



An Agency Path Forward: **Designing Effective Engagement and Building Capacity for Relevancy**



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report describes a project and journey undertaken by the Virginia Department of Wildlife Resources (DWR) in collaboration with the Wildlife Management Institute and Metropolitan Group and in relationship with Outdoor Afro, the Upper Mattaponi Indian Tribe, and the Rappahannock Tribe.

In this journey, DWR and its collaborators encountered two broad sets of challenges: one related to creating intra-agency conditions for success in advancing relevancy, the other related to building and maintaining external relationships to increase DWR's relevancy. This report illustrates and summarizes key aspects of these two sets of challenges, lessons learned as team members worked to address them, and recommendations for how they might be better resolved in the future and by others.

Here, at the outset, three primary lessons should be emphasized.

First, the two sets of challenges—the internal and external work of relevancy—are inextricably linked. Because they are part of the same system, neither can be effectively addressed in isolation from the other. Advancing relevancy requires an integrated and simultaneous approach in which change, learning, and growth anywhere in the system contribute to learning and growth across the entire system.

Second, this work is difficult. Advancing relevancy—that is, an agency or organization becoming relevant to a broader set and cross-section of the public they serve—requires that state fish and wildlife agencies build relationships with constituency and partner groups who may be unfamiliar to and with the agency, and whose expectations and priorities may differ significantly from those of longstanding constituencies and partners. Building these relationships requires building trust. That often requires understanding historical and contemporary contexts, including past events that engendered distrust and misunderstanding.

Because the terrain is so challenging, there is no simple formula for success, no simple roadmap. When the project began, project leads from WMI, MG, and DWR held out some hope that there might be a simple, repeatable, and reliable path forward. A “recipe for relevance,” as it were. If such a path or recipe exists, we did not find it. Instead, we discovered through our shared journey that relevancy is what National Conservation Leadership Institute participants might call an “adaptive challenge”—the kind for which there is no straightforward solution. The ambiguity and unpredictability of the challenge of advancing relevancy requires an experimental mindset, a willingness to learn and practice, a willingness to do things in new ways that are nearly always uncomfortable at first.

It also requires a willingness to make mistakes. This work cannot be done effectively if participants and collaborators are afraid of even the smallest misstep. There will be

breakdowns, bumps, and detours in the road. These are not failures. In many ways, making, learning from, and adapting to these inevitable failures is the primary work of relevancy.

Closely related to the first two lessons is a third: The most significant barriers to state agency relevancy—as well as the most significant opportunities for breakthrough change—are related to internal agency skills, structure, and culture. Because the internal and external work are integral to one another, an agency cannot significantly advance its relevancy without changing and experiencing growing pains. Because relevancy is an adaptive challenge, agencies committed to meeting the challenge have to develop a tolerance, even an appetite, for experimentation, discomfort, and learning from mistakes.

INTRODUCTION

By adopting the Fish and Wildlife Relevancy Roadmap in 2019, AFWA acknowledged that the future of state fish and wildlife agencies and their conservation work urgently depends on engaging and serving broader constituencies.¹

In taking decisive action toward relevancy, the Roadmap suggests that agencies:

- Recognize the need to adapt to changing societal conditions and demonstrate support for adaptation efforts.
- Demonstrate commitment to being more inclusive of diverse perspectives and interests in fish, wildlife, their habitats, and outdoor recreation activities.
- Increase acquisitions and application of social science information to identify, better understand, engage, and serve broader constituencies.
- Assess, evaluate, and improve agency structures, processes, practices, and programs.
- Increase and improve partnering and collaboration to increase engagement with, and service to, broader constituencies.

Shortly after its adoption, a number of agencies began to pilot and implement recommendations from the Roadmap. The Wildlife Management Institute (WMI) recognized, however, that the state fish and wildlife agency community needed a case study in taking decisive action toward relevancy: a project that would generate practical knowledge and demonstrate the potential value of committed relevancy efforts.

In partnership with Metropolitan Group (MG), WMI initiated this project, which was conducted between March 2021 and June 2022. Based on the guidance of the Fish and Wildlife Relevancy Roadmap, recommendations from the Future of America's Fish and Wildlife Blue Ribbon Panel report, and related discussions at national and regional conferences, the project was focused on two primary goals: (1) to enhance a state agency's ability to engage priority new constituencies and (2) to cultivate agency relationships with priority new constituencies. Among other benefits, focusing on those goals was intended to yield movement toward a third goal: to increase these constituencies' engagement with, connection to, and support for the agency. The project was designed to be carried out in collaboration with a single state agency that was ready and willing to take a deeper dive into relevancy work.

The Virginia Department of Wildlife Resources volunteered to join the project because its leaders see relevancy—and broader-based political, social, and fiscal support—as a matter of survival for the agency. They recognize the urgent need to begin engaging new constituent

¹ This report uses “constituency” and “constituent group” to refer to groups of residents with whom a state agency has engaged or might engage. In addition, “partner” and “partner group” are used to refer to groups and organizations with whom an agency has or might have an active, collaborative relationship. The term “stakeholder” is intentionally omitted, as some Indigenous nations object to it; more than holding just an *interest* or *stake* in natural resources management, they hold and claim specific *rights* and *title* to resources and land.

groups while not alienating long-standing partners. They are especially aware of the need to engage urban and suburban audiences and more racially and ethnically diverse communities. In the long run, they know the agency will need broad-based political support as well as financial support from new funding sources. They were eager to embark on this project, as an initial step on a longer-term journey, as a way of learning what kinds of approaches show the most promise, which paths to follow, and what tools and insights can be applied going forward.

This report documents the project's trajectory and results, with an emphasis on lessons learned and how they can be applied and integrated into related efforts in other states. Following a high-level overview, the bulk of the report focuses on learnings and recommendations about engaging with constituency groups, creating intra-agency conditions for success, and building skills and awareness. The report's appendices include project data and products, as well as a summary of how the design evolved as the project progressed.

OVERVIEW

Throughout the project, it was the WMI and MG teams' intention to take an open-minded approach to process and structure. Though we began with a clear project design, we knew that the nature of relevancy work in general—not to mention whatever specific situations we encountered in the focal state—would demand flexibility. This report is our attempt to tell the project's story, focusing on what we believe to be the most important elements of what occurred and what was learned.

In the project's earliest phase, the WMI and MG teams spoke with leaders from several state agencies that had expressed interest in being the project's focal agency. In those interviews, WMI and MG listened for several key criteria: leadership commitment, demonstrated need, and conditions that favored continuity and ongoing effort. The team also considered additional factors, seeking an agency that (1) was representative enough of the state agency community that other states would see its approaches and outcomes as applicable, (2) had a relatively high degree of diversity across demographics, political perspectives, and urban-suburban-rural settings, (3) had the ability and willingness to commit staff time to the project, and (4) had demonstrated past engagement with related ideas and efforts (e.g., wildlife governance principles, the Relevancy Roadmap). Based on those interviews and in consultation with the project's advisory group, WMI invited the Virginia Department of Wildlife Resources (DWR) to participate.

DWR's core project team initially consisted of six top-ranking staff. Over the course of the project, approximately 20 other staff members from across divisions were tapped to assist in various capacities.

Early in the project, conversations and other engagements focused primarily on (1) building relationships among the DWR, WMI, and MG team members, (2) helping WMI and MG understand agency culture and staff perceptions of relevancy work, including what it can and should accomplish for the agency, internally and externally, and (3) beginning to identify constituency groups underserved and under-engaged by the agency. MG and WMI facilitated small group staff discussions as well as larger group listening sessions, conducted one-on-one interviews with agency staff members, and—in collaboration with DWR's human dimensions specialist—fielded an agency-wide Qualtrics survey that had a 78.2% response rate. (See Appendices A and B for the survey questions and listening session agenda/guide used; questions for one-on-one interviews were tailored to each interviewee based on prior interactions or information.)

Data from survey, listening sessions, and one-on-one interviews provided WMI and MG with initial insights into DWR culture, including staff sentiments regarding relevancy work, the degree to which such work should be an agency priority, and how responsibility for such work should be distributed within the agency. These data also provided initial insights into DWR's existing

relationships with constituent groups and partners, past challenges and trouble spots in such relationships, the agency's approach to such relationships, and groups that might be a priority for relationship building in the near future.

These data directly informed the next phase of the project, focused on identifying, mapping, and prioritizing constituency groups with whom the agency might seek to engage during the project. (For details on this process, see the "Explore your constituency landscape" section below and Appendix C.) After an initial research phase and facilitated discussion process, DWR ended up prioritizing engagement with the local DC-Maryland-Virginia network of Outdoor Afro and with two tribal nations: the Upper Mattaponi Indian Tribe and the Rappahannock Tribe.

The remainder of the project focused on two interrelated efforts: (A) starting to build relationships and engage with the prioritized groups and (B) identifying and building on relevant strengths and opportunities in agency culture, systems, and capacity, while also identifying and seeking ways to improve weak points and overcome barriers. The bulk of this report is dedicated to illustrating lessons learned from these twin efforts and offering related recommendations.

Though this report is written in a tone of calm inquiry, it is not our intention to gloss over the fact that relevancy work is hard. Given our shared histories, working across differences (e.g., of race, ethnicity, and power) is always challenging. It requires building strong relationships of trust and reciprocity. In some cases, trust needs to be repaired. Woven throughout this report are threads of these challenges and echoes of moments when conflicts flared, frustrations rose, spirits fell, people experienced heartache, or historically-rooted distrust begot anger. The work of relevancy is, in large part, about persevering through such moments.

There are many paths to relevancy. This project explored a subset; this report's reflections and learnings are thus focused there. Other paths will also be important in agencies' relevancy efforts. These include diversifying an agency's workforce, including its leadership, so that the experiences and perspectives of broader and more diverse constituencies become an integral part of the agency.

LEARNINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Lessons learned from the project's twin, related efforts are described and illustrated below. Related recommendations are also offered.

- The first section—"Creating Internal Conditions for Success"—focuses on the effort to identify and build on strengths and opportunities in agency culture, systems, and capacity, while also identifying and seeking ways to improve weak points and overcome barriers.
- The second—"Building and Maintaining External Relationships"—focuses on the effort to begin to build relationships and engage with prioritized groups.

This report's conclusion briefly discusses the relationship and overlap between, as well as the crucial need to integrate, these efforts.

Creating Internal Conditions for Success

Start at the top

Though the kinds of relationship-building work needed to advance relevancy can be done at all levels of an agency, active support and advocacy from the organization's top leadership are vital.

