Preserving Our Place

A Community Field Guide to Engagement, Resilience, and Resettlement:

Community regeneration in the face of environmental and developmental pressures
Preserving Our Place

A Community Field Guide to Engagement, Resilience, and Resettlement:

Community regeneration in the face of environmental and developmental pressures
The collaborative work of the NAS team has involved community engagement and support as the Isle de Jean Charles (IdJC) tribe works to define development goals in relation to their community relocation from their ancestral home due to sea level rise issues on the Island. Working with IdJC community members our team has produced a methodology for working together and site objectives, design, and analysis related to potential relocation and memorialization efforts supported in part by the National Academy of Sciences.

**Audience:**
This toolkit document is intended for communities who are at high environmental risk and attempting adaptation. The case studies in this document are drawn from a small community with less formal organizational structure and a long history of high demand planning, facing pressures from external groups and forces, all while very much in the public eye. We believe this guide can also serve as a resource for communities facing similar risk and adaptation needs that find themselves in a range of situations, including, for example, but not limited to:

- Communities with less formal structures in place
- Those with more formal organizational structures in place
- Communities at the very beginning of their adaptation processes
- Those who are far along in their adaptation planning
- Smaller communities or larger communities
- Communities somewhere in between.

**Purpose:**
One important goal of this document is to provide possible ways for communities to help maintain control of the planning process and its narratives. We believe that some possible uses of this document include, but are not limited to:

- Its use as a decision-making asset
- As a guide for assessing and addressing risk and adaptation needs
- To aid in the navigation of community needs and keeping those needs at the forefront of planning processes
- As a collection of resources, and/or
- As a process guide.

Lastly, and most importantly, this is intended to be a resource for community efficacy and informed decision-making in community-led adaptation and regenerative planning processes in response to environmental stressors and injustice.
Community is self-defined and complicated. This field guide does not define what a community is or is not, but it is intended for those communities whose lifeways are threatened by environmental change that has exceeded the carrying capacity of the community’s social and ecological infrastructure. The problem is more often defined as risks to infrastructure, but the loss of lifeways is not irrelevant. We suggest that social concerns must not be displaced in the face of risk, and that cultural continuation and survival is as important as infrastructure. In fact, supporting lifeways in communities with deep ecological connections could well have prevented the impacts now driving adaptation.

External resources designed to support adaptation typically fail to support the regeneration of lifeways. All too often protecting the built environment comes at the cost of community reformulation and destruction. To this point, we offer a guide for organizing and mobilizing community in the face of institutional and programmatic constraints by: 1) building partnerships through a cross-boundary network undergirded by community-defined principles and community control, and 2) approaching planning processes and adaptation in a fundamentally different way. This is, in fact, not a new way of thinking. Rather, it is honoring traditional knowledge and practices through emphasizing community-led engagement and a cross-boundary support network of external resources for the community.

This work cannot and does not eliminate the institutional and programmatic limitations imposed by current legal and bureaucratic mechanisms designed to assist communities going through adaptation processes. There are, and will be, systemic, institutional limitations, particularly ones steeped in historical patterns of structural violence. We want to emphasize the various faces that structural violence can take - from the purposeful silencing of voices to rendering invisible specific populations to outright neglect of specific populations, and however else it may manifest. However, in addition to being a critique on how help is current delivered to
communities in need, we hope you will also find this document to be a path to measured compromise. In fact, neglecting to recognize adaptation as a human right, and instead framing it as "assistance," only perpetuates colonial tropes and power structures. This is one in which communities who receive assistance should be grateful for the support and passively accept systemically-driven community plans, rather than voicing their community needs and acting as agents with vision and self-determination. What happens as a result is ahistorical adaptation, which ignores the structural injustices that created risk. This guide is meant to show a different way.

With these ideas in mind, we feel it is important to note that this field guide is based upon the principles that are deemed important to the people of Isle de Jean Charles. We recognize that each community may have their own principles and, as such, we feel it is necessary that the field guide be viewed as a support document for communities whose lifeways are tied to the ecosystem that is threatened. The contents of the field guide are not necessarily sequential, but they do serve as a set of elements to consider, some of which will be more useful to you than others. Any of the sections of this document can be used on their own. While our document title includes the word "field guide," ultimately, we conceived of this document as a scrapbook of our experiences, put together to share with others. It is a collection of our ideas and treasures from our work. It is those treasures that will keep our work moving along, as your treasures will do for you. This guide is thus a map for you to build your own field guide and scrapbook. Throughout it you will find worksheets that are included for your use. We invite you to utilize these materials in the creation of, or as foundations for, your own community document.
to an ecosystem that is threatened, rather than viewed based upon its principles alone. Communities viewing this document may or may not be in geographic diaspora from long term environmental pressures as Isle de Jean Charles is.

