



shut up & listen

**What We Learned from
Community Conversations
in the Cleveland Area**
February 2018

Introduction

Our place – the Great Lakes Basin – is globally unique, and the people and wildlife of this exceptional place are inseparable from it. A healthy Great Lakes and clean water should unite people, benefit all, and transcend differences.

The Alliance for the Great Lakes, like many place-based environmental groups, depends on the support of the people who live here. We likewise aspire to equitably serve these same residents, and we believe our success can be measured by whether all people in the Great Lakes benefit from our shared freshwater ecosystem.

The benefits created by the Great Lakes and clean water are not equitably shared within the region. The impacts of dirty and unsafe water, limited recreational access, and high cost of water services often fall most heavily on communities of color and low-income communities.

We already know that clean water, especially safe drinking water, is a near universally held value. Whether you're an avid beachgoer, a boater or angler, an owner or employee of a coastal business, or you simply drink tap water, you're impacted by water.

As Great Lakes advocates, we aim to:

- Equitably serve and represent everyone that relies on the Great Lakes we have made it our mission to protect;
- Build stronger and more sustainable alliances to better protect our lakes and our water; and
- Identify connections between our own existing priorities, and those of constituents whose voices we have not historically made it a priority to hear.

Our hypothesis about how to get there: The first step is to simply shut up and listen.

In recent years, conversations around fundamental principles of racial equity and social justice have echoed across the nation—including within the mainstream environmental movement.

Extensive research shows that traditional environmental groups do not reflect the people living in the places their missions obligate them to protect.

The good news is that many mainstream green groups are asking themselves how to build relationships with low-income communities and communities of color, how to talk about race and racism, how to bring people of color to the table to improve our work and build stronger, more diverse coalitions.

But whose table are we talking about? We will not become more successful if we focus only on bringing people to where we already are. We need to meet others where they are, and change our own work to address the needs of a broader, more diverse constituency. To do that, we have to seek out and support the voices of people who have been silenced or talked over. And we should challenge ourselves to understand, support, and protect the full variety of ways that people and communities rely on the Great Lakes.

In 2017, we began to test out our “shut up and listen” hypothesis in northeast Ohio. This concept isn't new, but it was new for us. It's just the beginning, and we've already learned a lot. If you find yourself or your organization with ideas and questions that mirror our own, we invite you to consider our process, described on the following page.



PART 1

Process & Rules of Engagement

Purpose

In 2017 we embarked on a listening tour, with our partners, comprised of four “Community Conversations” in northeast Ohio—one with inner-city youth from various neighborhoods in Cleveland, two in the Cleveland neighborhoods of Buckeye Road and Kinsman, respectively, and another in Lorain, Ohio. This was an effort to hear from people of color in some of the region's most economically and politically marginalized areas. The meetings functioned dually as focus groups and community discussions among people from the same neighborhoods, some of whom knew each other, and many of whom shared similar relationships to local institutions and community organizations and services.

Throughout the conversations, we heard community priorities, perspectives on water issues, and interest in advocacy and stewardship opportunities. Key takeaways from the conversations included the following:

- Participants' proximity to the lake had a direct correlation to their sense of obligation to stewardship of the lake;
- Pressing local quality of life issues take precedence over environmental issues; and
- Residents appreciated the opportunity to express thoughts and concerns.

This listening tour provided us with ample information to guide our work on water issues in Cleveland and Lorain. We were deliberate about listening first and not showing up with a preset agenda. We also wanted to design the sessions to be as mutually beneficial as possible to both our organization and the participating community members. The Alliance, along with our environmental partners, is now better equipped to create tailored programs in northeast Ohio that will be mutually beneficial and appreciated by residents and those that seek to serve them.