At every stage of the project, DWR staff members stated that Director Ryan Brown's steadfast and vocal support of relevancy and related work, which he communicated both to immediate team members and to agency staff as a whole, was essential in enabling the kinds of conversations and efforts required. The other top-ranking staff members who served on the core project team—Jeff Trollinger (Assistant Chief, Aquatic Wildlife Resources Division), George Braxton (Chief Diversity and Inclusion Officer), Becky Gwynn (Deputy Director), Darin Moore (Director, Planning and Finance Division), and Brian Moyer (Deputy Director, Outreach Division)—were likewise steadfast in their support of Brown, this specific project, and the broader efforts of which it was part. Brown also acknowledged that the DWR Board's active support—which, in his view, amounted to a mandate—was a key factor that enabled him to fully voice his support and take action.

Leadership support for relevancy can be communicated through words and actions alike. In the years immediately preceding the project, Brown and other agency leaders had signaled and demonstrated their commitment. For example:

- In 2019, Brown, with support from the DWR Board, highlighted diversity as a focus for the agency.

- Since then, DWR leaders—including the agency’s first Chief Diversity and Inclusion Officer, George Braxton—have spearheaded the establishment of the DWR Inclusive Excellence Council and the development and publication of DWR’s first Inclusive Excellence Strategic Plan.

During this 2021-2022 project, Brown reiterated the importance of relevancy work in verbal statements to DWR’s project team and in emails to all staff. Brown also participated in project-related meetings, as well as the 1.5-day in-person training delivered as part of the project.

As noted in the overview above, leadership commitment was one of the core criteria established by WMI and MG in the process of selecting a focal state for the project.

Clarify and communicate the why

Why should state fish and wildlife agencies pursue relevancy work, seeking to engage new constituencies and to get more adept at such engagement?

If an agency’s staff members do not understand or do not support “the why,” relevancy-related efforts are at risk of being set aside in favor of more familiar work or criticized as irrelevant to the agency’s mission. Skeptical voices within the agency are apt to ask why they or others should dedicate time to connecting with people who aren’t buying licenses or otherwise providing financial support to the agency. (More on this under “Define success” below.) They’re apt to ask, in other words, “Why is this work mission-critical?”

It is crucial for agency leaders to have a compelling answer. It is also vital that leaders communicate “the why” clearly and repeatedly so that the importance of relevancy work and the reasons for it

“This work is a matter of survival for the agency. From a business-case perspective, we have no choice but to undertake it.”
—Ryan Brown, DWR Executive Director

become integral to how staff members understand the agency and its mission, just as the three core elements of DWR’s mission—conserve, connect, protect—are. Like leaders’ support for relevancy work (see “Start at the top” above), these messages can be communicated through both words and actions.

In interviews, meetings, and communications with staff, DWR’s leadership team repeatedly referenced their public trust responsibilities to be inclusive of all of their constituencies as part of their “why” for doing this work.²

As noted in the Introduction, DWR leaders recognize that, over the long term, the agency will need broad-based political and fiscal support from Virginians as a whole. During this project, Director Ryan Brown repeatedly communicated this to DWR’s project team and to staff overall.

² See [Decker et al. 2016](#), [Smith 2011](#).

The vision statement presented in DWR's Inclusive Excellence Strategic Plan similarly points to links between connecting with more diverse constituencies and ensuring the agency's future: "As a public agency, our ability to understand, embrace and operate in a multicultural Commonwealth—both among our stakeholders and our employees—is critical to our long-term sustainability and specifically impacts our ability to meet DWR's mission."

Among the DWR staff members tapped for this project, the "why" had already started to become integral to their understandings of the agency and its mission. Yet they still occasionally raised and discussed various forms of the question in constructive ways. And they expressed concern that skeptics might ask it more critically and destructively, in an attempt to derail the work.

Define success

Based on this project and other pilot efforts, it is clear that state fish and wildlife agency relevancy does not yield a swift, substantial return on investment (ROI), especially if ROI is measured in terms of rapid revenue increases. Agencies engaging in this work must define success in other terms.

In initial conversations with WMI and MG, agency leaders indicated that they saw this project as an initial stepping stone in a long-term journey for the organization. Their definition of success was focused on learning lessons that could be applied going forward, gleaned insights into what works or shows promise, so that those insights can inform continued work in the coming decade. For them, success was less about bringing in new audiences in the short term or getting those new relationships to particular benchmarks within the timeframe of the project. They expressed the aspiration that DWR will someday be an agency that presents no barriers (externally) to participation in the outdoors and no barriers (internally) to pursuing a conservation career. It was also important to DWR leaders that this project in particular, and relevancy work in general, be recognized—by members of the public and staff alike—as an endeavor that benefits everyone and contributes to the agency's overall conservation mission.

The question of how to define success for relevancy work was discussed at other points as well. As the project progressed, members of DWR's project team offered a number of insights and perspectives.

"Making a new friend may be more important than getting someone to buy a license."
—Jeff Trollinger, Assistant Chief, DWR Aquatic
Wildlife Resources Division

Director Ryan Brown, for example, expressed the view that the agency needs to "break out of the government bubble that requires showing success across the board" and needs to take "a longer view of the work and learning." Jeff Trollinger noted that, for the agency, "making a new friend may be more important than getting someone to buy a license," because friends, allies, and partners can provide many kinds of support, including political and social support regarding wildlife issues. They expressed the view, in short, that engaging in conservation-related relevancy work has value beyond the short term and beyond financial revenue.

These insights from DWR speak to the need to reframe this work's ROI in at least two ways:

- Understand and approach assessment of ROI over longer timeframes, thinking in decades, rather than months or even years.
- Think of and define ROI in broader terms, extending beyond the value of license dollars to include the value of social and political support and awareness of the agency and its work.

Getting clear about what kind of ROI is sought over what timeframe is vital, especially given the fact that it can be challenging to justify dedicating significant resources to this work from already-tight state agency budgets.

Given the relationship-focused nature of this work, it is also important for agencies to listen for (and ask about) what success would look like for partner groups. The process of defining success is another opportunity to engage in co-creation with partners.

This report offers state agencies and potential agency partners glimpses of what success could look like. It also suggests metrics that could be used to measure progress over time. (See Appendix D.)

Distribute responsibility, authorize action

Early in the project, a single point-person was designated to lead DWR's engagement with the local Outdoor Afro network and another to lead engagement with the Upper Mattaponi and Rappahannock. At that stage, responsibility for advancing DWR's relationships with these constituencies rested almost entirely in the hands of individual leaders (1) who had many other responsibilities, (2) whose roles in the agency were not primarily focused on advancing these kinds of external relationships, and (3) who did not have a clearly identified team dedicated to engaging with these specific groups. This was not a recipe for success, even when the individual was well-suited to and well-positioned for the role.

The effect collectively was that:

- Responsibility rested in too few hands.
- Competing priorities and limited time capacity hampered progress.
- Individuals were often acting alone, instead of as part of a team.

As a result, DWR encountered challenges, including:

- Bottlenecks and delays in communication.
- Varying levels of initiative and follow-through.
- Individual leaders lacking information necessary to make decisions or plans.

As these challenges came into sharper focus, WMI and MG recommended the creation of constituency-specific teams within DWR, with responsibility for the advancement of relationships with Outdoor Afro and with the two tribal nations.

DWR's project team agreed that it was important for these constituency-specific teams to know that they were authorized to move forward in advancing these relationships—that agency leadership wanted them to take action, rather than ask for and await approval at every step. Director Ryan Brown was fully supportive. He demonstrated his commitment to the work as well as his trust in the teams by explicitly empowering and authorizing them to be creative, take the initiative in advancing these relationships, and respond to opportunities that might surface. Brown also promised that he would “have their backs” as they stepped into unfamiliar territory.

“Top-down permission to go out and do these things was important. It allowed us to take advantage of the opportunities that arose.”

—Margi Whitmore, DWR Tidal Rivers Fisheries Biologist

DWR chose to move toward shared responsibility with authorization-to-act via two teams:

- The team focused on Outdoor Afro included people from across DWR's divisions, mainly because one immediate task that emerged was to co-create and plan an event with local Outdoor Afro network leaders. Bringing their wide range of knowledge and expertise to bear, the team was collectively able to identify questions that needed to be answered, clarify issues that needed to be resolved, share critical information, and take necessary action.
- The team focused on relationships with the Upper Mattaponi and Rappahannock consisted almost entirely of staff from DWR's fisheries division, mainly because representatives of both nations had spoken of strong interest in and cultural connections to fish, aquatic ecosystems, and the health of rivers. When two specific opportunities arose—one to be joined in the field by two fisheries trainees for a week, the other to participate in a river trip with youth and elders from the Upper Mattaponi—the fisheries biologists involved were able to respond and participate. As a result, connections were strengthened and new relationship pathways opened. (See “Go to tables set by others” below.)

By teaming in this way, DWR more effectively advanced relationships by providing people with awareness of and access to one another's diverse skills, insights, and expertise. Creating multi-person teams also resulted in an increased number of relationships and points of contact between the agency and its new partners.

Coordinate and connect

Early in the project, members of DWR's project team noted that the agency also had other relevancy-related work in progress, including the development of the Inclusive Excellence

Strategic Plan mentioned above and a Wildlife Viewing Plan that included a focus on “increasing participation in wildlife viewing by underrepresented groups and youth and families.”

As the project progressed, it became clear that other kinds of related work were also getting done within the agency. Often, however, the people engaged in these various efforts were not involved in—and were sometimes not aware of—what others were doing, including parallel strategy setting, processes, projects, and events. As a result, they could not pool their insights and knowledge, learn from one another, or make introductions to partner groups, and they were sometimes at risk of reaching out to the same potential partners without knowing about each other’s efforts.

The proverbial right hand didn’t always know what the left was doing. Within DWR—as in other state agencies—employees’ efforts are often substantially siloed, even when their work is closely related. These examples are representative:

- DWR’s Wildlife Grant Program, which connects youth to the outdoors, has long involved significant relationship-building with underserved communities. The program is led by just one or two DWR staff members who were involved neither in this project nor in the development of the Wildlife Viewing Plan.
- Some months before this project began, DWR hosted a fishing event with a nonprofit organization dedicated to connecting people of color to the outdoors and diversifying outdoor leadership. The staff member leading the development of the agency’s Inclusive Excellence Plan did not know the event had happened.
- During the project timeframe, a hunting recruitment, retention, and reactivation (R3) event was planned with one of this project’s focal constituencies, the local Outdoor Afro network. The staff member leading DWR’s engagement with Outdoor Afro was unaware that the event was being planned.

When WMI and MG asked about this apparent pattern, the DWR team confirmed that a lack of internal communication, networking, and information-sharing was an agency-wide challenge that had been recognized at least a decade ago. The DWR team shared a pair of related assessment reports of the agency’s internal communications, the first of which was published in 2010.

