblind ideology (Harrison, 2019). However, as further elaborated within this report, one person's perspective cannot account for all lived experiences concerning the outdoors. A common stereotype of low income or diverse socio-economic populations is that they are viewed as irresponsible, uninterested, or unaware of the importance of environmental or conservation practices (Harrison, 2019). Therefore, common organizational pushback is framed as a waste of resources to engage low-income groups of diverse backgrounds due to their lack of interest. These ideas stem from a colonialist view of land use, management, and conservation practices that are historically rooted and has barred marginalized groups from natural spaces and hindered their ability to utilize them as they see fit (Chaudhury & Colla, 2021; Mullenbach et al., 2022).

Another common tactic of pushback is for organizations and agencies to undermine environmental justice or equitable conservation reforms by satisfying them superficially. This approach ensures that the staff or agency is not held accountable for actual implementation or change in practices (Harrison, 2019). The prioritization of environmental goals and "conservation first" mentality also creates pushback from staff or implementors as DEI aims may seem out of the organization's scope (Harrison, 2019). This view reflects "fortress conservation" a common theme in traditional conservation.

Fortress conservation prioritizes conservation practices that separate people and nature by focusing on preserving biodiversity and removing people from landscapes, a strategy founded in colonial and racist ideologies (Dowie, 2011; Mullenbach et al., 2022). While at times difficult to grapple with and dissect internally within organizations, it is important to bring awareness to these themes prevalent in today's conservation field. Projects such as these, however, make strides to ensure that diverse voices are represented and amplified to promote more equitable practices.

Results

Concept 1: Accessibility

Accessibility, while a standalone concept, also includes thematic elements that are intertwined into each of the other four concepts. The theme incorporates aspects of physical access, however it is truly characterized by more abstract ideas. First, there are physical access barriers that prohibit certain demographics from accessing the space. These barriers have, for the most past, already been identified by the Refuge and has led to the pursuit and creation of infrastructure to support access. The other, more intangible concepts, however, will require further dissection and reflection of the other themes found within this project to fully understand the breath of their impact and disentangle the influence on perceived access.

Transport

Four out of the eight staff interviewed recognized socioeconomic factors as affecting the neighboring communities. These included constrained time and limited social capital to fully engage with RMANWR. Summarized by staff ,

> *"There's a lot to be explored and I'm excited for it. I think it's just... It does take a lot from both sides. We're asking people, especially if they're low-income and they have a lot of other things going on in their lives, multi-generational family household, or even if it's a single parent, then they might not have the time to come out here and enjoy the nature even if it is only a 15 minute drive."*

> *"There are a lot of barriers for their entry into enjoying nature. Some physical ones, like the highways that surround these cities. Money. So transportation. Working two jobs".*

> *"And then as far as our lower income neighbors, I do think there's those financial barriers."*

> *"So when you come from a lower income family where you were maybe working a couple of jobs, it ain't... […] It ain't easy and it isn't, "Well, time to spend time with the kids."*

Identified by staff, primarily for visitors and community members with families, is a need for after workday-hours or weekend programming at the Refuge. Whether it is because parents are working during the Refuge's hours of operation or over the weekend, it is perceived as incredibly challenging or nearly impossible for parents with limited availability to bring their children to events. Adding to this challenge was perceived low walkability to the Refuge from closely situated neighborhoods and lack of pedestrian-friendly infrastructure particularly for children or others that do not have transport access. A staff member raised concerned,

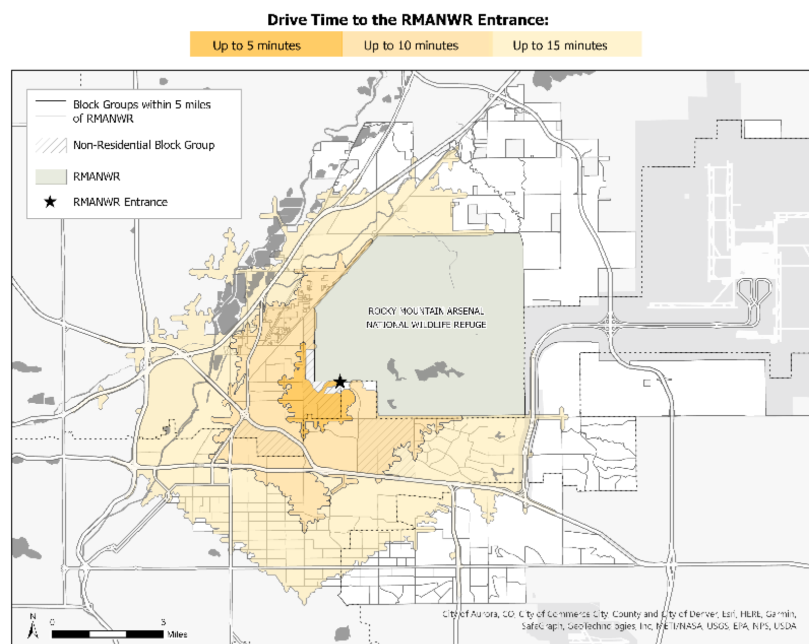

Figure 1. Drive times from neighboring block groups within 5 miles of RMANWR.

> *"I just really would like to emphasize is the public transport and how you can get here without a car. Even if you're trying to get here by bike, you still must be ready to really go a long way. And it's just not something that's easily accessible for people that live even just a block or two away".*
>
> *"I think we're a little bit far off the streets, which there's nothing we can do about that, but it's not as accessible as suppose if you were to live right off of Quebec, for example, to just get to the visitor center."*
>
> *"If they're going to walk up here, it's a little bit too far I think for most kids to walk. There's no public transportation here. There are all kinds of transportation issues and safety issues in terms of getting here. And then I think just, I'm not sure I'd let my kids just come out here on their own".*
>
> *"But also, there's transportation barriers. I mean, we've had our rangers before be like, how could I get to work using public transportation? Basically, the answer is you don't."*

As voiced by the staff members, walking to the Refuge may not be feasible for all from an accessibility, distance, and comfort perspective, especially if aiming to form new visitor engagement and relationships. As demonstrated in Figure 1, driving, dependent on your neighborhood of origin, can take up to 30 minutes roundtrip. Notably, increases in drive time from the Refuge entrance coincides with neighborhoods of lower median income (Figure 2).

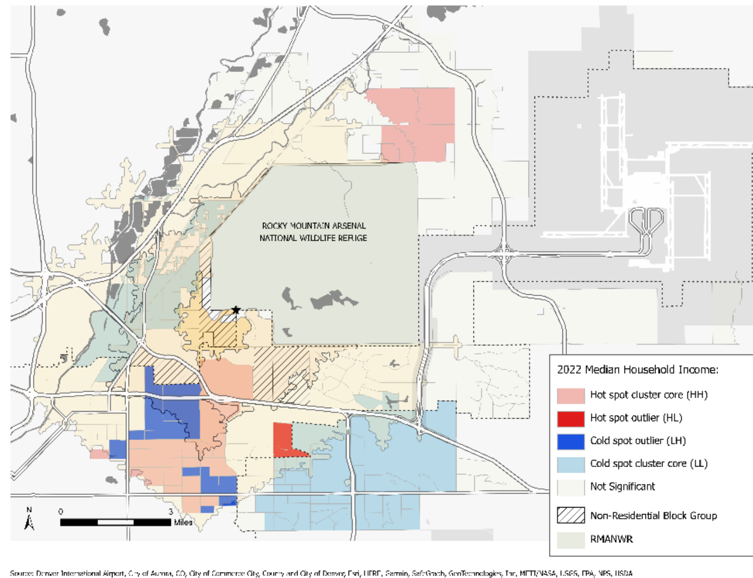

Figure 2. 2022 median household income cluster analysis for neighboring refuge block groups overlayed with a drive-time network analysis

To provide visual representation of drive time limitations, Figure 2 demonstrates statistically significant areas of block group clustering based on Median Household Income displayed with areas of high median household income displayed in pink (a hot spot cluster) and areas of low median household income displayed in light blue (a cold spot cluster). Outlier block groups are shown in bright red and dark blue. A bright red block group denotes an area of high median household income within a statistically significant cluster of low median household income block groups (i.e. High-Low designation). A dark blue block group denotes an area of low median household income within a statistically significant area of high median household income block group clustering.

As stated within this project, transportation and access to the main entrance continues to be an issue promoting sentiments of inaccessibility especially by those in specific areas. Staff ideas to improve transportation included,

"*We do need just a bus that drops off in front*",

> “*having one of the, either a bus line or actually one of the light rails come up to the soccer stadium. And right to our entrance here and be the end of a spur over the line or whatever.”,*
>
> *“if we had a consistent bus route that was on Quebec that you could walk into the refuge, that would change things for people I think”.*

Linking direct public transport drop off points to the Refuge was a common staff opinion and certainly aligns to community participants comments where the long distance from public transport points and the visitor center were mentioned. However, one staff member cited that Colorado mostly depends on personal vehicles for transportation. Noted in the demographic report (Appendix 1), less than 5% of the population in all four neighboring areas relies on public transport as their main form of transportation (U.S Census Bureau, 2020). Although only a small percentage of the population relies on public transport, promoting direct transit access will still support and facilitate Refuge access for populations that do not have any other forms of transport and are therefore less represented at the Refuge.