Alliance for the Great Lakes Benefit

We intend to use the information gleaned from the Community Conversations to guide our work and communications in Ohio. Our organization developed a more permanent presence in Ohio in May 2016, when we hired Crystal Davis as our policy director to run our Cleveland office. As we continue to acclimate to northeast Ohio, we endeavor to learn more about existing gaps and how the Alliance for the Great Lakes can fulfill local needs while achieving organizational objectives. As a result of the Community Conversations, we are equipped with intelligence that will inform future funding proposals, strategic program design, and investment of staff time. Community Conversations participants provided us with information that will aid us in developing authentic relationships with Cleveland and Lorain residents that result in policy, stewardship, and education work that has deep and lasting impacts in targeted neighborhoods. Likewise, we can avoid spending time and resources on activities of no or marginal value to community members.

Community Benefit

Through the Community Conversations, meeting participants had an opportunity to elevate their local priorities using the Alliance for the Great Lakes' and our partner organizations' platforms. This connection links communities to resources, such as funders and potential partners, that can be cultivated to support efforts to address their priorities. The Community Conversations provided a space for residents to commune with neighbors, learn more about environmental issues, and weigh in on community planning.

Methods and Framework for Quality Conversations

In order to facilitate substantive conversations and develop high-quality insights, we specifically targeted residents whose backgrounds reflected that of the broader community, limited the group size to enable meaningful participation, and made an effort to respect participants' time.

Specifically, our target constituents were residents and business owners, diverse in age, with a racial makeup that reflects that of the community. There were two conversations held with primarily African American adult populations from the Kinsman and Buckeye Road neighborhoods in Cleveland. The youth conversation included 26 African American youth, split into two groups, that hail from various neighborhoods throughout the city of Cleveland. We also held one conversation 30 miles west of Cleveland in the city of Lorain, Ohio. Lorain has the most densely populated Puerto Rican community in the entire state of Ohio. This bilingual (English/Spanish) session brought together Latino residents eager to discuss environmental and community issues.

We endeavored to keep the group size small to promote quality dialogue and allow for a meaningful conversation. The groups ranged from 11 to 18 participants. The community conversations lasted about an hour and were held on a weekday evening or late Saturday morning. Each session started with an introduction of hosts and facilitators and an explanation of why these gatherings are happening. Hosts distributed demographic surveys that request age, race, zip code/ neighborhood, and income range. We specifically asked that participants exclude their names for confidentiality.

The facilitator then led a conversation about perceptions and opinions on Lake Erie, beach usage, interest in volunteerism, Great Lakes education, drinking water, and local priorities. The discussion ended with talk of desired next steps and interest in continuing the dialogue. In exchange for their time, participants were provided a hot meal — dinner for evening sessions and lunch for the Saturday afternoon session. All meals were sourced from a local caterer in an effort to reinvest in the participants' communities. More on the importance of this decision can be found in the rules of engagement. There was a hired notetaker at each session capturing feedback from the group. The session ended with a brief talk about desired next steps, capacity for future engagement, and thanks from hosts.

<i>Ideal Group Size</i>
15-20 people, with two youth groups of 25 students
<i>Time Frame</i>
One-hour session held on a weekday evening or Saturday late morning
<i>Demographic Information Collected (via survey completed immediately prior to discussion)</i>
Age, race, zip code, neighborhood, and income range **NO NAMES**
<i>Budget</i>
\$300 for food (local catering only), materials and note-taker per conversation

Partnerships Matter

For each Community Conversation, we secured both environmental and community partners. It was critical to build relationships and work with trusted local partners, both for the integrity and credibility of the conversation in the eyes of participants and to connect across organizations, which we hope will lead to future collaboration.

Community organizations and local partners played an integral role in helping select appropriate meeting spaces, promoting the event, and lending the local credibility needed to be taken seriously by potential participants.