Based on this project and those previous assessment reports, it is clear that DWR is constrained—in relevancy work and elsewhere—by barriers that limit internal communication and information sharing, as is often the case within state wildlife agencies. The previous assessment reports recommend specific solutions to a variety of cultural and technical communication barriers. To implement those and/or other solutions, the agency will need to overcome inertia and change familiar ways of doing things.

These internal communication challenges are not unique to Virginia. Based on this project and other pilot relevancy efforts, WMI and MG are convinced that—for these efforts to flourish—it is

vital to have effective coordination and information flow among people who are doing work related to outreach, relevancy, and “new” constituency engagement. To advance relevancy, it is important to establish a “networked” approach that includes:

- Recognizing that basic organizational challenges—including structural and cultural barriers to internal communication—are pivotal, that overcoming them can make relevancy efforts more effective and enable long-term ROI, and that leaving them unresolved is likely to sabotage any significant movement toward relevancy.
- Prioritizing an increase in internal networking and information-sharing to enable more coordinated efforts when engaging constituent groups; designing and maintaining connection points among relevant staff and teams at multiple levels.
- Assigning staff members (or teams) to specific constituency groups or partner organizations, so that—for each partner—there is a clearly identified “node” in the internal network, with responsibility for monitoring and managing engagement and ensuring that relevant threads are woven together.

This kind of networked approach, which ideally involves people from all levels of the organization, can help agencies foster shared learning and bring everyone’s knowledge, expertise, commitment, and insights to bear on the complex demands of relevancy and engagement work.

Agencies will be most effective in advancing relevancy if they can empower teams to take action while also increasing coordination and information sharing among teams. If the main recommendation from the previous section (authorize action) is implemented without an increase in coordination, an agency runs the risk of uncoordinated actions that may hinder or harm relationship-building.

Dedicate time and resources

During this project, the DWR team managed to devote a significant amount of time to this work and made significant strides, both in relationship with new partner groups and in their own understanding of how best to approach this work. (Thanks to them and to the partner groups, WMI and MG’s understanding also advanced substantially.)

The DWR team devoted this time and made these strides despite the fact that relevancy work is not the focus of any of their roles. Everyone on the team had other responsibilities more central to their job descriptions. For fisheries division staff, for example, roughly 15 percent of their time was allocated to “outreach.” Given the demands of relevancy work, competing priorities made the project effort challenging, even for staff whose roles are focused on outreach of one kind or another.

This approach—asking people to take on specific kinds of new partner engagement responsibilities without making significant changes to their overall roles—can work to a degree, as evidenced by the advances DWR made during this project. And, as also became clear during this project, implementing this approach effectively over the long term will require agency leadership to support prioritization and choice-making about what other work is being taken off people’s plates. Putting relevancy work at the center of how conservation work is done will require agencies to dedicate significant staff time to it.

“How do we slow down enough to do this amidst all the pressures and pulls? This work requires a depth of teamwork and commitment that’s hard to find time for.”
—Eddie Herndon, DWR R3 Coordinator

In addition to making time for general staff to take on relevancy-related responsibilities, it is vital to invest in specialized expertise, skills, knowledge, and experience. This can be done in several ways:

Identify emerging leaders within the agency.

As a result of individual interests, backgrounds, expertise, and aptitudes, some staff will—if provided with the opportunity—emerge as key bridge-builders. During this project, for example, a DWR biologist emerged as an especially effective ambassador to tribal nations. Agency leaders can look for opportunities to redefine such staff members’ roles. Based on this project and related experiences, the combined project team offers these recommendations:

- **Look across organizational divisions.** Don’t limit yourself to your agency’s outreach division. A biologist in the wildlife division or an accountant in the finance division, for example, may be eager to contribute their unique expertise and insights—completely unrelated to biology or accounting—to relevancy efforts. (In an interview, one person of color on DWR staff expressed some frustration at not usually being included in these kinds of efforts.) Extending an open invitation across divisions may reveal interest and expertise in unexpected places.
- **Be thoughtful about criteria.** There is no single, hard-and-fast set of criteria for identifying and assigning existing staff to constituent-engagement roles. In thinking about general criteria, consider factors such as personal interest, emotional intelligence, intercultural experience, and a willingness to learn. In thinking about engagement with a specific constituent group, consider factors like cultural knowledge (e.g., past experience with tribal nations), geography (e.g., familiarity with and proximity to a group’s location), and topical expertise (e.g., knowledge of aquatic ecosystems if those are of special interest to a partner group).

- **Provide learning opportunities.** If a staff member meets key criteria but does not have all of the necessary skills, invest in training and other learning opportunities for that employee (and other team members). As detailed in subsequent sections of this report, relevancy work is an investment in learning and growth for individual staff members and for the agency as a whole.
- **Beware of tokenism.** Due to their identities—whether racial, ethnic, gender, sexual orientation, or otherwise—employees may have insights and expertise they can and want to contribute to the agency’s relevancy efforts. Do not, however, assume that a staff member is the right person to (or wants to) lead or even be involved in your agency’s engagement with a given partner simply because they belong to the same identity group. Selecting someone based solely on identity and asking them to represent the agency in relationship with a specific partner (e.g., tapping an employee to represent a white-led agency in its dealings with the Hispanic Access Foundation only because she identifies as Latina) can be experienced as an insult both by the employee and by the partner. (For further discussion of tokenism, see the “Listen for concerns” section later in this report.)

Employ specialists.

To move relevancy work forward—and to signal that it is a priority for the agency as a whole—there is no substitute for investing in one or more dedicated, high-level staff positions. Whether hiring from outside the agency or reassigning a current employee (see “Identify emerging leaders within the agency” above), apply clear and relevant criteria (e.g., emotional intelligence, intercultural experience, expertise in partnership-building and diversity, equity, and inclusion) to recruiting and retaining the right people. With such criteria clearly in view, hires and reassignments can also serve as opportunities to recruit, retain, and develop high-performing and emerging leaders from groups currently underrepresented in agency leadership.

Toward the end of this project, Director Ryan Brown remarked that having someone dedicated to relevancy would have made a difference and that planning for long-term staffing will be key.

Seek outside support.

Consultants, trainers, and other external partners can play important roles in moving this work forward. This can include providing learning opportunities for new and existing staff members on topics such as intercultural partnership-

building, psychological safety, and diversity, equity, and inclusion. (See “Deepen understanding and build skills” below for one example from this project.) Conversations about these issues and dynamics can be difficult for colleagues to broach with one another. A practiced facilitator can help create the conditions needed for constructive dialogue about how to engage effectively and respectfully across differences.

Building new relationships is both harder than and fundamentally different from maintaining existing relationships with longtime partners. As the DWR, WMI, and MG teams learned in the course of this project, it is important not to underestimate the time, energy, expertise, and human capital required.

Deepen understandings and build skills

As originally designed, this project focused on “learning by doing” and did not include training sessions. As the project progressed and roadblocks were encountered, questions began to arise about how best to address specific difficulties. (For details, see “Building Relationships” below). It became apparent that a shared, focused learning experience might be useful to agency staff.

A series of sessions was scheduled: two virtual 90-minute sessions followed by a 1.5-day in-person session. The sessions were open to all 25 DWR staff members who had direct involvement in the project.

The two virtual sessions focused on Black and Indigenous perspectives and experiences. Designed and led by a Black man and an Indigenous woman, these sessions provided cultural and historical context specific to the partner groups with whom DWR was engaging. Understanding this kind of historical context—including how Black, Indigenous, and other people of color have led many environmental justice, climate justice, and other conservation-aligned movements, and have often been excluded and impacted by government policies and by the historically white, mostly male wildlife conservation movement—is a key ingredient in developing insight and building trust.

Building on that historical context, the in-person session focused on strengthening relationships among participants and developing skills and awareness for advancing relevancy work within the agency and with partner groups. Though no simple, discrete “toolbox” of skills can ensure that an agency will become more equitable and inclusive or succeed in relevancy work more broadly, this session introduced participants to a set of practices that—if consistently practiced—improve the odds significantly.

The in-person session’s core objectives were to:

- Deepen relationships and trust among participating staff.
- Learn how to build psychological safety.

- Build awareness of:
 - the complexity of people's identities.
 - the inevitable presence of power differentials in interactions and positive ways in which power can be used.
 - unconscious bias and its historical and present-day impacts.
- Develop skills for being effective allies and “upstanders.”

Corresponding to these objectives, key topic areas covered in the session are **bolded** in this brief narrative description:

The morning of Day 1 provided opportunities for colleagues to engage with curiosity, authenticity, and courage in learning from each other about their past experiences with diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice (DEIJ) work at DWR and elsewhere. As participants witnessed one another's courage, trust and rapport increased within the group. Participants also recognized that they collectively have significant experience and wisdom related to this work. One key activity on that first morning was modeling how to build **psychological safety** in teams, creating conditions in which people feel empowered and authorized to engage in this work with curiosity, courage, compassion, and creativity.

In the afternoon of Day 1, participants worked on building awareness of their **complex identities** and of how **power differentials** are always present in interactions, both among agency staff and with partner groups. Participants also explored how their power and influence can be leveraged in service of relevancy and related transformations.

The morning of Day 2 began with reflections about what participants experienced and learned in Day 1. The group then focused on developing an understanding of **unconscious bias**—which is ingrained in all of us—and how it has historically created systemic barriers for the constituencies with whom DWR is currently seeking to build relationships (Black Virginians; Indigenous people).

The latter portion of Day 2 focused on learning—and starting to practice using—skills for being an **active bystander (aka “upstander”)**. These skills help prepare participants to respond constructively when a person says or does something that constitutes harassment, discrimination, or disrespect against an individual or social group.

As Day 2 closed, participants had the opportunity to reflect on what they learned and any “aha” moments and to commit to specific ways of implementing what they learned, moving from learning to doing.

The sessions, especially the shared experience of the in-person training, proved to be of significant value to DWR staff. From this, WMI and MG drew several lessons:

High-quality training matters.

The learning-by-doing baked into the original project model was necessary but not sufficient. DWR's team also needed high-quality, focused, shared learning experiences with clear objectives.

Session participants, including agency staff with extensive facilitation experience, appreciated how well the in-person session was facilitated and found themselves drawn into deeper-than-expected engagement with colleagues. The facilitator's level of skill and experience in the conservation field were key. The session's objectives could not have been accomplished by a presentation or by a process developed for a different sector.

One participant put it this way: "The word 'training' is too limited. Past DEI trainings have checked boxes. Maria created a conversation and got people telling stories. It was a deep learning exercise, not just a training."

One-off trainings alone, of course, are not sufficient or effective in catalyzing organizational change. Trainings—designed to support ongoing learning and practice—need to be part of broader, sustained change efforts.

Training should not be the first step.