Infrastructure

Perceived inaccessibility to the Refuge begins before visitors even consider a transportation plan. Many contributing factors to perceived limited community accessibility included the fence line, discomfort of outdoors or with outdoor recreational activities, cultural-socio economic factors, awareness of accessibility to the public, institutional association, fear of being unwelcomed, and accessing the main entrance, all of which have been documented in previous literature and in the recent interviews (Dietsch et al., 2014). Staff interviewees were aware of many of the accessibility issues in terms of physical access; however, one aspect not mentioned is the main entrance’s location. The Refuge’s main public entrance is closely situated to a neighborhood previously called Stapleton, now renamed Central Park (CBS News Colorado, 2020). Participants of a previous study indicated that the location of the entrance to Central Park, a typically affluent area, may be perceived as catering to high-income demographics (Sexton et al., 2015). Without preexisting knowledge about the function or importance of the Refuge, the community could fail to see the Refuge as an asset available and accessible for everyone, especially when perceived negatively or impacting their daily lives. As an example, community members’ commute times are lengthened when they must drive around the Refuge perimeter. As stated by a staff interviewee,

> *“ But even when I'm trying to come from their place to my home, I have to drive all the way around the refuge. And it just is like this really big burden to have to drive around it, because there's only one entrance and you can't really easily drive through it. And you're just thinking like, "Wow, this would be so much faster if I didn't have the*

refuge there." Especially if you don't know that the refuge is something that you can go to. You're seeing it not as a community asset, but rather as a burden".

Additionally, for community members visiting the Refuge, driving past certain points on the premise triggers their GPS to direct them to the Havana exit, a staff only exit. This poses both a challenge for Refuge law enforcement and confusion for visitors who are, to their knowledge, following credible instructions. Staff pointed out that signage was unclear stating they sometimes had to intervene on their way home from the RMANWR to aid visibly distressed visitors trying to exit.

Community Inclusion & Ownership

Community participants related inclusivity and ownership to understanding Refuge conservation actions. In the following examples, community participants mentioned their perceptions of what is needed to feel included:

> *"To include us on their activities, I mean to make sure our community knows what is happening there".*

> *"I think that that's important, that it should feel like it's a place that we have access to and have a sense of belonging about since it's so close. It makes. That makes sense.*

> *"I'm telling you, I've never heard about it, never hear about it on the news, or see advertisements anywhere. We need to get familiarized with the Arsenal, we need to know it's there, it's close by, it's open; start going, hear about it on the news, advertisement, to know more about the activities… then I think I start building a relationship & loving the place & wanting to go & be part of it."*

Staff also mentioned hearing of public interest in knowing what sets the Refuge apart from other natural spaces as well as a desire to engage in behind-the-scenes or conservation-based activities. A staff member proposed the idea that increased knowledge behind Refuge conservation activities may help to garner public support. They held the belief that providing explanations behind conservation or management strategies implemented on site and emphasizing how these efforts at the Refuge are part of a larger national mission, will capture visitor interest and subsequently generate community interest. This idea would echo several community members' desires of feeling included in the Refuge's decisions. The sharing of information and Refuge plans serves more to promote transparency and foster inclusion. Both concepts facilitate rebuilding of trust and community ownership of the Refuge and therefore further interest and inclination to engage with the space.

Outdoor Recreation

The Refuge is on the national radar as a place where one can get lost in nature, spend time among wildlife, all while being in an urban area. For some visitors, this unique setting is reassuring for their safety and proximity to assistance or emergency services if needed. A community participant stated:

> *"Even though it's not the city or it's not the neighborhood, it's very different once you're on the grounds. The proximity of home makes me feel more comfortable exploring and being, than I would maybe further away in the mountains where I don't have any ties".*

It provides an ideal opportunity for new outdoor enthusiasts to feel as though they are exploring a new hobby or activity without feeling too isolated. The Refuge can expand engagement through emphasizing its location and the facility it provides. Visitors react very positively once on the Refuge grounds. Staff reported visitors are amazed the space exists and that it is free and open to the public. Adults and children alike are thrilled to interact with the wildlife, see bison, and marvel at the proximity of Refuge to their homes. Staff believe visitors are mainly interested in the Wildlife Drive, fishing, picnicking, and photography. Repeat fishers tend to be from local communities since they can more easily stop on their commute home from work. New visitors tend to go to the Visitor Center for information then either explore on their own or participate in an established activity. Based on staff interaction with visitors, questions for staff are generally geared at learning about short-term activities or engagement opportunities lasting approximately 2-2.5 hours.

Visitors commonly ask, according to interviewed staff, about what programming is available that day, what activities are okay to do with children, or what can be accomplished in an afternoon. While staff are aware that there is a lot to see and do on site, visitors are not always equipped or adequately prepared to take full advantage of the offerings. Articulated by staff,

> *"I think there is a lot of barriers, especially in the local community, with comfortability with outdoor activities and there's a monetary threshold for the gear that you feel like you might need for fishing, archery. I mean, the archery stuff especially."*
>
> *"And then there is just kind of that outdoor barrier fear where, oh, I want to go hiking out here but maybe I don't have the right gear for just that. Even though you don't really need anything, I think there's that perception that maybe you don't have the right gear for whatever outdoor activity you're trying to do."*
>
> *"Yeah. You have to be prepared. You have to think ahead. And I know most people do not think that way".*

One staff member raised an interesting point that while drop in events can attract or provide flexibility to some patrons it can also contribute to planning and gear issues. They expressed,

> *" I think everyone would tell you this as well, that it's more of a drop-in, or it's an experience that doesn't always have to be so pre-planned. Also something that maybe you needed gear for that you didn't have gear for."*

Staff also provided anecdotes of visitors who come with a baby carrier and not a stroller and, therefore, cannot go on long, unpaved hikes as an illustration of limited participation in activities based on inadvertent lack of preparation. Acknowledgement of the forethought and preparation necessary to adequately access and enjoy the Refuge is essential for changing some staff's perceptions surrounding engagement and programming. Through this understanding, staff can begin to grasp that many factors are at play when cultivating accessibility and ultimately, emphasizing that the responsibility of cultivating engagement cannot be placed mainly as the community's responsibility.

As these limitations have been recognized by some staff, to mitigate preparation needs, they proposed the idea to establish a gear library as well as introductory activities or clinics where visitors are taught how to use the equipment appropriately was proposed. This staff member described the idea as:

> *I would love to see us have a bigger gear library and just rentable things, and I think the local community would like that if they had that free thing they could go do, maybe drop in classes, that kind of stuff. That would be a little bit of an intro so it's not as daunting to go out and do it somewhere else. If you decide, oh, I really like fishing, maybe I will buy a fishing pole and go in the mountains and do this. I would like to see that sort of more building comfortability with the outdoors, with the local community, and I would think that would be something they'd be interested in too. I'm in Colorado because of outdoor things and I associate living in Colorado with being easy access to outdoor activities so I want that for them too."*

This would grant visitors the opportunity to gain exposure to new activities, in a safe and guided setting, promoting ease and comfort when engaging in outdoor recreation. Similarly, some staff expressed interest in integrating new spaces and reimagining current usage to cater various demographics and accessibilities.

> *"When we have so much land here and so much to see here, I think that there's more we could be doing that would specifically cater towards people that have different abilities, have different... Even just different sizes of people. If you're a tiny toddler, it might be really difficult for you to do a half mile loop. That might be okay, but one of the bigger stretches of hikes that we have, that might be more difficult."*

Staff have noted requests for more multigenerational programming from members of the community. Other ideas were to incorporate a nature play spaces, playgrounds with structures made from

surrounding landscape and vegetation, as they would encourage families to engage with Refuge on a regular basis. It could additionally serve as a juncture into other nature-related activities such as hiking for families who otherwise view the Refuge as an ambiguous open space. In terms of volunteering, staff reported community interest in low-impact and short activities like seed collecting as opposed to pulling invasive plants. As a staff interviewee pointed out, volunteer opportunities must be meaningful for community members. A community participant summarized their interest as,

> *"I think if it's making an impact in the overall community, I could consider it mine or part of my community, even if I'm not going there in the flash. If kids are taking field trips there and learning about cool things, then, yeah. I think it would count as part of our community".*

By directing more efforts for the local community to become more familiar with the Refuge, USFWS is aiming to integrate community concepts into conservation-based structure of the Refuge. If the Refuge can demonstrate its goals represent the values of the local neighboring communities and the urban landscape as well as its long-standing commitment to conservation it will be possible to promote the space as a hybrid, social and ecological, setting (Havlick et al., 2014). The difficulty comes in identifying the community's values that align within this space, as community interests are not commonly based on impacts to the larger ecosystem or conservation planning, but the contributions made to the larger community's interests.

Concept 2: Trust

Relevant to Federal land management agencies, conservation social scientists have documented instances where local perceptions of mistrust, exclusion from planning processes, language barriers, and safety have limited perceived access to public spaces (Dunfee et al., 2019). While traditional land management conventional goals may not see the importance in this barrier, trust between land management institutions and stakeholders are a key factor in reaching natural resource conservation goals (Cvetkovich and Winter, 2003, Davenport et al.,2007, Vaske et al, 2007; Stern 2008, a,b; Stern and Baird, 2015). Creating the trust necessary for successful partnerships, however, can be difficult. As described by a staff interviewee,

> "*We have to understand that the approach needs to have a little bit of grace, I guess*

Four types of trust, each equally part of the Trust Ecology Framework, have been documented as all essential to conservation and natural resource management (Stern & Colman, 2015; Stern and Baird, 2015). They are dispositional, rational, affinitive, and systems-based trust (Stern & Colman, 2015). Based

on the information gathered throughout this project, we will adapt the four types of trust to the current perceptions of community participants, staff, partnerships and programming to highlight opportunities for development.