Partnering organizations filled two distinct roles: “hosts” and “facilitators.” Hosts were responsible for sponsoring the event, planning logistics and recruiting residents to get involved. Facilitators were responsible for guiding the conversation with questions and maintaining a trusting, positive space for dialogue. Partner groups broke up into these roles based on the following criteria: Hosts and co-host teams needed to know the community—including local institutions, potential venues, what local caterers to go with, and how to effectively promote the event— and also have resources and capacity for logistics, planning and sponsoring. Facilitators needed to be seen as a trusted messenger—meaning sharing the race, background, and language as target participants— and have strong facilitation skills to foster a robust, candid conversation. For the Cleveland and Lorain conversations, we co-hosted with River Network, Voices for Ohio’s Children, MyCom, Western Reserve Land Conservancy, Ohio Environmental Council, El Centro De Servicios Sociales, Inc., and Environmental Health Watch. Facilitators were as follows: Destinee Henton - youth session, Crystal Davis - Cleveland sessions, and Francisco Ollervides - Lorain session. get involved. Facilitators were responsible for guiding the conversation with questions and maintaining a trusting, positive space for dialogue. Partner groups broke up into these roles based on the following criteria: Hosts and co-host teams needed to know the community—including local institutions, potential venues, what local caterers to go with, and how to effectively promote the event—and also have resources and capacity for logistics, planning and sponsoring. Facilitators needed to be seen as a trusted messenger—meaning sharing the race, background, and language as target participants—

and have strong facilitation skills to foster a robust, candid conversation. For the Cleveland and Lorain conversations, we co-hosted with River Network, Voices for Ohio's Children, MyCom, Western Reserve Land Conservancy, Ohio Environmental Council, El Centro De Servicios Sociales, Inc., and Environmental Health Watch. Facilitators were as follows: Destinee Henton - youth session, Crystal Davis - Cleveland sessions, and Francisco Ollervides - Lorain session.

Developing a Thoughtfully Structured Conversation

All four of the community conversations started with the hosts welcoming participants and distributing a demographic survey. Then, the session facilitator provided an introduction in which they acknowledged the host organizations, talked about the significance of the discussion, and set guidelines for the conversation. It was imperative that the facilitator communicated to the participants that there were no wrong answers and their opinions were welcomed and valued.

After the welcome and introduction, the facilitated conversation started with word association. We began with broad terms like "Lake Erie" and "Cleveland," and then got specific to the local context, like "Buckeye Road neighborhood." The light hearted word association encouraged residents to talk and begin thinking about how they would describe the environment around them. This also helped illustrate a clear differences in how people think about each setting. For example, we observed that participants in Cleveland neighborhoods did not generally see their neighborhood as connected to Lake Erie and that there was a disparate sense of connection between neighborhood, "home," and the Lake or even the larger metro area. Lorain, on the other hand, is closer to Lake Erie, and residents reported more of a connection.

The session then moved into a facilitated conversation that explored a series of questions around Great Lakes issues and education, beach use and connection to Lake Erie, community priorities, and potential advocacy activities. (Key takeaways from these conversations can be found in Part 2 of this report, and guiding questions can be found in the appendices.) As the conversation came to a close,

Community Conversation Agenda

1

Welcome &
Complete Survey

2

Introduction,
Overview &
Acknowledgement
of Partners

3

Facilitated
Conversation

4

Discussion on
Next Steps

5

Closing/
Thank You/
Distribute
Dinners

the group discussed next steps. For each session, the desired next steps were different. For example, the residents of Cleveland's Kinsman/Woodland area wanted the host organizations to facilitate a community meeting with the water department to discuss water bills. Lorain residents, on the other hand, wanted to be kept abreast of opportunities to advocate on environmental issues.

Compensation & Respecting Community Members' Time

Typically, focus group participants receive financial compensation. While we weren't able to provide stipends for participation, it was vitally important to compensate residents for their time. Alliance for the Great Lakes and partner organizations recognize that there are competing needs, and interests, and several other ways that residents could have chosen to spend their time.