After the in-person session, the participants and facilitator alike reflected that the training would not have been as effective at the very beginning of the project. During the prior months, (1) the DWR team members had strengthened relationships with one another, (2) the participants and facilitator had gotten to know each other and established relationships of trust, and (3) together, the participants and facilitator had experienced a number of "bumps in the road" as DWR, WMI, and MG worked to engage constituency groups, allowing them to refer to those tangible experiences as context and to tack back and forth between internal and external work during the training. These factors all contributed to the effectiveness of the training and the DWR team's readiness for it.

This confirmed the WMI team's hypothesis that a heavy focus on training—especially at the very start of a relevancy effort—is not the most effective approach. Rather, high-quality training is best deployed after agency staff members have been readied by starting to tackle relevancy challenges and encountering roadblocks and struggles.

Trainer familiarity with agency culture and context is key.

Having been involved in the project and in conversation with DWR staff for months, the trainer was familiar with the agency's relevancy efforts and the challenges the DWR team was encountering and was, therefore, able to discern what would be relevant and adapt to the agency's specific situation and needs.

Six-to-eight months into an effort may be a sweet spot.

By the time WMI and MG realized how much value there would likely be in a shared, focused learning experience, only a few months remained in the project. As a result, the in-person training session did not take place until late in the project timeframe. Following the session, participants said they wished they had had the training 3-6 months earlier (6-8 months after the project began). They felt they would have been ready by then, and the experience could have then (1) informed how they handled constituency engagement overall, (2) helped them understand that making mistakes is okay and that there are effective ways to handle those mistakes and move forward, and (3) helped them recognize earlier that relevancy involves not just outreach but also intra-agency work.

Building and Maintaining External Relationships

Relevancy is about relationships. State fish and wildlife agencies are most relevant to the groups and organizations with whom they have the strongest and most positive relationships. If an agency is not in good relationship with a given group, that group's members are unlikely to see the agency as relevant to them; likewise, the agency is unlikely to have any clear sense of how to become more relevant to them. Simply put, the work of relevancy is the work of building and maintaining good relationships.

Explore your constituency landscape

In this project's first phase, WMI and MG facilitated discussions and listening sessions with members of the extended DWR relevancy team (20+ staff members initially). In addition to questions related to agency culture and staff perceptions of relevancy work, the facilitators posed questions like these as a first step in identifying under-engaged constituency groups:

- Who are the agency's most engaged audiences and closest organizational partners?
- How well do those existing partners and audiences represent the diversity of the state, both in terms of demographics (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender, age, geography) and in terms of psychographics (e.g., values, opinions, attitudes, interests, activities, lifestyles)?
- Among your most engaged audiences, which groups are best represented? Which are underrepresented?

- Are there constituency/audience groups with whom you have nascent or tenuous relationships that could grow?
- Of the underrepresented groups, what new constituencies do you think present especially important opportunities?
- Are there any groups that the agency is legally required to—yet is struggling to—engage with?
- Have you tried to engage these groups before? If so, what worked? What didn't work? What barriers got in the way of getting into a relationship with them?
- If you have not tried to engage these groups before, why not? What barriers (e.g., past breaches of trust) have prevented you from engaging them? How could we overcome those barriers?
- Do you have a relationship pathway to these groups?

Soon thereafter, focus shifted to a more thorough process of identifying, mapping, and prioritizing constituency groups with whom DWR might seek to engage during the project.

As part of that process, an intern at MG conducted several hours of research into organizations and groups that (1) were based in or had a presence (e.g., a chapter) in Virginia, (2) had a clear interest in outdoor activities and/or conservation, and (3) were demographically and/or psychographically different from the DWR's most traditionally prominent constituent groups: staff expressed surprise at the number and diversity of groups and organizations identified.

Review and discussion also revealed that some engagement with such groups was already occurring at the individual level (e.g., one staff member was a member of or had an active relationship with a particular group or organization). Many of these connections were not previously known to other staff members.

Exploring DWR's constituency landscape—using the intern's research as creative fodder—involved a facilitated process during which members of the DWR, WMI, and MG project teams collectively brainstormed and mapped a wide variety of groups. That process involved locating all identified constituency groups and organizations along a continuum of relationship. Six categories were used to organize groups along that continuum:

- **Institutional trust:** The agency and this group have a good working relationship built on trust; multiple staff/group members know each other and have collaborated closely.
- **Institutional transactional:** The agency and this group work together occasionally when the right opportunity arises; though multiple staff/group members know each other, the agency and this group are not close partners and do not share relationships of trust.
- **Individual trust:** One or more individual agency staff members have strong connections with people from this group; they don't work together at an organizational/group level.
- **Individual transactional:** One or more individual agency staff members have weaker connections with people from this group and have interacted or worked together on occasion.

- **No known connection:** One or more staff members at DWR know of the group; there is not currently any known connection, individually or organizationally.
- **Groups in VA identified by MG:** This group was identified by MG's intern; no DWR staff member involved in the facilitated discussion was previously aware of the group.

Please see Appendix C for the simple, six-column “map” that resulted. (There, “no known connection” is labeled as “don’t know each other.”)

In constituent mapping and segmentation processes in general, “interest” and “influence” are commonly used as x- and y-axes to create a two-dimensional, four-quadrant map. In this case, “interest in outdoor activities and/or conservation” was used as an initial screening criterion and the resulting one-dimensional map used only an x-axis (degree/type of relationship).

Though state agencies looking to identify and prioritize a diverse set of constituencies could do the same, other variables could also be considered. For example, an axis could assess alignment with at least some core agency values.

In this kind of mapping exercise, it is helpful to be open-minded and beware of making unwarranted assumptions based on preconceived notions about constituent groups.

Build on existing relationships

As noted, the constituent mapping process and subsequent discussions led to the prioritization of three constituency groups: the DC-Maryland-Virginia Outdoor Afro network, the Upper Mattaponi, and the Rappahannock.

Multiple factors contributed to the prioritization of these groups, including the fact that there were individual relationships—baselines of connection and trust—to build on. George Braxton, DWR’s Chief Diversity and Inclusion Officer, was already part of the local Outdoor Afro network. Chief Frank Adams of the Upper Mattaponi was already a member of the DWR Board. And more than one DWR fisheries biologist had interacted with representatives of the Rappahannock.

These existing relationships served as valuable bridges, helping establish initial connections between DWR and each constituency group.

Prioritize trust

Trust is foundational to good relationships. At every step in building relationships, especially if there is a history of distrust, two questions are key: Where are we on the continuum of mutual trust? How can we increase trust between us? (The constituent mapping process conducted early in this project was, in part, an attempt to answer the first question about a large number of groups at a fairly high level.)

In relationships and collaborative work, the qualitative value of trust outweighs the value of quantitative gains. And distrust is extraordinarily costly in terms of goodwill, time, energy, and all manner of other resources. Where there is a choice to be made between short-term efficiencies or other gains and long-term relationship investments, prioritize the latter.

“To start a partnership, you have to reach out and shake someone’s hand.”

—Jeff Trollinger, Assistant Chief, DWR Aquatic Wildlife Resources Division

Agency staff who want to understand trust in more depth may be interested in Stephen R. Covey’s book *The Speed of Trust*, where he argues that nothing impacts relationships and collaboration more than trust (or lack thereof).

Agency employees might also be interested in neuroeconomist Paul Zak’s research, which has demonstrated that being trusted by others stimulates production of the brain chemical oxytocin. Increased levels of oxytocin in the brain, in turn, make us both more trustworthy and more likely to trust others, in addition to giving us a sense of well-being. (Abuse, stress, and experiences of being distrusted inhibit oxytocin production; low levels of oxytocin make us less trustworthy and less trusting.) In establishing a new relationship, someone has to initiate the virtuous cycle of trust-giving.

Go to tables set by others

Relationship- and trust-building is a two-way street. An agency is most effective in this work when it expands its thinking and approach beyond “outreach”—that is, beyond being the host and inviting people to come to figurative “tables” the agency has already set (e.g., on properties the agency owns, through programs the agency runs). Though the agency’s places, properties, programs, and other resources are valuable assets in relevancy work, it is at least as important to be willing to go to places and experiences managed by the people with whom you are building relationships. Below are a few examples from this project that illustrate the idea.

Accept invitations

A few weeks after their first (video) meeting with the project team, leaders of the local Outdoor Afro network said that one of their first steps in any new partnership is to invite members of the potential partner organization to attend an Outdoor Afro event so that people can get to know each other. They offered to lead a short hike in a Virginia park on an upcoming weekend; after the hike or during a lunch break, people would have a chance to talk specifically about the potential partnership. The DWR team welcomed the idea, saying that they would like to host the hike at one of DWR’s Wildlife Management Areas. In response, the Outdoor Afro network leaders suggested that project team members join a hike already being planned at Wolf Trap National Park.

The DWR and MG teams discussed the agency's inclination to act as host as well as the invitation extended by Outdoor Afro: to join them in one of their events in a place they know and are comfortable in. DWR accepted Outdoor Afro's invitation and several staff members joined the hike at Wolf Trap, which proved to be a valuable relationship-building opportunity in a space that felt safe and comfortable for everyone.

Several months later, DWR received an invitation from the Upper Mattaponi to have a booth at a powwow being hosted by the Tribe. DWR accepted and—after some preparatory conversation and coaching with the MG about cultural respect in general and powwow etiquette in particular—sent several staff members to the event. Like the hike at Wolf Trap, the powwow proved to be a valuable relationship-building experience, during which DWR staff had the opportunity to engage with Chief Adams and many attendees who were curious about the agency and its displays.

Not long thereafter, the Upper Mattaponi's Environmental and Cultural Protection Director reached out to a member of DWR's fisheries division about the possibility of spending time with two fisheries trainees in their early 20s, whose training was being funded by a federal grant and who had been working at a federal hatchery. The two trainees—one from the Upper Mattaponi, the other from the Chickahominy—joined DWR staff for a productive, enjoyable week on the river, sampling fish and sharing knowledge. The trainees and DWR staff talked about everything from traditional knowledge about the river to current events related to tribal law enforcement to the potential for the Upper Mattaponi and Chickahominy to open hatcheries for sturgeon and shad, advance fisheries research, and help find answers to some longstanding challenges in partnership with agencies and universities.

DWR's fisheries division was also contacted by a Virginia Institute of Marine Science (VIMS) employee who had close relationships with citizens of the Upper Mattaponi. He extended an invitation for DWR to participate in a field day on the river he was coordinating. DWR staff ended up going on a preparatory scouting trip with tribal elders, helping to organize the field day, and providing additional boat capacity. The field day—which involved four boats and nearly 20 people, more than half from the Upper Mattaponi, both youth and elders—provided opportunities for everyone to learn something, whether about electrofishing techniques, the tribe's historical use of and dependence on shad runs, or traditional knowledge of river ecology, edible plants, and the like. All three partners—the Upper Mattaponi, VIMS, and DWR—are looking forward to creating a similar event next year, possibly with more people participating. And members of DWR's fisheries staff have offered to share data with the Upper

Mattaponi, have extended an open invitation for further collaboration, and are actively thinking about specific opportunities to work together.