Dispositional Trust

Dispositional trust is the pre-disposition to trust or distrust in whichever situation (Stern and Baird, 2015). Often this type of trust is developed by personal ideas, histories, personalities, and general ideas or branding of a particular situation (Stern and Baird, 2015). Additionally, dispositional trust sets the foundation to be able to build other types of trust (Stern and Baird, 2015). One key concept effecting dispositional trust in the neighboring community/Refuge relationship is institutional historical context and marginalized groups. There are multiple barriers to accessing the outdoors and public lands for minoritized and historically marginalized groups that have been documented in growing literature that examines equity in traditionally white spaces. Defined by Kirmayer et al, 2014, Historical Trauma or the impact of violence, is the cultural suppression and oppression of people who have a collective identify, racial or ethnic background, gender, or sexual identity, that effects beyond the generation who lived through the specific event (Kira, 2010; Kirmayer et al., 2014).

Historical and contemporary practices have created deep mistrust among communities of colors, federal institutions, and nature-based experiences (Dietsch et al., 2021). Minority and marginalized groups have had to grappled with the implications for limited access to institutions within the United States, including natural spaces and national parks (Roberts & Rodriguez, 2008).Limitations to access has led to the minoritization of certain groups in natural spaces through oppression, trauma association, segregation, immigration penalization, land theft, conservation practices and policies, and codification of race to inhabit certain spaces (Deloria, 1988; Brahinsky et al., 2014; Finney, 2014; Taylor, 2016; Rothstein, 2017; Dietsch et al., 2021). The culmination of all these events have resulted in the normalization of minority groups being seen as disconnected from or uninterested in natural spaces and outdoor recreation (Dietsch et al., 2021). As community participants summarized the concept,

> *"If it was a place that was really comfortable to Black and Brown folks... Seeing more Black and Brown folks would make it seem like it was... It's hard. It's like, what comes first? The chicken or the egg, right?"*
>
> *"I feel like that's a different experience than other people who don't look like me, maybe people who are white, would have in this space"*

This perception has also been observed in staff interviews when they are speaking about engaging with the local communities. Presumably they are directly referring to BIPOC communities and other marginalized groups due to the specific diverse target audience the Refuge is interested in engaging with and the main demographic makeup of the four neighboring communities. Staff perceptions explained,

> *"this is not a part of their community. And I don't use the culture because that's not really what I mean, that's not their culture. But just how they function as a community. Things like the conservation of what the refuge system does just has not really been part of their history of their type of communities, that I've seen".*
>
> *"It doesn't cost to come out here and it's free. I think it's more of just... I don't know, I think maybe some families, they don't have any experience with being out in nature. So it's not something they even think about. And that's why I say you got to get at the kids."*

As it is recognized by staff and voiced by some community participants, it can be an implied sentiment held within BIPOC and other marginalized groups in proximity to the Refuge's perceptions that the natural space essentially is not catered to their diverse groups. Minority groups are subject to and can regularly be retraumatized by historical and current events, and daily interactions, therefore still associating past experiences to current ones where they have a higher degree of danger or cultural loss than white counterparts (Dietsch et al., 2021). According to BIPOC community perceptions,

> *"I feel nervous because I've had more, either microaggressions, or people say weird non-welcoming things than I've had people say welcoming, nice things. I mean, it depends on each person, but because of those experiences, when I get approached by people, I get nervous. I'm like, "What are they going to say here?"*.
>
> *"I feel so often when I've been approached or my friends have been approached, it has been about... I don't know. I talked earlier about people's perspective around the way the land should be used or whatever, and sometimes when people approach, it is to either question if I know what I'm doing or if I'm where I'm supposed to be. I don't ever feel like I'm doing something bad. I'm just enjoying the, whatever, but sometimes I think people feel the need to tell you the rules, even when you're not breaking the rules. They feel like they want to just make you look like someone who might break the rules. I'm going to preemptively tell you what the rules are. I feel like that's a different experience than other people who don't look like me, maybe people who are white, would have in this space."*

Lack of trust poses a significant barrier to conservation engagement, use of public lands, science communication, and ultimately interactions with government agencies, again highlighting the importance of building trust, recognizing historical context, and reconciliation for past inequities (Stern & Baird, 2015; Martin et al., 2016; Canfield et al., 2020). Developing this level of trust is especially

important for BIPOC and marginalized groups simply due to the historical trauma affiliated to similar natural spaces and the impact it will has on creating partnerships in the present.

Rational Trust

Rational trust is based on the likely outcomes of actions (Stern & Baird, 2015). For example, rational trust in the Refuge is dependent on the local communities' assessments on what they think will be the expected outcome of the Refuge's actions. If the community's expectations about the outcomes are generally positive, then rational trust is high. Therefore, rational trust is dependent on past performance and consistency as the Refuge, in this case, and its past rapport with the neighboring current action in question (Stern & Baird, 2015). For the Refuge, the spaces' history of contaminated land creates an unwillingness to enter this space rooted in health and safety concerns. Relating to the theme of hybrid space commonly found in military -to-wildlife spaces, the proximity of communities to the Arsenal influenced the social construction and collective memory of the land. Acknowledging the interdisciplinary characteristics of military to wildlife spaces is essential to reshaping the site as it works to understand all aspects of the transition of the space rather than erasure (Havlick et al., 2014). More than visceral, the development of trust is informed by some community members' generational trauma caused by exposure to contaminated land and groundwater (Havlick et al., 2014). Being in such proximity to witness the changes and having been directly impacted by contamination has created a long-lasting impression about the Refuge for some community members. One community participant explained*,*

> *"I know that that space was very contaminated, I just don't feel comfortable, I kind of feel disgusted by the thought of the contamination and I also worry about how I can be affected by the contamination. I would like to know how they cleaned up the area*".

Unfortunately, the impact of what occurred at the Refuge prior to USFWS management still has current implications to its perception today and management similar to the community concerns after the remediation (Havlick et al., 2014). Though it is interesting to note community participants' general lack of awareness and information about restoration efforts. Several participants voiced wanting more information about the remediation and how it was performed stating,

> *"Providing a "remediation report" on the area, I don't know if the public has access to that report, I haven't looked it up".*

While information on the remediation is publicly available, creating easy access points for this information promotes transparency and reassurance.

A way to perhaps increase rational trust is to increase information transparency about the Refuge, the remediation, and cultivate more of the image of a hybrid space emphasizing both the historical, sociocultural, and ecological components to the Refuge. Transparency plays a key role in rational trust, as the community can only base its opinion of the Refuge and its actions based on the past actions it can readily reference. Community participants stressed,

> *"we don't receive information on what's going on in there" and needing "Information about what it is, what is there for, their purpose & activities".*

Without clear knowledge or information, community members will refer to whatever past associations they have with the Refuge, federal land, and natural resource management. To be able to convey the Refuge's community-oriented priorities, efforts to communicate information must be made on multiple levels.

Affinitive Trust

Affinitive trust is cultivated through social connectedness such as positive shared experiences, perceived shared identities, and assumed shared values (Braithwaite 1998, Cvetkovich and Winter 2003, Stern, 2008b; Stern & Baird, 2015). This type of trust develops through creating meaningful personal relationships through positive social or interactions, organizational expression of similar values, and a demonstration of active listening about community concerns (Stern & Baird, 2015). Affinitive trust can be seen as intertwined with Refuge community ownership. As the community's sense of ownership or partnership with the Refuge is contingent on if they feel their identities and values are also the Refuge's. The community will come to this conclusion based on the visitor interactions and experiences they have on site. For many community participants, they did not feel Refuge ownership due to the lack of awareness they had that the Refuge was open to the public and their perception of limited Refuge community involvement. However, one participant's opinion of Refuge ownership demonstrated its ties to affinitive trust,

> *"I mean, it's a nice place. If someone were to ask me, "What is your favorite outdoors space?" I would probably, more likely, talk about a place closer to me that I could get to, like my park that I could walk to, because I see my neighbors, and I see people that look like me. That feels more like my space than the wildlife refuge, but it's a nice place".*

As articulated by the interviewee, community ownership stems from so much more than events and programming. It is encompassing of community representation and therefore a reflection of community values within the space. These community perceptions demonstrate how important representation is to some participants,

"What could they do to make the place seem more welcoming to Black and brown folks? I think that is who is working there. Do I see people that look like me? Do they have events that I think speak to my own.....You like to see yourself reflected in a place, right? What are cultural ties, I think, to different communities that make it feel like communities want to be in that space? Do I see stories that reflect me and my community in that space? Yeah. I think just how I feel reflected and represented makes me feel more like the space is for me, right? Then I feel better about going there and being there a lot."

"Most of the time when I go to Arsenal, I have used the... maybe it's Lake Mary, or there's Ladora. I don't know. There's a trail that goes around the lake. I've only been to their visitor center once, and that was because I'm a member of Environmental Learning for Kids. They did a program there that was a lot of families of color, and I decided to bring my family to go see it. Before then, I hadn't. I don't know. I don't bring my family too often. Sometimes I meet friends. But I will take the lake, and there's certain places you get on the lake where it can seem intimidating. Especially when you're going around, and it seems far from everyone, and you see a lot of people that don't look like you."