As a way to show that we value participants' time, thoughts, and ideas, we provided full hot meals and drinks from a local caterer at each event. We were careful to use popular local caterers to accommodate food preferences and ensure that we were investing in the same neighborhoods where the conversations were being held. As we follow up on suggestions made during the sessions and make plans to revisit the groups, we will continue to seek opportunities to compensate participants and prioritize local businesses.

Rules of Engagement

There isn't one book that will detail all of the rules for initiating conversations with communities of color on environmental issues in a meaningful way. Therefore, we spent a great deal of time meeting with community organization leaders, local activists, elected officials, agency professionals, and Cleveland residents to build relationships, establish trust and a shared vision, and be both collaborative and thoughtful in deciding how best to embark on this process. One of the most important things we learned is that there are key rules that must be followed to demonstrate that you respect and value residents while asking for their time and participation.

Below is a list of rules for engagement that we have learned throughout the community conversation process. By no means is it meant to be exhaustive. However, it outlines some of the best engagement practices we learned for genuinely connecting with urban communities of color.



Check assumptions at the door—listen, be open, and don't attempt to win people over on a pre-existing agenda



Choose meeting place that are easily accessible to public transportation



Ensure that free parking is available



Provide compensation in some form (e.g., money, gift cards, full meals etc.)



Be mindful of people's time, use it wisely and ensure that time used is commensurate with compensation



Provide or otherwise ensure that childcare is available



If multiple languages are spoken, provide translated materials and an interpreter to ensure that everyone is able to fully participate in the conversation



Ensure that meeting locations are compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act



The messenger or facilitator should be the same race as the people being engaged, which helps to build trust



Be honest—don't over promise and under deliver



Involve local partners and invite a strategic partner to act as a moderator to facilitate trust

PART 2

Key Takeaways & Resounding Messages

Throughout the Community Conversation process, Alliance for the Great Lakes and partner organizations learned a great deal about Cleveland and Lorain residents' perspectives on water issues and local priorities. We heard similar sentiments echoed across communities. It is apparent that people care about their environment, and water issues specifically. However, it is also clear that we need to do a better job of making the connection between water issues and how they impact people's everyday lives.

To reach this goal, we must clarify our language, keep communities actively engaged and, above all, listen. The best way to know how people feel about an issue is to listen to them. A mere seat at the table will not suffice. We need to seek out and support voices of people we have not previously made a point to hear and provide opportunities for them to act on their concerns.

Following are the key takeaways from the Community Conversations:

Proximity to the lake has a direct correlation to sense of ownership/obligation

 *Cleveland beaches are dirty, dangerous, and polluted.*

The African American groups with whom we spoke reside on Cleveland's east side, which is not particularly close to Lake Erie and does not have easy access to the lake. Those with a desire to use this natural resource must travel by car or public transportation to get there. These individuals indicated that they don't frequent Cleveland beaches, nor do they feel a sense of obligation to those areas. They explained that they don't frequent the beach due to negative perceptions that persist from a time when the beaches were dangerous and neglected. For example, many of the participants had not been to Edgewater beach area since Cleveland Metroparks took over management from the state of Ohio in 2013. Under Metroparks, the beach and surrounding area have been cleaned up and renewed, but the stigma remains. Proximity to the lake is another issue. The majority of the African American population in Cleveland lives on the East Side. There is no easy access for many of these residents to Edgewater.

However, in the predominantly Latino city of Lorain, residents reside in very close proximity to the lake. When asked about their interest in community service beach clean-up efforts, they responded that they are very interested because it is their lake. Though the residents think that there is definitely room for improving the Lake Erie beaches in Lorain, it is still theirs, and they are up for the challenge.

Although Cleveland's Edgewater neighborhood is very near to the lake, direct access to the beach is very limited. And travel to the lakeside parks and beaches is not simple, especially for anyone taking public transportation. It can take over one hour via public transportation to reach the beach, which is a challenge, especially when carrying beach-going accessories like coolers, towels, chairs, etc.