Especially in these early stages of partnership, DWR likely could not have created and hosted events of these kinds with Outdoor Afro or with the Upper Mattaponi. But—by engaging in dialogue and starting to build trust—the agency opened the door to receiving and accepting partners’ invitations.

Seek opportunities to attend partners’ events.

Go to others’ tables can take the form of being responsive to invitations like those mentioned above. It can also take the form of actively seeking and inquiring about opportunities to attend and participate in events being organized and hosted by others.

In the fall of 2021, for example, at least one member of DWR’s top leadership team attended the Sovereign Nations of Virginia Conference. The next year, multiple DWR staff members plan to attend the conference; the 2022 theme is Indigenous-led conservation.

Showing up—and, if appropriate, having a booth or table—at partners’ key events demonstrates the agency’s interest and commitment, offers the chance to build relationships, and can provide valuable opportunities to learn about the partner group, their priorities, and the kinds of experiences they offer to their members and partners. As the common community-engagement adage goes, “invest before you request.”

Do *with*, more than *for*

The idea of “going to tables set by others” relates to a broader set of lessons and recommendations emerging from this project. Anecdotes and reflections shared by several DWR team members toward the end of the project illustrate further:

Ask what is relevant and desired.

When the Upper Mattaponi invited DWR to set up a booth at the powwow, agency staff initially planned to set up their standard exhibit. When they talked with tribal representatives about what the exhibit would look like, they learned that—in light of the central role played by the river in the nation’s history and culture—the Upper Mattaponi wanted local aquatic species included, so DWR brought an eel display. Agency staff also learned that, for cultural reasons, the Upper Mattaponi did not want snakes at the powwow, so DWR did not bring its standard snake display. Later, a team member reflected that the process of the

agency team learning what was relevant to their partner—and what their partner did and did not want—was key to the relationship’s growth and to creating the conditions for a positive experience for everyone involved.

As relationships began to develop with citizens of the Upper Mattaponi and Chickahominy nations and conversations continued with the Rappahannock, it occurred to another agency team member that it would be great to convene a meeting of representatives from multiple tribal nations. She quickly realized, however, that this idea—of DWR acting as the convener and bringing multiple nations together—was rooted only in her perspective. Citizens and representatives of each unique, sovereign nation might or might not want to participate in the kind of convening she had in mind. Rather than push forward with the idea of a convening, she realized that it was more appropriate to interact with each nation individually, while remaining open to the possibility of multi-nation conversations and collaborations. This specific realization was part of a broader shift in how she thought about moving relationships forward, toward an approach that is centered around conversation and asking others what they want.

Invite conversation instead of sending information and holding events.

A member of DWR’s leadership team described the agency’s traditional approach to outreach as having consisted of sending information (e.g., pamphlets) to prospective partners and dismissing them as uninterested if they didn’t respond. This was emblematic of an engagement approach that was focused almost exclusively on sharing the agency’s story and offerings, rather than on listening and seeking to understand the other party. At the beginning, he had perceived this relevancy project as a technical assignment in which the agency would go out and try a few modestly different engagement strategies with a couple of new constituency groups. By the end of the project, he had recognized that the old way of doing things was severely limited and that relevancy work hinges on making deeper changes in how the agency thinks, trying significantly different approaches, and exploring unfamiliar ways of building relationships. The greatest value in the project, as he saw it, was the lesson that adapting, learning, and being intentional about real cultural shifts within the agency are key.

“This project changed my perspective. This work is less about ‘outreach’ and more about ‘connecting.’ It’s more mutual. There’s more give and take. I’ve moved from ‘build it and they will come’ to a more collaborative approach.”

—George Braxton, DWR Chief Diversity and Inclusion Officer

Another agency team member expressed a similar idea, noting that DWR has historically thought about outreach in terms of events, marketing, and related efforts that did not include seeking to find out, let alone adapt to, what constituent groups want. He said he was now seeing that the agency needs to recalibrate and focus more on understanding, empathizing, and getting better at building and maintaining relationships. He also reflected that doing this with external partners goes hand in hand with doing it within the agency. “Without psychological safety inside the agency,” he said, “we’re not going to see much in the way of improvement elsewhere.” (See “Integrating internal and external work” below.)

Keep partners involved at every step.

After initial discussions with Outdoor Afro network leaders about factors relevant to selecting a location for the co-created field day, members of the DWR team had an internal meeting in which they discussed the pros and cons of a number of options and decided on a specific site. When the agency team told Outdoor Afro about the location that had been selected, network leaders expressed concern that driving distance might deter people from attending. As it turned out, event sign-ups were robust. But members of the DWR team later reflected that making a unilateral decision about the event location had been a misstep.

Walk into the room as learners, not experts.

Looking back over the course of the project, two team members reported that their most significant “aha” moments involved recognizing that it’s important for the agency to approach new relationships as listeners and learners, not as experts who know what’s best.

Integrate relationship-building into everyday work.

Another said that her thinking about relationships and relationship-building had expanded significantly beyond efforts and tasks typically categorized as “outreach.” She had begun to recognize that improving and maintaining relationships with current and potential constituency and partner groups can be incorporated into everyday work. For example, if she’s planning to do field research on a section of river that’s close to or important to a particular tribal nation, she can get in touch with the nation in advance to let them know her team will be there as a demonstration of respect and to invite people to come say hello, see what the DWR team is doing, and talk about the river.

In different ways, each of these DWR team members was describing a recognition that advancing relevancy and building new relationships hinge on the agency’s ability to make a key shift: away from assumptions about what good “outreach” looks like—and about what people

need and desire—and toward inquiry, conversation, and collaboration. In other words, away from doing predetermined things *for* others, toward doing things *with* others.

Listen for priorities

In their initial conversation with the DWR team, Outdoor Afro network leaders described their focus on organizing and leading outdoor events and the interest many people have in opportunities to learn new skills. These core priorities—outdoor events and opportunities to learn skills—were at the heart of the idea that the network leaders and the DWR team hatched a few months later: to co-create a field day event where people would have the option to try and learn a variety of outdoor skills.

Early on, representatives of the Upper Mattaponi similarly told the DWR team of the tribe’s deep connection to fish, aquatic species, and the river, and of their belief in the importance of engaging tribal youth in conservation leadership.

These core priorities—river ecosystems and youth engagement and mentorship—became central to how the agency engaged with the tribe. For example, as noted earlier, the agency team assembled to work most closely with the Upper Mattaponi was composed almost entirely of staff from DWR’s fisheries division.

“The local Outdoor Afro network has gained a valuable partner in Virginia DWR, based on a shared understanding that meaningful partnerships require patience, flexibility, curiosity, and focus. Together, we’ll continue connecting Black people and Black communities to the outdoors.”

—Monette Bailey, Outdoor Afro DMV leader

In both cases, asking and listening enabled agency staff to identify connections between partner priorities and DWR’s work, and begin to ask related questions: How could DWR partner with Outdoor Afro to create an outdoor event for people in the local network? What skill-learning opportunities could be included? How could a focus on fish and aquatic ecosystems help DWR deepen relationships with the Upper Mattaponi? Could DWR work with the Upper Mattaponi to create internship opportunities³ for tribal youth?

What the DWR, WMI, and MG project teams learned about new partners’ priorities played a key role in shaping each relationship and the path of the project.

Listen for concerns

In the process of developing relationships with new constituency groups and new partner organizations, state fish and wildlife agency employees are likely to hear concerns voiced. Listening for and seeking to understand such concerns is key. As illustrated by the brief examples provided below, these concerns may relate to access to places, to health and safety,

³ By compensating interns, as DWR already does, agencies can extend valuable opportunities to young people from underserved and marginalized groups, not just to those who can afford to work for free.

to a wide range of historical and contemporary issues, and/or to the process of relationship-building itself.

Concerns about access and health

In an early conversation with members of the DWR and MG project teams, for example, Chief Frank Adams of the Upper Mattaponi spoke about the river and the tribe's relationship with it. He mentioned that tribal citizens no longer have much access to the river. He also said that it breaks his heart to see signs warning people that, due to contamination, they should be careful about consuming fish taken from the river.

Without saying so explicitly, Chief Adams was drawing everyone's attention to the fact that dominant, white, Euro-American society has—in various ways over the centuries—severely limited his people's access to the river that has been central to their lifeways for millennia. Likewise, he was drawing attention to the fact that dominant society has contaminated waterways severely enough that traditional subsistence foods have become a health risk. These kinds of concerns and histories are relevant to how Indigenous nations interact with and relate to state and federal conservation agencies today.

Concerns about tokenism and role expectations

When first speaking with members of the DWR and MG project teams, Outdoor Afro network leaders said that they are often asked to partner with other organizations and institutions. Though interested in partnering with DWR, they wanted to be clear about roles that they have no interest in playing. It was important that DWR hear and understand these things at the outset:

- The Outdoor Afro DMV network leaders did not want to help “diversify” events for other organizations or “color” their grant applications.
- Network leaders were focused on helping people enjoy time together in the outdoors. Making those experiences feel safe included making sure that event attendees did not have a responsibility to “educate” white folks. (This point was made after a member of the MG team mentioned the idea of a “listening session” designed to help agency staff better understand the Outdoor Afro network and people's values and priorities.)

It is not uncommon for white-led organizations and efforts to engage in tokenism: recruiting people from underrepresented groups to gain some kind of advantage for themselves (e.g., a positive appearance or public perception, an advantage in seeking funding) without any real commitment to diversity, inclusivity, or equity.

As a pattern of behavior, tokenism allows people to maintain power while appearing to champion diversity and inclusivity. The Outdoor Afro network leaders clearly communicated that they would not let DWR or any other partner organization use people in their network in this way.

It is also not uncommon for white-led organizations to ask people of color for help in understanding their perspectives and experiences. In some cases, people of color are glad to engage in conversations of this kind. But structuring an engagement with DWR around this kind of learning and “educating” would not have matched the Outdoor Afro network’s ethos and purpose.

Concerns about research

Not long after the initial conversation with Outdoor Afro network leaders, a member of the organization’s national staff expressed another concern. Perhaps based on the same mention of a possible “listening session,” the staff member had the impression that the project would include research and data collection. In calls with members of the DWR and MG teams, the staff member made it clear that people in the Outdoor Afro network were not to be studied without the organization’s fully informed involvement and consent. Network leaders agreed to continue dialogue only after the DWR and MG teams provided assurances that no data would be collected. (The combined DWR-WMI-MG project team also abandoned the idea of a formal “listening session” in favor of a focus on organic relationship-building.)

