



HERITAGE NARRATIVES: A COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT TOOL

AN ARBOR DAY FOUNDATION ENVIRONMENTAL
JUSTICE TRAINING RESOURCE

PURPOSE/GOAL:

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

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

- For example, in Detroit, Michigan, residents who declined to have a street tree planted in front of their house by a nonprofit organization indicated they had challenges with property upkeep due to the city’s declining population and economy, and little help from the city to care for street trees. Therefore, they wanted more decision-making power about the types of trees planted, and assistance with (or information about) tree maintenance before accepting a tree ([Carmichael and McDonough, 2019](#)).



ADVANTAGES/STRENGTHS:

Understanding heritage narratives is helpful when:

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

LIMITATIONS:

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

NUMBER OF PEOPLE:

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

AMOUNT OF PREPARATION:

- Finding the right people in each group will initially be time-consuming since you have to identify the groups and communities you’ll want to interview. Be sure to hear narratives from at least a few people in each group (e.g., renters and owners; volunteers and board members).
- Once you identify participants, schedule a time to speak with them and audio-record your session, if participants agree, so you don’t miss any pertinent information. If you’re unable to do so, be prepared to take detailed notes, or have someone with you to be in charge of note-taking.
- Alternatively, you can schedule a time to go door-to-door with a community leader so you can speak to a variety of residents in a given area.

TECHNIQUE LENGTH:

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

RESOURCES REQUIRED:

- Notepad to take notes and an audio-recorder if the participant consents to be recorded.



STEPS IN PROCESS:

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

Remember to have an open mind and really listen to the participants' stories. People may stop speaking openly if they get the impression that you are not genuinely interested in understanding their perspective. Instead of judging their stories, stay curious.

FOLLOW-UP:

- Highlight key themes, phrases, or ideas in your notes or while writing down the conversation from your audio recordings (e.g., noteworthy positive or negative experiences with trees).
- Share your findings with the participants to check for accuracy and to discuss next steps on how to manage the land based on their answers.



THE ARBOR DAY FOUNDATION AND FAIR FORESTS CONSULTING

At the Arbor Day Foundation, we believe everyone should have access to the powerful benefits of trees. To help strengthen our focus on communities that need trees most, we partner with experts like Dr. Christine Carmichael from Fair Forests Consulting. This resource, crafted by Dr. Carmichael, is part of our ongoing commitment to empowering our partners to grow their environmental justice work in urban forestry.

Alliance for Community Tree members have access to our full environmental justice training series in the ACT Member Resource Center. Learn about this network and how to join at arborday.org/ACT.