Intimidation brought about by institutional spaces, particularly for BIPOC and other marginalized communities/groups, are often shaped by power differentials. Perceived roles and previous experiences with community members or visitors permeate into how authority presence (rangers or officers) interact and interface with the public. In the community focus groups, law enforcement interactions are perceived as stern, authoritative, and strict. As described by these community participants,

"It seems a place is being protected for a reason, so visitation is probably welcomed, but with, maybe, some strict rules."

"I know they are very strict, once I heard an officer talk to a couple who had their dogs unleashed and the officer said something like," You better get those dogs on leash before I come back or else, I'll give you a ticket" the tone of voice was not friendly more of an intimidating tone. I wouldn't like to be approached like that."

"Yes I've always felt safe, although it could be intimidating, because, a refuge has very different rules & regulations very different than a National park, State Park, public parks it can be confusing; […] having a Ranger or K9 officer approaching you can be intimidating."

"I think I trust them, but I feel I can get in trouble not knowing I'm doing something wrong."

Community members are also cognizant of context specific variations when assessing a staff interaction as well as differences in each staff members individual approach. Community participants when evaluating staff/ranger roles used statements like "keep us safe outdoors", "they're just doing their job", and "protect the land". Using each interaction with visitors as an opportunity to cultivate this affinitive trust could help facilitate its growth for the Refuge's larger aims. Using trainings or a standard

script to engage with visitors in a way they identify as positive could be a start. For example, this community participants described their idea of a positive interaction with staff,

> *"I think a positive experience is either one where there's a friendly greeting, and you're kind of left alone, or where the interaction doesn't assume a deficiency, right? It doesn't assume that I don't know what I'm doing or that I'm not in the right place or that I'm preemptively going to break the rules. One that is genuinely, I'm just like any other visitor, which sometimes I'm like, "Do you approach every visitor," to like, just being treated like every other visitor really."*
>
> *"I would say respect on both parts is a really big one for me. As long as we're talking and communicating in respectful manner, I don't see why I wouldn't feel good about it."*

Experiences where visitors walk away feeling welcomed and connected to the Refuge are critical to engagement goals. Continuing outreach through multiple avenues and creating a general perception of the Refuge as open and inviting will support in developing affinitive trust and trust affiliated to larger institutions the Refuge is a part of.

Systems Based Trust

Systems based trust is the trust in a system, set of procedures, regulation, or organization (Stern & Baird, 2015). In this case it would be in the Refuge management, USFWS, and the federal government, The close association between the Refuge and the federal government paired with the Refuge's infrastructure, i.e. fencing, fosters a sentiment of distrust and restriction. Some community participants affiliated USFWS with the traditional roles of conservation land managers. Described in the following perception:

> *"To introduce us to the outdoors. I think they are there to introduce the outdoors to people that don't get to see it or know about it all the time and at the same time make sure of wildlife & like our regular life kind' a co-exist, I think it's a very difficult thing to do."*

However, others described USFWS as "control" or as "I know of them, but I don't know exactly what all they regulate". These perceptions reinforce the idea that public knowledge and clarity about the Refuge, regulations, and USFWS as land managers isn't well understood. What is perceived is associated with an institution and enforcement as these community perceptions explains,

> *"I've heard about US Fish and Wildlife, in that, that is, I think, their main goal. Which I think it's important to protect the land, but I think, also, we have to be honest about what viewpoints are mostly represented in that type of land protection".*
>
> *"They care for the land, lakes, rivers; they have a lot of rules & regulations that vary from one place to another & can be intimidating; it's easy to get in trouble by not knowing what is allowed or not in that specific area. I think they try to engage with the community but I they might not have sufficient funds to promote their activities"*

While many participants believe in the conservation goals and work USFWS does there are some that cannot get past the federal affiliation and traditional conservation practices. Managers traditional are dedicated to an organization accepted mission of wildlife, habitat, and ecological conservation that provides social dimensions secondary at best (Havlick et al., 2014). Adhering to the institutional framework, commonly organization managers will try to accommodate certain values and activities that do incorporate human dimensions and engagement, but do not represent the cultural context and history of the site (Havlick et al., 2014). If perhaps the Refuge's programming and engagement represented the local community members more visibly in which they had a collaborative hand in implementing there could be a diffusion in the focus in institutions and Refuge federal affiliation. When asked about relationship and trust the community has in USFWS, one participant said

"I don't know that I have a huge level of trust of the government."

> *"For me, all institutional areas have intimidating aspect, the government & authority aspect that doesn't make me feel completely comfortable because I might be breaking a rule I wasn't aware of."*

USFWS is left both managing the transition of the Refuge into a new community space and mitigate the past negative associations. Unfortunately, not created solely by USFWS, but left to the organization to dismantle the narrative that largely effects how the Refuge is perceived so that the space finally can begin to detach from institutional frameworks and truly reshape the multifaceted space.

Concept 3: Information and Regulations

Safety

Perspectives involving safety affirmed several areas of needed information and relationship development between the neighboring communities and the Refuge. As acknowledged by a staff member in the following quote, relationship development could require more regulation transparency and understanding of the aims of the space:

> *"We struggle. I think any place struggles when... And a wildlife refuge is not an easily understood concept. Are you a park? Are you a national park? Are you a state park? What do you like? And we just have a different mission, which requires rules. I don't know. It would be interesting because you sort of hope that people take a moment to understand a little bit of that, but it's a lot to digest and we recognize that."*

Separately, the remediation and the land's past did structure some of the participant's perceptions. Participants touched on how community lack of awareness over remediation efforts informed their belief that the Refuge is still contaminated,

"I think it's taken a long time for people to overcome the idea that the place is radioactive & contaminated."

"The place has a weird history, first during the clean-up, everyone had this idea of being contaminated, harmful & horrendous & it was closed often, a lot going on in there that no one really knew what was happening so, it was a weird sensation around the Arsenal."

"I don't feel safe because I don't know how the land was cleaned up I think it is still contaminated".

Although most community members generally reported feeling safe at the RMANWR

Some participants, like the one quoted above, have real fears of physical harm or future impacts of what they see as exposure to an unsafe space. This sentiment may be an additional component to overcome for patrons who are already intimidated by the outdoors, perhaps it is their first time exploring the space, or they are unsure what accessible features are on site. These compounding factors contribute to one's own reassurance of personal safety. Some participants acknowledged a degree of self-reliance, ensuring one's outdoor safety through personal responsibility and precaution. Participants stated,

"I feel safe, but I also take responsibility of my own safety when in the outdoors"

"I'm not going to rely on other folks for my safety."

Amongst community participants, there was also the understanding that feeling safe in natural spaces was largely circumstantial, but that certain amenities made visitors feel more secure,

"I look for trails that are well made & define, make sure there's water & a map or a compass to know where you are going; other than that, if you look around & see that the place is well kept & maintained, you kind 'a know you are safe… if you following the rules & regulations".

The topic of safety was also thematically intertwined with racial or identity representation, belonging, and ownership throughout the community focus groups. Visiting a space that is frequented by people of similar backgrounds—particularly similar racial and/or ethnic backgrounds—promotes feelings of safety and security. Some of the BIPOC participants stated,

"I think I feel safe in outdoor environments when I see people that look like me using the site, and when I meet people who, maybe, work at the site, but they're really nice or friendly or make an effort to approach me in a way that's welcoming. Those things make me feel safe or like I belong".

This theme is deeply intertwined with community perceived accessibility, in particular BIPOC or marginalized groups. As further elaborated in Concept 2: Dispositional Trust, there is historical context

at play that inform these visitors' sentiments of safety and on what to prepare for or expect when entering natural spaces. In respect to Refuge staff interactions, community members reported that when staff maintained a respectful, friendly, and approachable demeanor throughout the encounter, it encouraged sentiments of belonging and acceptance as well. Negative experiences with staff pose a risk of exacerbating a sense of unease, tension, and danger when visiting the Refuge, especially if hesitant or unaware about the space to begin with.

Therefore, it can be understood that as a common safety tactic, community members of certain demographics may feel more comfortable visiting Refuge in a group. One interviewee described increased feelings of safety if no one else was around. However, two other community members oppositely touched on a safety in numbers approach via visiting the Refuge preferably with trusted companions,

> *"I like going in a group. Occasionally, I go by myself, but... I don't know... it seems better to go more with other people".*
>
> *" I go sometime on my own, but because it just doesn't really feel like my backyard, I'd like to go with other people more. It's not easy to always get a group together to go so you feel safe. You bring your own safety and welcoming with that group, right? And that's not always easy to get together."*

For one of the participants mentioned above, the group approach was motivated by the belief that a group was more effective at safeguarding against targeted harassment when recreating outdoors. The participant expressed,

> *"I mean, I think it varies. I feel safer when I'm able to go with other people. I feel safer if I go to a place, and I see that I'm not being... I don't know... harassed, or there's a lot of... I don't know"*

Additionally shaping visitors' sense of safety, belonging, and welcoming are perspectives on acceptable recreation or Refuge enjoyment. In spaces where natural resource management occurs, certain cultural aspects can be disenfranchised and removed from practice on the space. One's relationship with the natural world can expand beyond a narrative that is not exclusive to only leisure or conservation. In fact, limiting the narrative to be only within the confines of those narrow definitions often erases cultural visibility and traditions entities have with wildlife, plants, and bodies of water (Savoy 2015; Dietsch, 2021). One participant's views explained,

> *"Sometimes within those facilities, there's a set of rules that is based on one perspective of the land or one perspective of how people should recreate on the land. If you come, and you're*

doing something different, or you're experiencing different, it's not appreciated, or they don't like it. That can feel not safe or welcoming”.