The idea of research being done by white-led organizations and government agencies can evoke a wide range of historical and present-day issues. For some, for example, it evokes the infamous U.S. Public Health Service Syphilis Study at Tuskegee, which helped spark sweeping changes in research practices for studies involving human subjects. For many people of color and members of other historically oppressed groups, it evokes more general practices of designing and conducting research (e.g., in anthropology) in ways that serve the interests of researchers but do not benefit—and may harm—the people being researched. Maori anthropologist Linda Tuhiwai Smith has described the word “research” as “probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world’s vocabulary.”

This does not mean that people who identify as Black, Indigenous, or Of Color (BIPOC) are not willing to participate in research. (Members of the WMI team, for example, were recently involved in a study of attitudes toward and interest in hunting, which involved Black researchers and focus group participants.) It does mean that research, especially when a government agency is involved, can be a

sensitive topic—one that should be approached with care, awareness of historical context, and transparency about the purpose of the research.

Concerns about violence

The Outdoor Afro network’s concerns about the safety of the people who participate in their events are rooted broadly in a very real history of violence (including lynchings), threats, and harassment in “public” and “recreational” outdoor spaces that continue to this day.

Those concerns intensified in May 2022 when a mass shooter killed ten Black people in a grocery store in Buffalo, New York. The field-day event being co-organized by DWR and the Outdoor Afro network was scheduled for June and would bring together dozens of Black people in a public outdoor space. In the intervening weeks, network leaders expressed significant concern about the safety of participants. (As it happened, the June event ended up being postponed due to a rainy weather forecast. Initially rescheduled for October 2022, due to weather it was again postponed until spring 2023.)

Though no specific concerns about agency law enforcement surfaced during DWR, WMI, and MG’s conversations with new partner groups during this project, it is important for state agencies to be mindful of the history of police disproportionately harassing and harming Black Americans, among others. Compared to Whites, Black Americans are more likely to perceive law enforcement officers as a threat. Yet agency law enforcement officers are the agency staff members most likely to be encountered by members of the public.

Many concerns voiced by new partner groups are likely to be beyond the ability of a single state agency to resolve on its own. Yet it is important for agency staff to listen closely and begin to understand them, their historical roots, and how they are linked to longstanding power imbalances in the conservation arena and beyond. Listening to such concerns—and addressing them to the extent possible—builds trust.

Expect bumps, breakdowns, detours, and breakthroughs

This work is not easy. It is not a kind of work with which agencies have much practice and it cannot be effectively done using agencies’ existing expertise.

In terms familiar to National Conservation Leadership Institute participants, relevancy is an “adaptive challenge.” Unlike “technical challenges” that can be solved in straightforward ways using existing expert knowledge, adaptive challenges are ambiguous and unpredictable. Overcoming them requires adopting an experimental mindset and a willingness to learn new ways of thinking and new ways of doing things.

It is important for agencies taking on this work to go in with the knowledge that the journey will be hard and unpredictable, and with a commitment to sticking with it and continuing to learn.

Here are a handful of lessons learned and confirmed during this project.

“Working to make our mission relevant to new and more diverse constituencies is difficult only because it is work we have not done before. Simply put, we are not practiced at it. Think about relevancy as a practice, like a muscle we need to strengthen. The more you practice, the stronger that muscle will become. If we treat relevancy as occasional, intermittent work, it will feel challenging and shaky every time.”

—Maria Estrada, MG team member

Relationships with new partners will not be as smooth as relationships with longtime partners.

State fish and wildlife agencies have evolved in parallel with organizations like Ducks Unlimited and the National Wild Turkey Federation. They share many values, norms, priorities, and expectations, and have been partnering for decades. None of this is true of new partner groups, especially when the social identities (e.g., Black, Indigenous) of these groups are markedly different from the social identities (e.g., White) that predominate within DWR and its longtime partner organizations.

On the other hand, don't assume that new partners are new to conservation or outdoor recreation. A lack of history collaborating with state agencies does not mean that a constituency group or organization isn't already involved in conservation or outdoor recreation. The groups engaged during this project had rich histories related to—and were already deeply committed to—conservation, outdoor recreation, and related leadership.

There will be gaps and delays.

Work with a longtime partner group is likely to be prioritized by both the agency and the partner; when a delay occurs on one side, there may be enough active communication that the other side knows why. This may not be the case with new partner groups.

At times during this project, weeks and even months went by with little or no communication from a partner group. Often, the DWR, WMI, and MG teams did not know what was going on for the partner group behind the scenes (e.g., limited capacity, competing priorities, a point of contact leaving their position). Patience and persistence were essential—waiting and reaching out gently and periodically, without assuming the delays indicate a problem or lack of interest.

Missteps will be made.

Taking on new challenges, especially in unfamiliar terrain, inevitably means you will misstep at times. It is vital to recognize these missteps not as failings but as a necessary part of learning and taking action.

The MG team's mention of a potential "listening session" in initial conversation with the Outdoor Afro network was one such misstep. When network leaders said they wanted people to be able to enjoy outdoor events without having to "educate" white folks and a national staff member expressed concern about "research," the project team corrected course.

Not every effort will bear fruit.

Nothing guarantees a hoped-for outcome in this work. Dialogue with the Rappahannock, for example, did not progress far during the project timeframe. But the invitation to engage has been extended, and DWR will continue to connect with the Rappahannock and other tribal nations at tables they have set (e.g., by attending the Sovereign Nations of Virginia Conference mentioned above).

Plans will have to be adjusted.

As originally designed, this project involved a specific sequence of steps. That sequence was based on implicit assumptions about how the process would unfold, both within DWR and in relationship with constituency/partner groups. Many of those assumptions turned out to be unwarranted and approaches were adapted. (See Appendix E for details.)

Unforeseen breakthroughs will occur.

Things will also evolve in positive ways you could not have planned or anticipated. As described above—and as a result of being in intentional and open dialogue with the Upper Mattaponi, having authorization from agency leadership to take action, and being willing to adapt—DWR staff members had serendipitous opportunities to work with tribal fisheries trainees and to join tribal youth and elders on a river trip. (See "Go to tables set by others.")

The breakdowns, bumps, and detours in the road are not failures. Learning from and adapting to them is the work of relevancy.

CONCLUSION: INTEGRATING INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL WORK TO ADVANCE RELEVANCY

When it was adopted by AFWA in 2019, the Fish and Wildlife Relevancy Roadmap represented the state of knowledge and experience at the time. The editors and contributors recognized that, collectively, state agencies had little practical experience on which to rely in advancing relevancy and improving their policies, practices, services, and programs to serve and engage more of their constituents. As they advised at the time, the recommendations, strategies, and tactics included in the Roadmap would have to be applied in real-world conditions and—based on outcomes and lessons learned—refined over time.

In this project, DWR, WMI, and MG did just that. We applied existing knowledge and recommendations in real-world conditions, learned from the results and relationships as they evolved, and refined and iterated our approaches in real time. We encourage future state agency attempts at relevancy work to embrace a similar framework. And we hope that the insights gained and lessons learned in the course of this one short-term test case prove useful to other state agencies as they engage in relevancy efforts over the long term.

Finally, we want to emphasize that effectively advancing relevancy requires an integrated approach. It is not just an outward-facing endeavor. Nor is it just inward-facing.

One way to look at this integration is by considering that the two endeavors—one focused on creating internal conditions for success, the other on building and maintaining external relationships—are linked. This link is not a simple, sequential process of (A) creating favorable internal conditions, thereby enabling (B) success in external relationships. Rather, internal and external efforts are mutually reinforcing. Engaging in them simultaneously, and tacking back and forth between the two, accelerates learning in both. Insights in one sphere can lead to insights and changes in the other.

Another way to look at it is that there is no strict distinction between the two. They are a single endeavor. Rather than distinct spheres, they are parts of the same system, with each element (e.g., each relationship, each interaction, each policy, each practice) occurring along an internal-external continuum. When growth occurs anywhere in the system (e.g., in a new relationship, in a better interaction, in an improved policy or practice), it can contribute to learning and growth across the entire system.⁴

A few examples from the project illustrate these kinds of integration:

⁴ The integration of “internal” and “external” relevancy work—and the benefits of state agencies becoming more diverse, inclusive, and equitable across the internal-external continuum—can also be seen through the lenses of the [Three Paradigms of Diversity](#). In the third paradigm, diverse viewpoints become a source of learning, creativity, and innovation, pushing the organization to evolve and become more effective. The demographic composition of the organization also expands the nature of the work and notions of what is relevant.

- During the in-person training session conducted toward the end of the project—focused on “organizational culture” topics such as psychological safety, unconscious bias, and power dynamics—participants were able to ground what they were learning in their “external” experiences engaging with Outdoor Afro network leaders or participating in the powwow hosted by the Upper Mattaponi.
- A member of DWR’s fisheries division staff reported that sharing that training experience and exercising those kinds of relational “muscles” informed a subsequent strategic planning process in which staff members had to sit down together and agree on a set of shared priorities.
- Thinking back to the beginning of the project, another staff member said that the initial constituent mapping process had made him significantly more aware of connections and potential connections with a range of constituent groups. As a result, he had started to think more about who might be interested in opportunities that came to his attention and had, for example, begun forwarding announcements of grant and scholarship opportunities to new points of contact with tribal nations in Virginia.

As suggested by these examples, the work of relevancy can have far-reaching effects both on the habits of individual staff members and on organizational culture, in addition to serving external outreach and relationship-building outcomes.

This work is most effective when it is integrated throughout an agency. This doesn’t mean that every employee’s role gets focused explicitly on relevancy. It does mean that the mission-critical nature of relevancy is communicated and experienced enough that it becomes woven into the fabric of an agency, its strategic planning, and how it does its work, just as other core elements of its mission and values have been over the decades.

Taking an integrated approach to relevancy involves recognizing the different and complementary roles that can be played by people across the agency. For example, as occurred in this project, top leadership can authorize teams to take action and commit to having their backs if a misstep is made or difficulties arise. Human resources staff can play a role in recruiting more diverse candidates. Managers can have discussions with supervisees about what work to deprioritize so they can prioritize relevancy-specific activities. Field biologists can establish relationships with biologists and environmental program managers in prospective partner groups.

And any staff member can take a step as seemingly inconsequential as inviting a colleague or partner with differing values or experiences to grab a cup of coffee or connect by phone. Trust and connection across differences can be deepened one relationship at a time simply by including new people in your day-to-day work and expanding the circle of people you call on for counsel, advice, and expertise. Over time, such actions can make a meaningful contribution to

shifting organizational culture by mitigating bias, countering marginalization, and increasing employees' sense of belonging. Such shifts in “internal” organizational culture, in turn, have a significant effect on the agency’s ability to build and maintain “external” relationships.