We demonstrate how the formation of a cross-boundary network was established to address these issues through a collaborative process designed to support the Tribal mission and vision. We hope that our work can be used as a resource for communities who feel that planning processes must account for the future preservation and regeneration of its culture and lifeways. In short, planning for the future need not come at the expense of a community’s culture and lifeways. As a result, we present our case study as critique, resistance, design, and a reimagining of social and environmental justice.

Current issues driving the Tribe’s relocation can be traced over nearly two centuries of social and environmental injustice.
Contents

Chapter 1
Preparing to do the work
A. Creating your vision
B. Defining the holistic crisis and potential integrated solutions
C. Staffing and time demands
D. Identifying assets and gap analysis
E. Identifying and engaging potential partners
F. Case Study: Cultural and Ecological Regeneration

Chapter 2
Mapping Ecological and Cultural Lifeways, Contexts, Assets, Goals

Chapter 3
Keeping Community at the Forefront in Design Processes
A. Governance and administration
B. Case Study: Creating, managing, and controlling the public narrative: The Isle de Jean Charles Case Study

Chapter 4
Building a Cross-Boundary Network: Partnerships and Collaboration
A. Deciding if and when to implement a cross-boundary network
B. Engaging partners
C. Community Protections: Declaration of Principles and Memorandum of Understanding

Chapter 5
Doing the Work: Creating Resources
A. Creating checklists
B. Funding Resources
C. Sample agenda to prepare for official meetings
D. Sample press release
E. Sample Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) for planning process
F. Creating a glossary of terms

Chapter 6
Doing the Work: Actions
A. Staffing needs
B. Designing: Integrated design process
C. Evaluation of the collaborative process
C. Case Study: The Tribal-led planning process

Advance the sovereignty of the tribe and build a movement among allies

A. Fully documented, iterative and participatory engagement and design process that holds all actors accountable to the tribe

Develop a culturally competent process that empowers Native communities around the country to lead projects of similar type and scope

- Tribe-led and Tribe-owned approach to the resettlement
- Build a prototype that offers a toolkit for highlighting and avoiding the tendency of cultural blindness and that establishes a precedent for future development projects by, for, or involving Native communities
Keeping Community at the Forefront
A. Governance and Administration

Another important consideration is the governance and administration of the community, which will impact your ability to access federal and other resources. Some models may require legal processes and paperwork, such as the creation of a non-profit corporation or a land trust. Understanding your current model and considering alternatives can be a time consuming process, and should be started sooner rather than later.

Each of the different federal programs, grants, and other funding mechanisms that the community may turn to for their project will present different requirements regarding governance and administration. These requirements include organizational and legal requirements, such as the requirement to have a 501(c)3 designation, or to be affiliated with an incorporated jurisdiction that is eligible for the various sources of funding. The type of formal organization that a community chooses, whether it be a 501(c)3, creating a land trust, or selecting another entity as a fiscal sponsor, will have an impact on the ways in which the community can govern itself. It will also impact requirements such as whether a board is needed and the kinds of legal documents that must be created.

The types of governance and administration also impact the need for external expertise, such as hiring an attorney or an accountant. Communities may also need to seek out different types of insurance, based upon the particular needs of the grants. For example, serving as a sub-recipient for some funds will require carrying some measure of liability insurance and being incorporated as a 501(c)3.
Some key questions to ask include:

• What is the current legal status of the community, and is all paperwork in order?

• What are the administrative and bureaucratic requirements of the potential funding sources being considered?

• What are the risks and limitations of changing your formal legal status? For example, will the rights given to an elected Board conflict with other methods of traditional leadership?

• Who will be responsible for managing the administrative components, such as filling forms and record keeping?

In addition to considering how administrative and governance mechanisms might be altered to allow for the pursuit of funding, it is also necessary to think about whether or not the tradeoffs are worthwhile. Although funding sources may be limited without conforming to the required forms of organization, retaining community control over governance may prove more valuable.