Dominant perceptions of what outdoor recreation should look like can be enforced through differential or inquisitory treatment by staff and/or other visitors against visitors who do not adhere to the presumed standard. It is important to remember that the standard of outdoor recreational practices was shaped in the exclusion of specific groups and how they use natural space (Finney, 2014; Tarin et al., 2021). Historically, the dominant perception in natural spaces, for example on federal public lands, maintains an idea of preferred leisure activities structured by a predominantly white male led culture. (Taylor, 2000; Finney, 2014; Dietsch, 2021). Usually, this idea of outdoor recreation is framed by promoting nature as pristine, quiet, and to be protected from humans (Taylor, 2000; Finney, 2014; Dietsch, 2021). Therefore, the differential treatment partly can manifest due to assumptions that visitors who do not look like or belong to the dominant group are unknowledgeable, are in the wrong place, or are breaking rules and regulations. If action is taken, based on those assumptions, visitors who do not present the assumed standard, usually individuals of marginalized groups, can be placed in uncomfortable situations. Creating trust in the Refuge, staff, and by larger association, outdoor recreational spaces, must actively work to not only foster diverse engagement, but rebuild from the historical trauma that controls the narrative between natural spaces and marginalized people.

Concept 4: Partnerships

Community members’ desires for Refuge-community engagement and/or partnerships encompass four main pillars: infrastructure, activity or programming, community representation, and outreach. Staff interviewees echoed several community ideas in their perceptions of the direction of partnerships, engagement, and programming. According to these interviewees,

“I think we're totally on the right track, which is you can't just sit here and hope they'll come."

“That's what it is. Instead of trying to make seven different programs catering to each different group, try to make one that isn't centered specifically and exclusively on privileged white people. I think that would help."

"You have to open the door. And I think it has to do with having their kids or having someone they trust invite them and tell them what's happening here.

Community members did mention infrastructure related feedback. Participants would like to see more picnic areas, playgrounds for those living with disabilities, more biking trails, trails with more viewing areas, benches, and shade structures. Activities were suggested by both staff and community

participants to be tailored toward community desires and expand beyond what the Refuge traditionally offers as standard outdoor activities. For example, in one community focus group, a participant voiced that they would rather take part in volleyball matches on the premises as opposed to attending a fishing activity. Community members seek engagement that foster deeper links between their sociocultural backgrounds and/or interests and the natural space offered by Refuge.

Additionally, community members would like to see multigenerational programming or events for the whole family; more events for children specifically aged between 10 to 15 years old; instructional outdoor recreation activities where camping basics, trainings, or workshop-style classes are given; music and art events; programming that offers a class or group setting (e.g., a photography or art class); environmental education spanning information about the animals of the Refuge and their role in the ecosystem, the work conducted on site, and project updates. There was a limited interest in the Refuge's capacity to rehabilitate or facilitate the rescue of animals at risk from urban expansion, however as conveyed by some participants' opinions, more information is needed. Different community perspectives included,

> "*they approved killing mountain lions or bears that come to the cities or close to homes instead of relocating, when we are the ones taking over their space"*

> *"I think that if they do open their space to relocate animals, then I will say that "it is my Arsenal", and "Would the Arsenal take wildlife from the surrounding areas? If they do accept wild animals, I would even be happy to volunteer at the Arsenal".*

Community members also expressed interest in increasing programming for those living with a disability, to further involve school groups and senior groups into activities, and to more heavily include community organizations to increase the diversity of visitors. These changes would thereby transform the Refuge into a space that more accurately represents the demographic make-up of the surrounding communities. Finally, community members would like to see more outreach or announcements regarding events and programming through various channels and media outlets. According to participants, the Refuge should be advertising, " *Information about what it is, what is there for, their purpose & activities."*

> *"Advertisement of new events, continue to remind the community the Arsenal is there & open with different activities".*

> *"To include us on their activities, I mean to make sure our community knows what is happening there"*

Additionally, community participants suggested outreach tactics using tv commercials, newspaper announcements, social media informational campaigns, flyers, or informational pamphlets in public

community spaces such as schools, libraries, and community centers, and using partnerships as a way to disseminate information publicly via partners and their patrons. While these avenues of advertising can be used for event information, participants also stressed that the advertising should serve to promote awareness of the Refuge and its availability to the public.

A partnership that was frequently mentioned was Environmental Learning for Kids (ELK), a partnership that fosters. visible representation through programming that centers engagement on underrepresented youth. The organization was highlighted by multiple community members during this portion of the community focus group. One participant said,

> *"It's nice when there are groups there. I like going with Environmental Learning for Kids because I know if I go, there's going to be other families like me, like my family".*

ELK has been able to create a more representative environment within Refuge and, therefore, increase ease and comfort among participating families when visiting the Refuge. As a community partnership, the positive reception of ELK programming embodies the desire of specific community members and families to be visibly, meaningfully, and respectfully feel integrated and welcomed within the Refuge. The willingness of diverse community members to engage with and visit the RMANWR is, then, influenced by other trusted entities to participate in Refuge events and dependent upon the degree to which Refuge can create an inclusive and safe outdoor setting.

Concept 5: Challenges to DEI Goals

A fifth concept emerged in analysis of staff interviews. This concept took shape from a minority of staff interviewee responses that seemed to not align with the larger engagement goals the Refuge has defined. Although nuanced with various layered concepts, that some, at times were conflicting, these perceptions had elements of lack of compassion for the local community's inability to access the Refuge, lack of understanding of the importance of local community and diverse group support and integration into the Refuge, and perceptions of engagement being less of a priority to natural preservation amongst other views. Majority of staff participants did express their understanding of the importance of local community and diverse audience support, presence, and integration into the Refuge programming. Additionally, most staff participants voiced interest in pursuing new avenues of engagement or expanding the current engagement program. However, despite setting priorities, creating official mandates, and establishing offices, programs, and initiatives to address DEI priorities, equitable or DEI efforts can still be undermined at the local level. As in the case of the Environmental Protection Agency, the Environmental Justice plan faces implementation challenges due to local staff

who fail to perceive or understand its importance, disparage its utility, label it as outside the agency's scope, and discourage subordinates' participation (Harrison, 2019).

Contradictory to the goals of this project and the engagement aims of the Refuge, these comments were compiled into their own thematic element because of the larger social structures within conservation and federal institutions they emphasize. These perceptions are examples of rhetoric that have historically controlled the conservation and outdoor recreation space. Relevant to the current study, as stated in the introduction, Urban Wildlife Refuges have a defined priority to engage underserved communities to foster more inclusion. As such, the Refuge has staff dedicated to reaching that goal. Nonetheless, in combination with barriers of limited staffing, resources, and sensitivity to historical contexts to performing engagement work or building partnerships documented in literature, here we would like to highlight several perspectives that emerged in this study that can be viewed as contradictory to the aims of the Urban Refuge mission (Seekamp et al., 2013). The goal of presenting these viewpoints is to foster the self-reflection that could allow for progress to be made. After framing these perceptions in comparison to published scholarship, we will review how to dismantle these views that pose challenges to the DEI and engagement goals the Refuge has outlined.

Historical Context

The 1997 National Wildlife Refuge Improvement Act defined the Refuge system's mission as maintaining a set of lands dedicated to the conservation and, where appropriate, restoration of fish, wildlife, and plants (US Fish and Wildlife Service, 2012a; Havlick, 2014). This definition provides the USFWS with a well delineated conservation mandate of any other US land management agency (Fischman, 2003; Havlick, 2014). However, this has helped affirm a culture within the agency that reflects specific parameters and a nearly singular focus on fish and wildlife (Havlick, 2014). This becomes apparent in the types of programs offered at many national wildlife refuges, is reflected in the natural sciences background of many USFWS employees and can contribute to the tensions created when a Refuge focuses on or is used for activities outside those limits (Havlick, 2014). The conservation-focused directives for refuges are important to guide management effectively, particular to certain refuges, such as military to wildlife ones, like the RMANWR this may not completely apply. This is due to the military to wildlife refuges have complex multi-faceted histories and restored habitat conditions that have evolved through many forms (Havlick, 2011). As one community participant stated,

> *"I know that I've heard every refuge is different, but that it mostly prioritizes animals and land, not really people, right? And maybe how people use the land, which I think is interesting. It's hard. We think of nature as being a thing on its own. Nature is on its own, but the minute people come in and say, "We're going to manage an area," right? You've added a human*

element. When you say you're going to manage an area with plants and wildlife as the main thing of it and not regard people, I think there's kind of a fallacy in that because even the way that US wildlife chooses to manage the area is based in a certain worldview, right"

The conservation first ideology can constrain what occurs at refuges in that first, managers can find little institutional support for programs that are not perceived to be "wildlife or conservation first", and second, considering the background, training, and organizational culture and roles of USFWS employees, the priority is towards biological studies and land management rather than remediation and its impacts (Havlick, 2014). This is where the integration of DEI principles and programming can be beneficial. The objective of DEI work is to push the institution to redress internal oppressive and harmful structures or frameworks (Gray et al., 2023). The aim is to drive self and community actualization to create interventions that restructure the historical and current frameworks that perpetuate the unfair marginalization of specific identities (Gray et al., 2023). However, as usually much of this work is internally led, it is difficult to hold actions accountable when critical reflection is steered by the same white, exclusionary, supremacist, and patriarchal systems that created inequities for marginalized and BIPOC groups (Gray et al., 2023). This issue has been identified as the DEI Industrial Complex where "the collusion of the state, non profits, corporations, and higher education to use Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion work is used to restore social and financial gain to an institution, while consistently only addressing the lowest hanging fruit, and offering no shifts in the major and pervasive issues of systemic oppression"(Gray et al., 2023).