Based on multiple pilot relevancy projects in recent years and extensive experience with R3 strategy, Wildlife Governance Principles, and the application of Public Trust doctrine, the WMI team is

The most significant barriers to state agency relevancy—as well as the most significant opportunities for breakthrough change—lie within the realm of agency skills, structure, and culture.

increasingly convinced that the most significant barriers to state agency relevancy—as well as the most significant opportunities for breakthrough change—lie within the realm of agency skills, structure, and culture. This report includes several examples that substantiate this conclusion. The adaptive approach WMI and MG took to this project was intended to address such issues as they arose for DWR and will likely arise for other agencies committed to engaging broader constituencies. For agencies and organizations looking to learn from DWR’s experience, we hope the examples shared in these pages invite reflection on “internal” factors that may hinder relevancy work so that agencies can be intentional about addressing them before and during engagement with broader and more diverse constituencies. These “internal” factors will have significant impacts—and likely decisive influences, positive or negative—on agencies’ current and future relationships with those who should benefit from the rich natural resource heritage afforded to all Americans.

APPENDICES

Appendix A: All-staff survey questions

The survey below was sent by DWR to all staff via Qualtrics in 2021.

Introduction

As part of an effort to implement the 2019 Relevancy Roadmap, the Wildlife Management Institute (WMI) and its contracting partner Metropolitan Group (MG) are collaborating with Virginia DWR on a 2021-2022 project designed to: enhance DWR's ability to engage new constituencies; cultivate agency relationships with priority new constituencies; and begin increasing these constituencies' engagement with, connection to, and support for DWR and conservation.

Your response to this survey will help the project team understand DWR staff capacity for and attitudes toward engaging new constituencies.

Your response will be kept confidential. Individual responses will only be available to the WMI-MG project team and DWR's human dimensions specialist, Rene Valdez. Anonymous data and quotes will be shared with other DWR staff and included in public reports and presentations.

Values

For the following section, indicate how much you agree or disagree with each statement (strongly disagree, disagree, somewhat disagree, somewhat agree, agree, strongly agree).

- I experience DWR and its work as being guided by the needs, interests, and concerns of all Virginians.
- The general public experiences DWR and its work as being guided by the needs, interests, and concerns of all Virginians.
- DWR and its work should be guided by the needs, interests, and concerns of all Virginians.
 - Why do you agree or disagree (with the above question) that DWR's work should be guided by the needs, interests, and concerns of all Virginians?
[text field]
- At DWR, we hold each other accountable to be guided by the needs, interests, and concerns of the constituencies we serve.
- At DWR, we provide the training needed to incorporate into our work the needs, interests, and concerns of the constituencies we serve.
- At DWR, we provide the resources (beyond training) needed to incorporate into our work the needs, interests, and concerns of the constituencies we serve.

For the following section, briefly respond to each question in the space provided. [text fields]

1. Which needs, interests, and concerns of Virginians are best represented in DWR's work?
2. Which needs, interests, and concerns of Virginians are least represented in DWR's work?
3. Which groups of Virginians are best represented in DWR's work?
4. Which groups of Virginians are least represented in DWR's work?
5. Are the needs, interests, and concerns of some groups of Virginians more important than others? If so, which are most important and why? If so, which are least important and why?

Partnerships/Engagement

For the following section, indicate how much you agree or disagree with each statement (strongly disagree, disagree, somewhat disagree, somewhat agree, agree, strongly agree).

6. Partnerships and relationships with communities and other organizations are important to the success of DWR's work and mission.
7. When engaging new stakeholders, DWR is committed to understanding and respecting people's values/perspectives and the implications for our work.⁵
8. When engaging traditional stakeholders, DWR is committed to understanding and respecting people's values/perspectives and the implications for our work.
9. For the following question, select the response you most agree with.
DWR's partnership-building priority should be to:
 - a. Engage and serve more diverse stakeholders
 - b. Somewhat engage and serve more diverse stakeholders while (to a lesser extent) deepening engagement among existing stakeholders
 - c. Somewhat deepen engagement among existing stakeholders while (to a lesser extent) engaging and serving more diverse stakeholders
 - d. Deepen engagement among existing stakeholders

⁵ As shown here, the term "stakeholder" was used in this all-staff survey. At the end of the project, as footnoted in the Introduction, WMI and MG decided not to use the term in the main report, largely due to objections that have been raised by Indigenous nations. This question of terminology did not come up in conversation with either of the nations engaged by DWR during this project, the Upper Mattaponi and the Rappahannock.

10. Building and maintaining partnerships and relationships, including engaging new constituencies, is everyone's responsibility at DWR.

For the following two questions, select the responses you most agree with.

11. Over the past 12 months, how much knowledge and/or skill have you developed related to building and maintaining partnerships and relationships, including engaging new constituencies?
- a. None
 - b. Very little
 - c. A little
 - d. Some
 - e. A fair amount
 - f. A great deal
12. How does that compare with the 12 months before that (12-24 months ago)?
- a. I learned much less in the past 12 months.
 - b. I learned less in the past 12 months.
 - c. I learned a bit less in the past 12 months.
 - d. I learned a bit more in the past 12 months.
 - e. I learned more in the past 12 months.
 - f. I learned much more in the past 12 months.

Representation

For the following section, indicate how much you agree or disagree with each statement (strongly disagree, disagree, somewhat disagree, somewhat agree, agree, strongly agree).

13. DWR staff is representative of Virginians overall (e.g., in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation).
14. DWR's most actively engaged constituents and organizational partners are representative of Virginians overall (e.g., in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation).
15. DWR values diversity of background (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation) among its employees.
16. People from all backgrounds (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation) have equal opportunity to succeed at DWR.

DWR Culture

17. Everyone at DWR has equal opportunity to have their voice heard, valued, and considered.
18. My voice is heard, valued, and understood in the workplace.
19. Perspectives like mine are included in decision-making at DWR (e.g., operational decisions, agency strategy).
20. I can be my authentic self at work.

21. DWR actively supports overall emotional and psychological safety for staff.
22. Is there any other information that would be instructive for the project team related to the topics covered above? [text field]

Outdoor Recreation⁶

In this part of the survey, we will be asking you about your wildlife recreation activities. By “**wildlife recreation**” we mean activities you do for enjoyment outside of work. The purpose of these activities may include observing, photographing, feeding, collecting data about, or harvesting wildlife.

Wildlife refers to all animals, such as birds, fish, insects, mammals, amphibians, and reptiles that are living in natural or wild environments. **Wildlife does not** include animals living in aquariums, zoos, and other artificial surroundings or domestic animals such as farm animals or pets.

Within the last 12 months, have you participated in any kind of wildlife recreation in Virginia? *(Please select yes or no)*

To what extent do you feel that each of the following describes you? *(Please respond for each recreation type: Very like me, Somewhat like me, Neither like nor unlike me, Somewhat unlike me, Very unlike me)*

Wildlife viewer: someone who intentionally observes, photographs, feeds, or collects data about wildlife or visits parks and natural areas because of wildlife

Hunter: someone who participates in hunting or trapping, with a license or exempt from a license, using any legal method to harvest wildlife

Angler: someone who participates in fishing, in either freshwater or saltwater areas, to harvest and/or catch-and-release fish

In the past 12 months, about how many days did you spend participating in any of the following wildlife recreation activities in Virginia and outside Virginia? Please count multiple activities done in a single day separately. *(Please fill in your response as a number between 0 and 365, providing the best estimate you can. If you have not participated in an activity, please fill in 0.)*

	In Virginia	Outside Virginia
Wildlife viewing		
Hunting		
Angling		

⁶ The questions in this section were included at the request of DWR's human dimensions specialist to gather responses parallel and comparable to data collected in previous surveys.

We are also interested in your participation in other kinds of non-wildlife focused outdoor recreation activities. Which of the following non-wildlife focused outdoor activities have you participated in within the past 12 months in Virginia? *(Please check all that apply.)*

- Archery
- Biking
- Camping
- Hiking or backpacking
- Horseback riding
- Motorized boating
- Non-motorized boating (such as kayaking or canoeing)
- Swimming
- Recreational shooting sports
- Running, jogging, or walking
- Winter sports
- Other (please explain): _____
- I did not participate in any of these activities

DWR Questions

23. Do you manage/supervise other DWR staff members? (yes/no)

24. Which DWR region or office do you report to?

- a. Region 1 (Charles City)
- b. Region 2 (Forest)
- c. Region 3 (Marion)
- d. Region 4 (Fredericksburg)
- e. Region 5 (Verona)
- f. DWR Headquarters (Henrico)

Demographics

25. In what year were you born?

26. What is your gender?

- a. Woman
- b. Man
- c. Transgender
- d. Prefer to self-describe: _____
- e. Prefer not to answer

27. What is your ethnicity?

- a. Hispanic
- b. Non-Hispanic

28. What is your race?

- a. White
- b. Black or African American
- c. American Indian or Alaska Native
- d. Asian
- e. Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
- f. Other (Please specify): _____

29. Have you interacted with Metropolitan Group and/or the Wildlife Management Institute as part of their 2021-2022 relevancy project with DWR?

- a. Never
- b. Once
- c. A few times
- d. Several times
- e. Unsure

Appendix B: Internal listening session agenda and guide

This agenda and guide was used by the facilitators who guided initial internal listening sessions with DWR staff in 2021.

Session design

- Two sessions (90-120 minutes each), each with 6-10 participants.
- Participants will be members of the extended (22-person) project team.
- A third and subsequent session to be conducted for members of the Executive Committee leadership team.

Purposes

- To gain insights into agency culture, as perceived by the extended project team.
- To gain insights into the project team's perceptions of strengths, barriers, and needs related to engaging new constituencies.
- To gain insights into current and potential constituencies and partners.

Agenda

- Preamble
 - Welcome and introductions
 - Context-setting:
 - Relevancy and state wildlife agencies
 - Project details
 - House-keeping:
 - With participants permission, we will record this session for note-taking purposes.
 - This session is anonymous, not confidential; insights and quotes may be shared, but will not be linked to individuals.
- Ice-breaker
 - Please say your name, division and, in 10 words or less, why you said "yes" to joining this project team.
- Why diverse engagement?
 - Why might engaging diverse segments of the public be important for DWR?
- DWR audiences/stakeholders
 - Who are DWR's most engaged audiences and closest organizational partners?
 - How well do those existing partners and audiences represent the diversity of the state? *Let's think about diversity both in terms of demographics*

(e.g., race, ethnicity, gender, age, geography) and in terms of psychographics (e.g., values, opinions, attitudes, interests, activities, and lifestyles).