Environmental issues are important but considered a luxury when compared to community priorities

-  *There are lead issues at my school. (Youth participant)*
-  *Safety is the most pressing issue in my community.*

While residents agreed that protecting our greatest freshwater resource was vitally important, they weren't very well versed on the expansive list of threats that plague our lakes or even our drinking water. However, conversations were much livelier when discussing non-environmental concerns in their own communities. Issues like safety, urban blight, homelessness, and dumping are local priorities and deserve more immediate attention than looming threats of water contamination, which seem less pressing.

Community newsletters, word of mouth, and teachers are the most respected sources of information

We've heard time and again that urban residents of color learn about current events the same way everyone does—television and print media. However, it was interesting to learn that most adults trust and depended more on community newsletters for information about things going on around them. These printed newsletters are sent to their homes monthly and detail new developments and current events. Local residents trust these publications and the community development corporations that produce them.

Urban youth indicated that their most trusted sources of information are their teachers. They see their instructors as smart, college-educated individuals with their best interests at heart. Students spend a considerable amount of time in school and rely on information from their teachers about current events, community service opportunities, and more.

Water affordability is a major issue

 ***Water affordability is a major issue that needs immediate attention!***

In all of the adult conversations, participants unanimously agreed that water affordability is a major issue of concern. While participants' income levels directly impacted their personal experience and perspectives around water affordability, even people who did not personally struggle to pay their water bills expressed concern for others in their community and recognized water affordability as a significant issue. They cited a lack of transparency and rising rates as a huge problem.

When we asked the participants how much of their income they spend on their water bill, the consensus among low-income residents was "too much." All participants agreed that their water bills were very expensive and continually increase even though their water use and household activities have not changed.

Some participants indicated that water affordability was not a major issue for their specific households, but they voiced clear concern for people with low and fixed incomes. Everyone agreed that policies on water rates should be set with senior citizens and others with set incomes in mind. Participants were outraged at the thought that there are seniors in cities like Detroit whose water is being cut off due to non-payment. In Lorain, water rates are being increased by \$6 every year, which will result in a \$40 increase by 2026.

 ***The thought of the doing a beach clean-up is insulting.***

The students were very vocal about their position on this issue. They feel that people from the suburbs (white people) frequent the beach. So why should they be asked to clean up a mess made by someone else? In general, they do not see a connection between the beach and their community. Participants indicated that they may be interested in a clean-up if they could be financially compensated, receive community service credit hours, or have the opportunity to participate in additional activities on the beach afterward.

It's good to be heard

 ***The water department isn't listening to the community.***

The Community Conversations generated significant interest as soon as we began promoting them, and a major factor appeared to be that people were eager to be heard. The general consensus in all of the conversations was that folks were appreciative of the opportunity to voice their opinions. They thanked us for hearing their concerns and expressed interest in continuing the dialogue. The groups also requested that we help facilitate conversations with elected officials and public utilities like the water department. We are currently working with our partner, Environmental Health Watch, to host a community conversation featuring representatives from the water department in the city of Cleveland.

Additionally, residents indicated that they would gladly speak up about environmental issues in their community if provided adequate education and notice. This is encouraging, as we seek to get residents mobilized to speak out on policy issues. It is important to note that while most advocacy is reactionary, we are also being proactive about having communities weigh in on policy positions.

What's Next?

The intelligence gained in the conversations is already guiding our work. While internal discussions and planning are still happening, we have already begun to respond to local demand for community education on water issues. Additionally, we have expanded our programming in Ohio, including the launch of volunteer, advocacy, and engagement initiatives such as the Cleveland Young Professional Council and Ohio Ambassadors Program. These programs offer a variety of volunteer opportunities outside of the traditional beach clean-ups. Below is a list of next steps.