Examples of efforts within organizations that fall within the DEI Industrial Complex are conducting diversity seminars, bringing in diversity specialists, and making public promises about goals to do better, to strive to cultivate an appearance of targeting solutions to inequity within the workplace (Tarin et al., 2021). However, these actions without the reflection of historical and current impacts of power and oppression can become performative while the institution still observes or downplays bigotry and exclusion within organizational culture and business practices (Tarin et al., 2021; Gray et al., 2023). Power dynamics are a crucial component to reflect on in the discussion of land management. The same community participant as quoted earlier in this section also mentioned the intersection of wildlife preservation and power,

"so if they say that they're managing the land to the benefit of wildlife, right? They still have people involved in it, but it's the people who have power. It's the people who have the power to segregate off pieces of land and decide what are the best practices for it."

In reference to USFWS as land managers, remembering that the history of natural spaces in the United States is rooted in exclusion provides a great deal of context to modern day engagement, diversity, and partnership issues. According to Myron Floyd, Dean of the College of Natural Resources at North Carolina State University, "The underlying rationale for creating parks was this idea of U.S. nationalism, to promote the American identity, and the American identity was primarily white, male and young." (Tarin et al., 2021). Furthermore, Gifford Pinchot, the first head of the US Forest Service, structured much of what we understand as natural preservation and outdoor recreation and asserted that parks were created only for white Americans (Purdy, 2015; Gosalvez, 2020; Tarin et al., 2021). Assessing historical context emphasizes the importance of recognizing the institutional frameworks and historical imposition of inequities in certain spaces as they perpetuate social processes and understandings that continue to replicate power structures in the present day (Hoover and Lim, 2021; Tarin et al., 2021). History and recent events demonstrate how outdoor spaces, while intended for leisure and recreation, are also places of oppression, violence, and highlight disparities for several marginalized identities further illustrating the codification of certain groups, configuration of power, and oppressive relationships within the natural management space (Tarin et al., 2021). Select staff perceptions outlined below highlight some of these perceptions. Although very much a minority amongst the interviewed staff, these sentiments are still detrimental to reaching the DEI and engagement goals the Refuge and USFWS have worked hard to and have set in motion to achieve.

Select Staff Perceptions

Select staff believed that since the Refuge has been open to the public for some time, the longstanding ability to visit exempts the Refuge from responsibility over public unawareness to access the space, especially in neighboring communities. As one staff member stated,

> *"…I still get people, "I live a mile away and I've never been here. Never knew what was here." We've been open to the public since the early '90s, that's not our fault and that's not, no ad campaign's going to do that. You've known. I mean, our signs have been here. I mean, you've driven past us a million times. You could have pulled in in some Honda. That's on you."*

The rationale behind this sentiment is based in the high visibility of the Refuge: If it is easily seen on the commutes of neighboring community members, they should take the initiative to stop and visit. The charge, then, of engaging with the Refuge is placed majorly on the individual, devoid of consideration for the underlying factors, historical context, and perceptions that may impact visitorship and engagement.

Additionally, there was some skepticism expressed over the effectiveness of certain types of resource investment into engagement to create measurable impact via increasing visitation rates. Stated by a staff member,

> *"having one of the, either a bus line or actually one of the light rails come up to the soccer stadium. And right to our entrance here, and be the end of a spur over the line or whatever. It's like, "Yeah, that's great. But is that really going to enhance visitation? I don't think so. I mean, not here. If we were in back east somewhere, maybe. But not on the west. Not out here. I mean yes, people are using light rail to get to downtown and stuff, but we don't use mass transit like they do back east. People out here in the west, west Mississippi, they like their cars. They're going to drive somewhere.*
>
> *"And I mean, I don't want to say it's going to be a detriment, but is it something we should spend a lot of effort on? I don't think so. I think our resources could be put elsewhere. Stretching those dollars as far as we could, we could probably get more bang for the buck doing other things."*

As previously mentioned within the accessibility section, it is true that most citizens in the four neighboring areas rely on individual transport to access the Refuge. However, it is understood that the Refuge aims of engagement are to engage with those most underrepresented. Therefore, that would highlight the emphasis in providing transport access for those who do have it, cannot access the Refuge themselves, or rely on public transportation for city mobility. Understanding that there are gaps in accessibility that have been historically reinforced and therefore may not be apparent at first glance is one way to frame equity in Refuge accessibility.

Environmental preservation and traditional conservation aims were emphasized as the "true mission" to conserve, protect, and enhance habitats, vegetation, fish, and wildlife. Coded in the sentiment that the space should be kept natural and pristine. Therefore, visitors and resulting amenities for their comfort such as signage, seating areas, play areas, etc. conflict with this vision. These sentiments are summarized by these staff members' thoughts,

> *"And I want to share that mission, and I've been doing that throughout my career. I mean, I've stood on boat ramps explaining why we're trawling a river for salmon smolt's and taking... I mean, in California to Florida. Literally, I've been on beaches or whatever, talking with people about what we do in different environments and everything. But we can't pull too much resource away from what we're doing because that really tells a story of what we're doing or what the refuge system is.*
>
> *"And yes, as an urban refuge, we are unique in the sense of, I mean and there's other urban refuges obviously... but we have some unique issues and situations that a lot of the more rural refuges don't have. I mean, I know refuges that if they get 50,000 visitors, it's a banner year*

for them. And we're talking 750,000. So there's a huge discrepancy there, but it's still I mean, the whole purpose of the refuge system, we're here to save dirt."

"I'm sorry. I mean if you boil it down, habitats and animals and whatever, that's what as a land management agency, that's what we're here to do. And if we can share our story and get more people to realize who we are, what we do and get their buy-in. Their support is going to be huge for us, but we got to let our work and let our mission speak for us in a lot of ways. "

"Yeah, out of the whole refuge as a whole, it's not... it's very few people trying to reach out. [...] but yeah, I feel not everyone on the refuge is on the same page about bringing more people in. You get this very [inaudible 00:23:00] where people are like, "Oh, we don't want visitors," or they're very anti-visitor."

"….we have sign pollution all over this refuge. There's too many signs, everywhere. Every time it's like, that's not natural. But when you have this many people coming to it, you had to have signs up. And so to keep it natural, I think is ideal. But to do that, to bring more people to see it, then you got to do things that aren't natural".

While environmental preservation is important, to begin equitable partnerships there must also be space for more collaborative and community integrated approaches where local community members can acknowledge conservation and natural spaces in their own way. Reflected in some aspects of these perceptions are traditional conservation perspectives and approaches to land management.

It was also viewed that the resources, energy, and effort required to cultivate an increased sense of appreciation for the natural environment within neighboring communities should be spent elsewhere or redirected to specific groups who have already taken the initiative or seemed more viable to engage with the Refuge. Local community support therefore can be viewed within this perceptive as less necessary or less of a priority to gain. A staff interviewee stated,

"You've been here for 20-plus years, you couldn't find 1, 15 minutes to stop in and say, "What are you guys doing"? And I think at some point, the community needs to take an interest and we can't force that, just you can't tell an alcoholic to stop drinking until they want to. It's a community of, until they say, "Hey, we want this to be part of us as a community", there's nothing we're going to do that's going to push that. If there's an interest there, we can absolutely support it and enhance it but it has to come from, they have to initiate that in to some extent.""people saying, "We got to do more [inaudible 00:06:29]. It's like, you know what's the difference between somebody two blocks away versus, we got people in Lakewood, other side of the Denver metro area... they drive here and they drive around and [inaudible 00:06:45]. People here have cars just like they do, what's stopping them from doing that? Why are we focused so much just within two to five miles of us? Because if we do things like, if we focus on this community, whether it be our signage in whatever language, Korean, whatever it might be, I don't care. If we do all of that, now we're pulling away from some other group".

"And so I just again, put that on... the visitor has to be a little bit accountable of what they have an interest in. And then we can, like I said, support and enhance that. If we spend all of

our time catering to every little demographic or group or this or that or whatever, we're going to completely lose sight of the mission, the conservation because it's going to draw so much resource away from that, it's going to really delay or slow down us accomplishing the mission of the refuge system."

"A kid gets a fish on the line and the way their face lights up, that's something they take with them. They will remember that into adulthood, especially if they do it a couple times.[...]So I think those are, programs like that that really can expose kids to it. I mean yes, mom and dad are paying their taxes and that money is what supports us. But I think for long term, those events like that that really expose the kids to something they haven't seen before. And especially in an urban area, a lot of kids, they see the City Park or the Denver Zoo, whatever. But to see something, open area like this with wildlife on it. Because a lot of them hardly get to the mountains, even. I think that's for me personally, when I see that, that's why I do what I do. Is to see that light bulb come on. Because that's the passing it on to the next generation, that love of the outdoors, that appreciation for conservation. They might go into something completely different, but they can still have the appreciation of it. That, I think is going to do us more good than trying to get somebody else out here."