- Which groups are best represented?
- Which are underrepresented?
- Of the underrepresented groups, where would you start intentional efforts to deepen DWR's engagement (assuming no barriers in terms of capacity, relationship history, etc)? In other words, assuming there were no obstacles, what new constituencies would be at the top of your wish list for strong, ongoing engagement?
 - *Optional probes:* Have you tried to engage these groups before?
 - If so, what worked? What didn't work? (What barriers got in the way of getting into a relationship with them?)
 - If not, why not? (What barriers have prevented you from engaging them? How could we overcome those barriers?)
 - Do you have a pathway you could share to help introduce our team to that group, if called upon to do so?
- Skill-building
 - What would you like to learn that would help you build inroads with the underrepresented groups you just prioritized?
 - *If not covered in-depth through optional probe discussion above:* In DWR's engagement of audiences and stakeholder groups, what are DWR's strengths? What are stumbling blocks that you face?
- Agency culture
 - We'd like you to first self-identify by show of hands, and then we'll discuss. Your three options for the show of hands are "yes," "maybe," and "no." The question is: *Perspectives like mine are included in decision-making at DWR (e.g., operational decisions, agency strategy).*
 - Raise your hand if you would say "yes" to this.
 - Raise your hand if you would say "maybe" to this.
 - Raise your hand if you would say "no" to this.
 - For those of you who answered [yes/maybe/no] to this question, why did you choose this response?
 - For those who said "maybe" or "no," what would need to change so that more voices and perspectives inform DWR's work?

- Same drill, but with a new question. We'd like you to first self-identify by show of hands, and then we'll discuss. Your three options for the show of hands are "yes," "maybe," and "no." The question now is: *Can everyone be their authentic self in DWR's workplace?*
 - Raise your hand if you would say "yes" to this.
 - Raise your hand if you would say "maybe" to this.
 - Raise your hand if you would say "no" to this.
- For those of you who answered [yes/maybe/no] to this question, why did you choose this response?
- For those who said "maybe" or "no," what would need to change so that everyone in the workplace could be their authentic selves in DWR's workplace?
- *If time allows:* Future state
 - Imagine a future where DWR is in deeper relationship with all the groups you all have mentioned today. What will DWR have done differently to get there? What will be different for DWR when that's true?
- Advice/questions
 - Today's conversation has focused on topics of agency culture and stakeholder engagement. We wanted to make space for you to answer the questions that we *haven't* asked. What else should we be thinking about at this early juncture in this work?
 - Do you have any initial advice for MG and WMI as we take this work forward?
 - Do you have any questions for us?
- Facilitator closing comments and next steps

Appendix C: Constituencies map

Please refer to the section “Explore your constituency landscape” for a description of the process that resulted in this “map.”

Groups in VA identified by MG	Don't Know Each Other	Individual Transactional	Individual Trust	Institutional Transactional	Institutional Trust
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Brown Girls Climb Black People Camp Too Capital Climbers Diversify Outdoors Environmental Coalition at VT Environmental Justice Collective at UVA Environmental Student Organization at VT Fat Girls Hiking DMV Girls Who Hike VA GreenUR Hike It Baby Hunters of Color Outdoor Alliance for Kids Outdoors at UVA Rappahannock Return to the River Program Rappahannock Department of Environmental Services Students for Cultivating Change at VT UR Outdoor Club Virginia Environmental Justice Collaborative Virginia Student Environmental Coalition Virginia Women's Kayaking Group Women Who Hike Virginia 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Artemis (NWF) Gay OUTdoors Girls & Guns Club [Groups that stepped in since Make-a-Wish stopped doing hunting] Latino Outdoors Outdoor Asian Pride Outside Shoot Like a Girl Venture Out Virginia League of Conservation Voters 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Black Girls Hike RVA College outdoor rec departments Harrisonburg Public Schools (Hispanic Festival) Shenandoah Reel Women Soul Trak Virginia Tech Fly Fishing Club 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> African American Gun Association BHA (including millennial program) Blue Sky Fund Boy/Girl Scouts of the Commonwealth DWR Wildlife Grant Program recipients (including Beyond Boundaries) Hispanic Access Foundation Inner City Anglers Local birding clubs Minorities in Natural Resources Committee Outdoor Afro DMV UVA Fly Fishing Club VA Society of Ornithology (youth program) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Appalachian Trail Conservancy Center for Environmental Justice at UVA Federally recognized Tribes Natl Association of State Boating Law Administrators Virginia Conservation Network Wounded Warriors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 4H American Fisheries Society (Women of Fisheries) B.A.S.S. Junior Tournaments Ducks Unlimited (millennial program) NRA (youth programs) NWTF Wheeling Sportsman National Archery in the Schools Program QDMA (programs for women and youth) RMEF (programs for women and youth) TNC (WTREX) TU (Trout in the Classroom) TWS (Women of Wildlife; chapters) USFWS VA Department of Conservation & Rec VA DEQ VA Marine Resources VA Tech Department of F&W Conservation

Appendix D: Metrics recommendations

To evaluate strategies for advancing relevancy and to determine if adjustments are needed, state agencies will want to establish measures that can be used across different time horizons. The chart below suggests sample factors for agencies to consider in developing such measures.

Developing reliable, rigorous metrics customized to an agency's specific context and needs will require careful consideration of a range of nuanced factors. WMI recommends that social scientists—whether agency staff or outside consultants—play a central role in the design of these metrics. Agencies are also invited to consider the ideas shared in MG's "[Measuring What Matters](#)" tool.

Inputs (what the agency puts in)	Outputs (what the agency creates)	Results/Impacts (what changes over time)
Creating internal conditions for success		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of cultural respect and responsiveness trainings offered; number of staff who attend • Number of implicit bias trainings/learning experiences taken by human resources staff, hiring managers, and agency leadership • Increase in resources (financial and human) dedicated to building capabilities for engaging diverse constituencies • Number of times/ways the case for relevancy is communicated and socialized across the agency • New and more diverse relationships leveraged for purposes of job posting and recruitment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ratio of agency staff who are comfortable and confident representing the agency's work among broader and more diverse constituent groups • Number of new groups who respond positively to the agency's outreach and engagement • Increase in demographic diversity among job applicants, hires, and employees retained • Increase in demographic diversity among agency leadership • Staff surveys demonstrate regular, quick, and effective disruptions of bias • Employee surveys indicate that diverse staff feel valued and respected in the workplace and perceive a career path within the agency • Employees report fair and equitable treatment of all staff 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employees report that they have access to the learning experiences needed to incorporate the priorities, challenges, opportunities, and needs of diverse constituencies into their work • Key contacts among new collaborators report that the agency was respectful of and curious to learn more about the particular experiences and context of the constituencies they represent • Increase in the number of employees who recognize that there are important roles for everyone in the agency to build relationships with constituencies, including among new groups

Building and maintaining relationships		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of new groups the agency proactively engages • Number of events or activities hosted by new groups that are attended by agency staff • Number of events and experiences created in partnership with diverse constituencies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of events or activities hosted by new groups that agency staff are invited to attend or participate in • Number of new projects or programs originating from engagements with non-traditional constituencies • Number of formal partnerships (e.g., codified in MOUs) with non-traditional constituencies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Key contacts among new collaborators report that the agency was responsive to their particular priorities, challenges, opportunities, or needs • Employees involved in constituent engagement self-report instances of “getting back on the horse” after experiencing challenges or breaches of trust • Constituent groups report that they see their priorities, challenges, opportunities, and needs reflected in the agency’s work • Legislators and other decision-makers report hearing from more diverse constituencies about the value of the agency’s work • Employees report that they experience the agency as being guided by the needs and priorities of diverse constituencies

Appendix E: Notes on project design evolution

As mentioned in the main body of this report, the WMI and MG teams started with a clear project design and also—aware that the general nature of relevancy work and the project-specific situations that emerged would demand flexibility—intentionally remained open to adapting process and structure. Below are brief summaries of several key adaptations we made.

Surveys and feedback. As originally designed, the project included conducting pre- and post-surveys with the prioritized partner/constituent groups to provide a baseline for—and assess any short-term changes in—engagement with, connection to, and support for the agency and conservation. As initial outreach conversations unfolded and relationships began to develop, it became clear that asking partner group leaders or members to take a survey right away would likely be detrimental to the relationships, especially in light of the concerns raised by local Outdoor Afro network leaders about research and data collection. The WMI and MG teams concluded that the value of prioritizing the qualitative relationships outweighed the value of gathering quantitative data. At the conclusion of the project, we instead asked partner group leaders for feedback, recommendations, and suggestions to be incorporated into this final report.

Listening and relationship-building. Similarly, an early phase of the project design included formal, in-person listening sessions. Such sessions have been effective in other government/constituency relationship-building processes, especially where constituency and government representatives have an existing, if conflicted, relationship to be improved and deepened. In the context of this project, the sessions were intended to build trust, begin to establish the priority constituencies as valued partners, provide the agency team with opportunities to listen, and enable the WMI and MG teams to document constituency values, priorities, and perceptions of the agency. As with the surveys, it soon became clear that—rather than building trust—requesting and holding such sessions might harm DWR’s nascent and slow-growing relationships with partner groups, by asking too much of the partner group members, by igniting concerns about research, or simply by interrupting the more informal, person-to-person evolution of those relationships. WMI, MG, and DWR instead focused on continuing to build relationships in more informal ways.

Ways of learning. The original project design assumed that agency staff would build skills in the process of collaborating with the WMI and MG teams and engaging with new partner groups, and that this “learning by doing” approach would suffice. As the project progressed and various roadblocks and detours were encountered, it became clear that specific models and skill sets—as well as shared learning experiences—would likely be useful to staff members as they navigated particular challenges and difficulties, both within the agency and with partner groups. As a result, a pivot was made and a series of sessions (two virtual 90-minute sessions followed by a 1.5-day in-person session) were

developed and offered to all DWR staff members directly involved in the project. (See “Deepen understandings and build skills.”)

Designing and doing. As originally envisioned, the process included working with the agency team and each partner group to co-design a collaborative project of mutual interest and value to be completed in the near future. Early in conversations with partner groups and DWR staff, it became evident that people on both sides had more interest in and appetite for identifying things to start doing now than for talking about things to do someday. In other words, people were more interested in “walking the talk and doing something” than in “talking about what we plan to do.”

While the summaries of these specific shifts may prove useful to other agencies engaged in relevancy work, the key point here is simply that flexibility is vital. Agency staff and any consultants or other external partners involved will be more effective at building relationships and navigating relationships if they have significant latitude to adapt as opportunities and obstacles arise.