- Facilitate conversations between urban communities of color, elected officials, and public utilities;
- Develop clear, simplified messaging without insider jargon
- Focus on issues of local importance that the community tells us are important (e.g. not Asian carp, but drinking water affordability);
- Add water affordability to the suite of issues that we seek to address at all levels of government;
- Work to create stronger, more diverse coalitions that include community organizations — this will help us make our work more equitable and ensure that we are serving all communities impacted by water issues in the Great Lakes region and beyond;
- Seek funding for community education and advocacy in communities of color; and
- Create a safe drinking water toolkit for nonprofit, watershed, and community organizations.

Appendix A

Community Conversation Questions— Buckeye, Shaker & Mt. Pleasant Neighborhoods

The following questions were developed to guide the conversations in the Buckeye, Shaker, and Mt. Pleasant neighborhood meetings.

General

Please tell me the first thing that comes to mind when I say the following words:

- *Cleveland*
- *Buckeye, Shaker Square or Mt Pleasant*
- *Great Lakes*
- *Lake Erie*
- *Cleveland beaches*
- *Sustainability*

Beach Usage

Has anyone ever been to Edgewater Beach or any other Cleveland beach?

If you have not been to the beach, why?

How often do you go to the beach? How do you get there?

When you go to Cleveland Beaches what do you do?

Do you attend Euclid and Edgewater Live?

What may be missing that could attract you to Cleveland Beaches?

Would you be interested in a community service effort to clean up the beach? If not, why?

Education

Do you feel that it is important for your children to learn about the Great Lakes in school? In what grade? Elementary, middle school? Throughout?

What current issues are you aware of when it comes to water?

Do you know where your tap water originates?

Do you drink water out of your tap?

Building Resilience

Have you worked on any environmental projects in your community? Community Gardens? Cleanups? If not, would you be interested?

Does your household recycle?

Does your household experience flooding?

Have you been impacted by lead in your home or child's school?

Did you know on average people spend about 5% of their monthly income on utilities?

I know this is hard because you have to factor electric bills, but have you ever had to spend more than 5% of your monthly income on utilities specifically due to higher water bills?

Policy/Advocacy

What are some of the most pressing issues in your neighborhood? Are they being addressed? How are they being addressed?

Would you be interested in speaking out on environmental issue affecting your community? If not, why?

How do you find out about what news or new developments are occurring in your community? How would you prefer to get information?

Appendix B

Sample Event Flyer



Please Join Hosts Alliance for the Great Lakes,
The River Network and the Western Reserve Land Conservancy
For

Buckeye Road/ Shaker Square/ Mt. Pleasant Neighborhoods
Community Conversation
Thursday, May 25, 2017
5:15 pm – 6:30 pm

At The Cleveland Public Library – Harvey Rice Branch
11535 Shaker Blvd., Cleveland, OH 44120

This is an informal conversation to hear your thoughts on environmental issues
and local priorities.

CATERED DINNER WILL BE PROVIDED

*Space is limited
RSVP Required*

*To confirm attendance, email Crystal M.C. Davis at cdavis@greatlakes.org or
Call (216) 456-2036 by May 22, 2017*

EL CENTRO
de SERVICIOS SOCIALES, INC.



Acompañe a El Centro de Servicios Sociales, Inc.,
Alianza para los Grandes Lagos,
Consejo Ambiental de Ohio y la Red de Río

Conversación Comunitaria de Lorain
miércoles, junio 21, 2017
5:15 pm – 6:30 pm

En El Centro de Servicios Sociales, Inc.
2800 Pearl Ave., Lorain, OH 44055

Esta es una conversación bilingüe informal para escuchar sus pensamientos
sobre temas del ambiente y prioridades locales. Un intérprete estará presente.
CENA DE MI CASA SABOR LATINO SERA PROPORCIONADA
ESTARA DISPONIBLE SERVICIO GRATUITO DE CUIDO DE NIÑOS

Espacio es limitado

Una reservación es requerida

Para confirmar su asistencia, comuníquese con Javier Espitia:

Jespitia@lorainelcentro.org

o marque (440) 277-8235 antes de junio 16, 2017



[UNLEASHING THE POWER OF GREEN]