This perspective places the initiative on community residents—not the Refuge—to take an interest and drive engagement forward. While true, very specific programming may not be feasible or effective for the Refuge, the example used, youth programming, is one of the more expansive and already existing programs at the Refuge. There are several gaps of engagement with underserved or underrepresented groups, even within youth group demographics, that are still valuable to pursue and dedicate resources to. Youth programming, via several well-established partnerships, interactive activities, and the GenWild collation has seen success at the Refuge. The same network of partnerships, effort, and resources are suggested to establish centralizing and emphasizing other groups to hopefully see similar results. With the same consideration of particular partnership development, long term goals, and tailored programming similar turn out and participation can occur with other demographics. As explained by the same interviewee as above,

"But if we build it, if we do the restoration, the conservation to implement that right, they will come. "They", being the general public. That interest, that wow factor, it'll come, but we got to do this right. Take the time and do it right, and people will see that."

There were some perceptions that emerged from the interviews that may be derived from personal views, however, they can be applied or permeate into conservation efforts, professional roles, or visitor interactions. Some of these sentiments can be connected to a superior ideology rooted in meritocracy, education, and socio-economic perceptions. When combined with traditional conservation views that only define usage and appreciation of natural space in an exclusionary way, there is the development of a complex that impacts community integration into natural spaces and conservation

work. This perception is harmful as certain assumptions have been made about people and communities neighboring the Refuge and how the space should be used. Demonstrated by this staff member,

> *"But to say that everything is, our signage or whatever, it's in English, whatever. We're in this country, this is our language. And whether they're visiting from another country or if they have just immigrated here for whatever, however, whatever way they got here, they're in this country. It's on them to learn again, to learn the country they want to become part of or live in."*

Assumptions limit space for staff to gather full context of what could be creating barriers for community accessibility to the Refuge. Additionally, create a notion about who the space is intended for. The following statement further solidifies the point that personal perceptions can impact how visitors are potentially treated and engaged with on site.

> *" I just don't trust people. And I think that they will try to commit criminal acts. And so we need the Rangers and we need Adler to be a police dog. But I don't know. There has to be a balance somewhere."*

It is simple, especially when engagement with visitors is mainly in the context of regulation violation, to reduce the local community and visitors to this understanding. Though as previously mentioned, these views are a minority within the staff interviews conducted. Another staff perceived regulation violation in a more nuanced perspective:

> *"Yeah. We let them know what they can and cannot do, but sometimes they do it anyways. I'd say 99% of the people come here are very respectful and they know and all that, but you always have that 1% that stands out."*

Perceptions like the first staff quote, reinforce the need to establish a standard for visitor engagement. Previously quoted, a community member described a positive experience with staff as:

> *"I think a positive experience is either one where there's a friendly greeting, and you're kind of left alone, or where the interaction doesn't assume a deficiency, right? It doesn't assume that I don't know what I'm doing or that I'm not in the right place or that I'm preemptively going to break the rules. One that is genuinely, I'm just like any other visitor, which sometimes I'm like, "Do you approach every visitor," to like, just being treated like every other visitor, really."*

Establishing a conduct for engagement could therefore help mitigate impacts of staff assumptions and help community visitors feel safer and more assured. Many community perceptions and previous literature have shown there are multiple factors at play that could make a person violate the rules or feel nervous on site. To facilitate cultivating more positive staff to community visitor interactions and positive engagement impacts, there must be further and holistic consideration of outside factors that may be impacting the current staff and neighboring community relationship.

Aligning with Engagement Goals

While personal views may not directly apply to certain staff roles at the Refuge, it was mentioned by staff interviewees that almost all staff have interactions and engagement with visitors on some level. Views such as the previous ones highlighted by a minority of interviewees reiterate several perceptions of concern that community participants expressed within the focus groups. At the root of these opinions, inclusivity practices for community engagement can only be mutually exclusive to natural resource management and poses risk of diminishing the conservation objectives that are seemingly prioritized. However, these ideas contrast with the existing principles of the Refuge as an Urban Refuge, Flagship Preserve, and the mandate that public land be accessible to everyone (USFWS 2021; CBS News, 2021). These perceptions challenge the notion that access to public lands is a right. Though, other staff fully acknowledged understanding that the Refuge is for the public,

> *"I think that we only exist as a wildlife refuge because of support from the public because they have voted to preserve this land, they voted for funding, and our entire existence really does depend on how effectively we're engaging with the community. Because once we fully lose that engagement with the community, we lose really our existence."*

To mitigate the effects of historical structures and current exclusive ideas or practices, managers must work toward dismantling their institutional framework and integrate the set of values and activities that go beyond traditional wildlife and habitat conservation while representing the cultural and social histories of people that are rarely represented (Havlick et al., 2014). Ultimately understanding, that restoration and conservation activities are not shaped by only scientific or biological parameters, but the public understanding of the space (Havlick et al., 2014). This approach to conservation can represent not only application of scientific knowledge, but also affirm how visitors envision the space to exist and an application of ethical values that eventually integrate themselves into the space's perceived structure (Havlick et al., 2014)**.** To do so the practice of self-reflection may be a place to start. Also known as parachute science or engagement, a growing movement seeks to end the practice of superficially engaging communities or extracting information to meet a shorter-term objective by moving toward deeper engagement, trust and relationship building, and co-production of knowledge or project objectives (Stefanoudis et al., 2021; Odeny & Bosurgi, 2022). This approach, characterized by authentic and lasting intentions, requires greater reflexivity about and sensitivity to power dynamics, marginalization, and the possibility of perpetuating oppression through tokenism (Bamzai-Dodson et al., 2021; Petriello et al., 2021). Newly adapted to conservation work, self-reflection or self-reflexivity is an adaptive framework for continuous and intentional introspective assessment of a conservationist's

influence on the scientific process and broader socio-ecological system to foster ethical, flexible, and diverse conservation efforts (Beck et al., 2021). What this would look like at the Refuge could begin with reconciling and confronting the institution and its role in maintaining white supremist structures in outdoor spaces, engagement in dialogue with those who have been most impacted and collaborating with them to determine and design the necessary reparative actions (Tarin et al., 2021). Dismantling these frameworks will come from critical organizational restructuring, but also shifts on the personal employee level.

Staff interviewees through the duration of the interviews shared their experiences working in more community or visitor engagement-based roles or projects. Interviewees that had several instances or experiences interacting with the local community and other visitors seemed to have more established ties and understanding with these groups. Their desire to allocate resources and dedicate time and effort into establishing more community integration was apparent. Understanding that regardless of designation, the Refuge space is for everyone, and the sharing of the space is how it becomes an invaluable asset to the community. Other aspects such as representation and identity diversity on staff are additionally important as it reflects other lived experiences and in many cases the communities that the initial frameworks of traditional conservation tried to exclude. Representation is an initial step in breaking away from the exclusionary narrative of the past. It promotes reinstating power to historically minoritized people and can begin to shift structural systems as there will be more diverse voices within management and professional roles to voice harmful environments that ultimately impact all who frequent natural spaces.

Discussion

As supported by documented literature, the sentiments and concepts that emerged from the focus groups and interviews within this project are not novel within conservation engagement work and DEI topics. Furthermore, similar neighboring community sentiments have been identified and documented in previous studies specific to the Refuge. The following major themes have been documented since 2014 (Havlick et al, 2014; Dietsch et al., 2014):

- Community's perception that the Refuge sits at the intersection of social, natural, and historic value
- Desire for the Refuge to engage in interest specific programming
- Accessibility concerns
- Institutional barriers

- Needed improvements in Refuge marketing and public information

For this reason, Lacy Consulting Services highly recommends that the Refuge refrain from conducting any further studies or information gathering projects moving forward and better allocate resources towards implementing activities, engagement, and partnerships. As it appears, the RMANWR is situated in an advantageous position having received this new community input and being newly appointed by the Biden administration as a Flagship Preserve (CPR News, 2021; FFWR, 2021). The status allows for the Refuge to be able to further expand the Urban Wildlife Conservation Program with a one million dollar annual infusion (CPR News, 2021; FFWR, 2021). The Refuge, therefore, can take next steps to meet community interests and implement any supporting and internal restructuring actions as needed. Furthermore, in gathering community input and participation there is now the expectation that implementation or action as a result of those shared perceptions. As an analogy, multiple Native Alaskan Tribes have pushed back after participating in multiple studies to address climate adaptation and instead, now ask when a project or actual action might take place (Marino, 2018). As this is the second time local community participants have been asked their perceptions on the Refuge there is a an expectation of follow through to some degree.

One last DEI concept to emphasize in the discussion of next steps and implementation. While understanding some of the limitations and extended timelines associated with federal institutions, it is important to also understand that the historical, racial, and accessibility barriers defined in this project have long existed. Prior to the space's establishment as a National Wildlife Refuge, there have been disparities of race, ethnicity, and income among the communities neighboring the Refuge (Sexton et al., 2015). Although engagement and partnership work take time, it is also important to stress the ability of the DEI Industrial Complex to slow project progression and essentially reduce or eliminate impact. The Refuge now has up-to-date data on key community aspects and the funding to create informed equitable engagement and organizational changes to transcend historical barriers. To ensure that the efforts do not fall stagnant to the DEI Industrial Complex and instead are enacted to fulfill the definitions of Urban Refuge and Flagship Preserve, internal shifts must occur. Previous studies have shown that conservation organizations complicit in the DEI Industrial Complex tend to exemplify a strategy focused solely on listening and voice amplification (Tarin et al., 2021). While most definitely a step within a larger scheme, the next phase within this project is to commit to concrete action, rather than following suit as other institutions have and emphasize another round of critical institutional self-reflexivity and DEI pledges (Tarin et al., 2021). Instead, the Refuge can work towards implementing realistic metrics to hold

the organization accountable with the tangible output of providing neighboring community environmental access in the immediate future (Tarin et al., 2021).

