



PROJECT BRIEF

PREPARED BY

Anna Buongiorno

Bay Burnham

Livia Spencer

Autumn Panlilio

MENV 2022

BEST PRACTICES FOR A REGIONAL VISION



Background

A team of four students from the University of Colorado at Boulder's Masters of the Environment (MENV) Program worked with the Metro Denver Nature Alliance (Metro DNA) on a 2022 Capstone Project to determine best practices to create a *Regional Vision for People + Nature* in the Denver Metro Area. The *Regional Vision for People + Nature* will combine goals from the Regional Equity Assessment and the Regional Conservation Assessment to build up equitable access to nature, ecological health and connectivity, and climate resilience in the seven counties that make up the Denver Metro Area.

Metro DNA is a coalition of non-profit, private, and governmental partners who strive to build an active and aligned network of experts and empower strategic, equitable, and conservation-forward land use decision-making in the Denver Metro Area. The coalition is committed to advancing social equity within the region and addressing the increasing lack of access to natural areas. Metro DNA aims to define the ecological and community goals of the region and articulate strategies to achieve those goals.

Objectives

The MENV Student's Capstone Project focuses on understanding how other metro area planners, regional alliances, and conservation and community groups have attempted to achieve equitable access to nature while also improving climate resilience and ecological quality and connectivity.

Target Audiences

The target audiences for the MENV team's Best Practices for a Regional Vision include:

- Metro DNA and their associated partners and committees
- Regional planners in the seven-county Denver Metro Area
- Conservation Organizations
- Community Organizations
- The Nature Conservancy's Cities Network
- Similar regional nature alliances across the United States

Timeline

There are three primary phases for the MENV team's project:

Planning

Feb. - May 2022

- Scope Development

Analysis

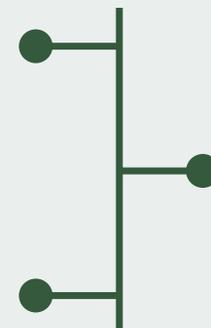
Aug. - Nov. 2022

- Final Report
- Stakeholder Presentations

Research

May - Aug. 2022

- Literature Review
- Interviews and Outreach



Methods

Our methods for understanding how other organizations have completed similar work fell into two categories: a literature review and key interviews. The literature review intends to answer the question of "How have others achieved or attempted to achieve greater equitable access to nature, climate resilience and ecological quality and connectivity in their regions?"



The literature review research delves into the history of the Denver Metro Area's challenges related to climate resilience, ecological health, and equitable access to nature and discusses case studies of organizations successful in implementing projects in their regions. To provide a comprehensive overview of methods that would answer our research question, the MENV team utilized academic sources, news articles, books, podcasts, blogs, and videos, ensuring we captured diverse and underrepresented voices in academic, professional, and community sectors.

The MENV student team also conducted a series of key interviews with organizations and individuals conducting similar regional work. Our target interviewees were groups that work to improve ecological health, equitable access to nature, and climate resilience. Sample questions from the interviews include:

"What are the major lessons you have learned while co-creating spaces with local communities? Are there any mistakes you or your organization have made while engaging with communities that you have learned from?"

"How have organizations working on the regional conservation plan facilitated buy-in from the local municipalities, counties, or other regional planning groups that might be tasked with helping to implement this work?"

"How do you measure progress towards goals that are intended to benefit people and nature in your region?"

Results

The literature review and interview process uncovered three important themes for best practices in merging equity and ecology to create a regional vision.

Begin with Acknowledgement and Understanding

- Engaging in equity and conservation work requires thorough acknowledgement and understanding of the historical and modern issues associated with conservation and access to nature for a region and a community.
- As part of research for any proposed project, it's necessary to understand the use and importance of the spaces that may be conserved or improved, and how any changes to those spaces may impact the surrounding community and ecosystem.
- For example, in Elizabeth Walsh's 2015 paper on White fragility as an obstacle to anti-racist resilience planning, Walsh details challenges faced by the Atlanta Beltline Project and advocates for greater acknowledgement of how vulnerabilities are created in communities before attempting to build social-ecological resilience.

Champion Diverse and Local Engagement

- If projects are intended to benefit communities and ecosystems, then community members with knowledge of those spaces and people must be involved in every step of the planning process.
- Involvement by community members and grassroots organizations will likely require extra steps to build trust and incentivize involvement for individuals and groups that otherwise may not have the capacity to be involved in a project.
- For example, the Orlando Nature Conservancy Chapter facilitates greater involvement by community groups by recognizing the limited capacity for involvement by busy and active organizations. The TNC chapter has taken steps to create and distribute one-pager summaries of all relevant meetings to help community groups remain informed and engaged.

Ensure Equitable and Intersectional Design

- To avoid unintended consequences, project design should focus on equitable and intersectional development.
- Project design should prioritize social aspects such as green gentrification, equitable access, and just distribution of green space. Focus should be placed on ecological features such as biodiversity and resiliency benefits and opportunities for environmental education.
- For example, in Alessandro Rigolon's 2016 article A complex landscape of inequity in access to urban parks: A literature review, he argues that urban green spaces should not merely consider access, but also acreage and quality relevant to the needs of a given community for natural spaces.



The MENV team anticipates completing the Best Practices for a Regional Vision by December 2022. If you would like to receive a copy of their findings, please submit your email through the QR code.