Regardless, it can be important to describe the current governance structures and any related protocols, in order to allow partners to understand the community’s expectations relative to their interactions.
B. Creating, managing, and controlling the public narrative: The Isle de Jean Charles Case Study

Another important consideration is how to both respond to intense media attention while also controlling your story and how it is told. As one example, in the two years following the January 2016 announcement of $48 million National Disaster Resilience Award, nearly 200 stories were produced for newspapers, television, and online that focused on the Tribe’s experiences of land loss, displacement, and resettlement. This coverage included regional, national, and international news outlets like *Indian Country Today Media Network*, *The Huffington Post*, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, RT, MSNBC, NPR, *National Geographic*, and *The Guardian*. Specialty journals like *The Natural Hazards Observer* and *Planning Magazine* also ran stories about the Tribe and their resettlement. Additionally, two photography books have been published and a number of short films produced about the Island. This visibility afforded both possibilities and problems for creating a community-driven cross boundary network for adaptation, resettlement, and tribal community regeneration. One of the biggest challenges has been simply the question of who gets to speak for the community and for the project.

Additionally, being very clear about what is meant by “the community” is critical to controlling the narrative. The Isle de Jean Charles tribal community resettlement has for nearly two decades advanced a notion of community rooted in current and ancestral connections to the Island, shared heritage, and Tribal affiliation. This included the goal of reuniting those who have already been displaced or migrated, many of whom regularly visit family on the Island and live in nearby areas where there is also high flood and storm risk. However, as the tribal community’s experiences and initiatives became more iconic within coverage and policy work focused on climate change, public narratives presented a narrow scope of community as consisting primarily of remaining Island residents, rather than the entire Island tribal community. Coverage would often frame the tribal community by first describing the Island in physical terms, rather than social, and the number of people described as resettling often only reflected the remaining Island households.

There can be more at stake than one might think regarding the management of public narratives of community, and committing to agreed-upon notions of community at the outset of any planning or funding partnership is critically important. If there
A design exercise at the Isle de Jean Charles Tribal Community Center invited children and adults to identify components of the Tribe’s land and lifeways that were integral to the Tribe’s identity.

“We all know what we want: betterment of the people on the Island and bringing our culture together. To do this, we must build a bridge between our ancestral land and our new land.”

-Chief Albert Naquin
are disagreements among partners on the scope of community within planning processes, these must be hashed out before moving on to subsequent planning activities. Within Louisiana's administration of National Disaster Resilience Competition funds to support the Isle de Jean Charles resettlement, for example, the Tribal Council and their resettlement partners tried to ensure the continuity of the tribal community that was described in the funding application. State planners, however, maintained an uneven, ambiguous, and non-committal approach by vocalizing support for the social and spiritual connections that Tribal leaders maintained to the Island in meetings while at the same time treating remaining Island residents as beneficiaries with special status and decision-making power when actual decisions were being made. This process became incredibly divisive and has had lasting effects on the resettlement process and the tribal community more broadly.

At the moment, the plight of so-called “climate refugees” provides a catchy headline. This phrase has problematically been used in association with the Isle de Jean Charles tribal community. Some critics of the term have pointed out that it has no legal meaning, and others have argued that it further marginalizes and undercuts the agency of those resettling. The “climate refugee” narrative also reflects a tendency to promote future doomsday scenarios of climate change at the expense of addressing the historical processes and conditions that have produced coastal risks in the first place or the long durée of indigenous adaptation to forced displacement, land grabs, and unsustainable development. Related to the issue of managing narratives of community described above, Isle de Jean Charles Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw Tribal leaders have also raised the concern that the attribution of this label to them obscures recognition of their tribal sovereignty and frames them as in desperate need of saving, rather than solidarity.

A great deal of time and energy has been spent by Tribal leaders and their partners trying to keep up with the demand to produce and consume stories about- and images of the Island, how life has changed, and plans for the future. Additional time is spent assessing and responding to inaccuracies and misrepresentations that persist throughout the coverage. This work drains the already strained capacity to actually do the much-needed organizing and outreach work and creates a sense of frustration among those most committed to regeneration. Some of the most accurate and compelling coverage of the resettlement has come from journalists and media makers with whom Tribal leaders have built durable and trusting relationships.

“The state isn’t thinking holistically about how the commercial and residential components of the site can be linked through ecology and culture.”

-Chantel Comardelle

Over two years, the Tribe held a number of community meetings around resettlement topics and invited trusted experts to engage collaboratively on resettlement topics that required broad cross-sector expertise.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

What narratives are most relevant to your community?

Who gets to speak for your community?
Analytical tools, including data visualizations, help articulate how tribal lifeways have evolved and how they could evolve in the future informed Tribe-led planning efforts aimed at regenerating lifeways at the resettlement site.