Since accountability is the next step for the Refuge, here are a few possible actions that could be taken next:

- Find and hire an Equitable Conservation Director or similar role whose job is to create and implement strategies to address the finding of this and previous reports
- Hire outside consultants that have specialized skillsets in helping to create and implement actions focused on the results of this and previous reports
- Create an external advisory committee with decision-making power that consists of diverse identities from neighboring communities
- Have leadership read and learn from case studies and reports of how others have incorporated DEI into their conservation planning (Ex: Conservation Standards: Diversity, Equity, Justice, and Inclusion Approaches (2020-2021); https://conservationstandards.org/library-item/conservation-standards-justice-equity-diversity-and-inclusion-approaches/)
- Review and adopt metrics that could have long-lasting impacts on both neighboring communities and the Refuge (Ex: https://hewlett.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Hewlett-Enduring-Conservation-Outcomes-2022.pdf)

Furthermore, alignment of staff priorities and cohesive engagement buy-in are essential to overcome the community sentiments voiced in this project that contribute to their feelings of safety, ownership, and feeling welcomed at the Refuge. Reconciling these more abstract ideas will require acknowledging internally the uncomfortable aspects of federal institutions that have most impacted community members and acting on the reparative actions the community has identified (Tarin et al., 2021). To do so will require a dismantling of the systemic frameworks, now appearing as engagement barriers, that have been indoctrinated into conservation organizations, environmental work, and outdoor spaces.

Conclusion

In summary of this project and the research done so far, it has become apparent that the Refuge's space is not only for conservation aims but has taken on a hybrid form integrating past history, community perceptions, and the current space's designation as an Urban Refuge. Understanding this definition and its departure from the traditional definition of conservation can begin to bridge the gap between what was previously understood as Refuge goals and creating metrics for the true hybrid the Refuge currently is.

Though recognizing these newly realized goals and aspects are only one component of the work. If the Refuge would like to engage in equitable partnerships and programming, there is an essential level of collaborative work that will need to occur with the neighboring communities. In addition to collaboration, there is also a need for the dismantling and restructuring of internalized frameworks within the conservation space. Using the historical context and mandate as a public Urban Refuge and Flagship Preserve as a focal point, recognizing the exclusion-based principles that permeate urban conservation and have displaced marginalized groups from access to natural spaces is a way to begin structuring equitable engagement planning. Actively making changes to move past the structures that enforce specific definitions of land use based on exclusionary principles to apply the courses of action identified in this project. While careers may advance and the boxes can be checked for reaching an administrative priority on engaging tribal or historically underserved communities, long-term damage may be done to the relationship with the community if only scoping or repetitive studies are performed (Hermann, 2019). Moving forward we urge the Refuge to begin applying the information sourced and taking steps to identify and those community collectives that have already begun to amplify community voices and works towards connecting those most marginalized with natural spaces.

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Appendix

Appendix A: Demographic Report **(External)**

Appendix B:Gap Analysis **(External)**

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Appendix C: Community Workshop Findings (2014)

Community Workshop Findings for Rocky Mountain Arsenal NWR in 2014 – Key Themes			
1. Speaking on behalf of your local community residents, what comes to mind when they hear outdoor recreation?	*2. What motivates people in this community to participate in outdoor recreation?*	*3. What barriers prevent greater access or enjoyment of outdoor recreation opportunities by people in this community?*	*4. What can be done to promote greater participation in outdoor recreation and use of RMA by people in your community?*
Common outdoor recreation activities	Family and social interaction	The site's history	Capitalize on the history and educational value of the site
Winter-based recreation	Escape	Access	Improve RMA cultural-competency
Family-based activities	Exploration/Adventure	Unwelcoming	Create a safe and welcoming environment
Food-related activities	Unique experience	Cultural and socio-economic barriers	Increase access
Sports	Pushes the comfort zone	Negative stigma associated with outdoors	Engage youth
Educational activities, including learning the history of the site	Entertainment that is affordable	Fear of and discomfort when outdoors	Create effective and enduring partnerships
Service-related activities	Connection	Lack of knowledge and awareness	Improve marketing and outreach efforts
	Educational opportunities	Institutional barriers	Increase RMA programs
	Service		
	Improve health and wellness		
	Transportation		
	Convenience		

Appendix D: Community Workshops: Barriers and Strategies (2014)

Community Workshop Findings for Rocky Mountain Arsenal NWR in 2014 – Top Barriers and Strategies	
Barriers	Strategies
1) lack of knowledge and awareness of outdoor recreation opportunities in general and of what RMA has to offer	1) increase access to RMA through a variety of means (e.g., additional access points)
2) perceptions about RMA due to its history	2) strengthen marketing and outreach efforts
3) the unwelcoming presence of RMA (e.g., fence, gates, staff/volunteer reception)	3) improve cultural diversity and sensitivity of staff and volunteers

Appendix E: Summary of Recommendations

Concept/Theme	High Level Strategy	Action
Safety	Cultivate an anti-racist workplace and RMANWR	Increase staff, especially law enforcement, competency on historical racial complexity and context that is centered around federal land, law enforcement, K-9 units, and representation
Accessibility	Address the distrust associated with the past contamination while clearly communicating the remediation efforts that were completed	Create new dedicated interpretive exhibits or staff/volunteer interactions to acknowledge RMA history, contamination, and its ramifications for the surrounding community
	Address visitor perceptions of intimidation by Refuge staff or law enforcement	Establish and implement a RMANWR-wide protocol or code of conduct for visitor interactions
	Address perceived limitations to transportation	Work with community partners in neighboring communities to provide direct public transport to and from RMANWR
		Collaborate with anchor institutions (e.g., schools, libraries, elderly assistance groups) to create tailored day excursion programs
	Address the priorities of the community members living with disabilities or the elderly	Increase infrastructure and amenities throughout RMANWR for differently abled visitors (e.g., shading sails or structures, removable water stations, seating)
Trust	Create a more welcoming and inviting space for BIPOC and marginalized groups	Prioritize more diverse and/or marginalized group representation in staff composition
		Invite BIPOC and/or special population group organizations to use RMANWR as a community and event space
	Improve RMANWR wide support of community engagement or DEI initiatives	Cultivate spaces and open dialogue for staff to speak candidly about their sentiments on community engagement and DEIJ efforts to foster learning and understanding
		Provide training and information on 'new' conservation (i.e., the importance of community support, engagement, and integration to reach conservation aims) to counter traditional conservation frameworks
	Dismantle the assumption, especially for law enforcement, that certain visitors are inherently doing something wrong or breaking regulations	Promote opportunities for staff and law enforcement to have other casual and positive interactions with visitors

	Create a community-oriented, inviting, and welcoming space that aligns with local needs and interests	Allow RMANWR site usage to be individual and specific to visitors in compliance with regulations Create opportunities for the neighboring communities to use the RMANWR and appropriate facilities as meeting or community space Connect with locally based influencers, leaders, or key mobilizers within the community that have a platform, especially for BIPOC or other marginalized groups, and invite them and their collective to RMANWR for a collaborative event (i.e., meet people where they are)
	Promote consistent communication and information dissemination about RMANWR's conservation practices to neighboring communities	Utilize different social media channels to transparently share information through permanent posts of essential regulations and conservation aims Foster opportunities for community input or participation in conservation practices where applicable Facilitate direct communication via coalition building and partnerships with key local leaders and groups
	Acknowledge and validate that RMANWR's former military history, remediation, and impacts of the past are felt in the present by the community	Recognize that new management of the RMANWR land does not erase or reset connotations based on the past Continually work to reconcile the past and the present through increased transparency with the public
	Rebuild trust and rehabilitate RMANWR's image	Focus on intentional partnerships and programming that go beyond a traditional conservation or outdoor recreation scope
	Address community skepticism on efficacy of remediation efforts	Increase accessibility to remediation-related information through linking various entities of information on the remediation and status on various platforms connected to the RMANWR Create on site interactive learning opportunities to convey information about the remediation
Information and Regulations	Align RMANWR event offerings with community needs and interests	Work with local grassroots organizations to collaborate in event planning Partner with local community pillars or centers for relevant programming that fosters a sense of ownership over RMANWR
	Consistent and frequent advertising about the RMANWR	Promote the varied work and activities of RMANWR on multiple platforms

		Create language accessible multimedia materials for wider dissemination to the public
	Streamline presentation of top rules and regulations	Integrate an interactive voice response (IVR) system and auto attendant script alerting visitors to priority rules and regulations with language options when calling RMANWR
		Create an at-a-glance or 'cheat-sheet' brochure for visitors
		Expanding volunteer duties to cover information gaps and visitor interactions/engagement
Partnerships	Create more meaningful volunteer opportunities and roles	Hold listening sessions with current RMANWR volunteers to gather their opinions of viable opportunities
		Identify intersection of neighboring communities' grassroots organizations objectives with those of RMANWR to expand mutually beneficial partnerships
	Build an outreach network	Cohesively align and include staff and volunteers in new partnership goals and development
	Redefine Partnerships	Integrate existing partners and partnerships to promote ownerships and collaboration. Invite partners to co create events or programming in addition to extending invitations to existing Refuge programming.