

BARRIERS TO BECOMING LAKE PEOPLE:
SOCIAL EQUITY AND ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE IN
MUSKEGON LAKE SOUTH SHORELINE ACCESS



Demolition of paper mill on the Muskegon Lake south shoreline
Still frame from video (Race, 2013)

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I. Project Overview

In Winter 2018, eleven students in the GVSU course ENS 401: Environmental Problem Solving played the role of consultants for community partner Viability Lab, LLC, which had developed a grant application titled ShoreLiveCity. A central feature of the ShoreLiveCity project was to improve social equity and environmental justice in access to the Muskegon Lake south shoreline. Historically, such access has been severely restricted for residents in the nearby Nelson and Nims neighborhoods. ShoreLiveCity proposed to use the Circles of Sustainability planning and implementation framework (2018) to improve access along approximately 500 yards of publicly owned shoreline adjacent to the neighborhoods.

The students and instructor K. Parker followed a design thinking process to approach the problem. They researched the history of the shoreline and the lake to understand the historical reasons for restricted shoreline access. They toured the site. They met with residents at two public meetings to gather information about the neighborhoods and about residents' experiences with the shoreline and lake. They researched existing literature on ways to measure social equity/environmental justice. Approximately one month before the end of the class, they met with the community partner to present preliminary findings and possible solutions. Based on feedback from this presentation, they finalized their recommendations and presented these to the community partner at the end of the course.

Context

Starting with European settlement and logging operations during the 19th century, the south shoreline of Muskegon Lake has been the site of heavy commercial and industrial use. The concentration of industrial sites adjacent to the Nelson and Nims neighborhoods has prevented easy residential access to the lake; moreover, the polluted state of the water and adjacent shoreline made it undesirable for residents to access the lake in this area.

The US Environmental Protection Agency declared the entire lake an Area of Concern in 1985. A remedial action plan to address a number of beneficial use impairments was created in 1987. After implementing many separate projects involving numerous stakeholders, lake conditions in 2018 are significantly improved (US EPA, 2018). It is expected that Muskegon Lake will be de-listed as an Area of Concern within the next few years. In 2011 Isely, Isely, & Hause projected that remediation and de-listing would lead to increased economic benefits associated with a) housing and property values and b) recreational use and tourism (Isely, Isely, & Hause 2011). In 2018 these anticipated effects are becoming visible: much of the formerly industrial south shoreline is currently undergoing redevelopment as private residential and multi-use property.

The economic benefits of increased property values and revenue from tourism are important considerations for the city's economy. The Isely report only addresses these two main economic benefits, however. The report does not address other, non-economic values

that people might derive from the lake and its shoreline; it does not address social equity/environmental justice factors that may arise during the remediation and de-listing process.

Environmental justice concerns the degree to which different stakeholders experience and benefit from goods connected to their environments. Redevelopment will necessarily affect such opportunities for residents in multiple ways. Attention to *social equity* raises questions about who will, and who will not, benefit from expected changes such as increased property values and tourism revenue. Property owners are likely to see more economic benefit than are renters, for example, and renters may in fact be adversely affected if housing costs in the neighborhoods increase. Access to the shoreline is likely to improve, but it may or not improve equitably for all stakeholders.

Rolston (1985) identifies a number of non-economic values that should be considered in addressing social equity/environmental justice. People experience a variety of non-economic goods in their interactions with “natural” spaces such as a shoreline. Rolston identified the following values associated with these goods are:

- life support value
- recreational value (apart from its potential economic benefits)
- scientific value
- genetic diversity value
- aesthetic value
- cultural symbolization value
- historical value
- character-building value
- therapeutic value
- religious value
- intrinsic natural value

In a populated urban context such as that adjacent to the Muskegon Lake south shoreline, we could add others, including:

- value for promoting community cohesion
- value for contributing to residents’ identity

Other values relevant to this location and community might also be identified in further study.

The ShoreLiveCity project identified a site that may offer a unique opportunity to support multiple economic and non-economic benefits for residents. The 500-yard section of shoreline extending from Heritage Landing to the Hartshorn Marina is within walking distance of the two neighborhoods, and all the property is owned and controlled by public entities: City of Muskegon, Muskegon Community College, and the Muskegon County Parks.

Project Brief

Students were given the following parameters and guidance for their semester-long project exploring social equity and environmental justice issues for Nelson and Nims residents:

Problem: The ShoreLiveCity grant writer needs a way to measure (baseline and outcomes) and promote (initiating engagement and progress) social equity in access to the Muskegon Lake shoreline from Heritage Landing to Hartshorn Marina.

Goal: Using common resources and the design thinking process, each team will propose a framework for both measuring and enhancing social equity in Muskegon Lake shoreline access, especially for residents of the Nelson and Nims neighborhoods.

Eleven students worked in three separate groups, each with a somewhat different focus. One concentrated on understanding the history of the social equity/environmental justice problem, another concentrated on existing physical barriers to access, and a third sought to develop a broad overview of the problem via a more holistic approach.

II. Student Findings and Recommendations

The three student groups presented their findings at GVSU on April 18, 2018. Portfolios for two of the projects are available on the GVSU ScholarWorks repository (via URLs provided).

Bear, M., Elkins, S., Fleming, S., & Thomassen, C. (18 April 2018). ShoreLiveCity Muskegon. ENS 401 presentation, Grand Valley State University.

Includes analysis of barriers to access, overview of the Imagine Muskegon Lake planning process, the need to move from tokenism to effective citizen power in planning processes (per Arnstein 1969).

Recommendations are to 1) remove physical barriers to access, 2) build a “creative space” such as a shelter or community center for residents’ use, and 3) offer an educational program such as a children’s summer camp to develop residents’ engagement and understanding of the shoreline.

Steffens, S., Noworolnik, M., & McClees, C. (2018). Historical analysis of Muskegon Lake. *Environmental and Sustainability Studies Undergraduate Projects*. 20. https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/ens_undergrad/20

Includes demographic information on Nelson & Nims neighborhoods; timeline and historical origins of main barriers to access in 19th and 20th centuries.

Recommendation is to offer hands-on educational programs about the lake via a new Muskegon Lake Eco-Center. The center would emphasize the success of remediation efforts, in order to develop residents’ attitude that Muskegon is a “lake town,” and that Nelson and Nims residents are “Lake People” with a meaningful connection to the shoreline.

Videki, J., Warrner, S., Clark, J., & Vela, N. (2018). Starting small. *Environmental and Sustainability Studies Undergraduate Projects*. 21. https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/ens_undergrad/21

Includes an overview of Imagine Muskegon Lake and other past planning processes; overview of existing barriers to access; description of different kinds of access, especially the role of visual and physical access to the shoreline, alongside access to use of the water itself.

Recommendations are to 1) remove major physical barriers to access, 2) offer additional programs that bring residents to the shoreline and lake, and 3) increase the sense of community within the neighborhoods—through such means as community gardens, and picnics—so residents can effectively demand increased shoreline access in the future.

III. Overall Recommendations

Measuring social equity and environmental justice

There are numerous tools and frameworks for assessment and reporting about social equity, both under the umbrella of sustainability and in connection with more general social well-being. Examples of such tools include US EPA (2016) Global Reporting Initiative (2018), and STAR Communities (2018). These tools tend to be based on standardized “top-down” indicators that are designed to allow comparisons across many different communities (Magee, Scerri, & James, 2012; Magee et al., 2013). They measure broad, quantifiable social characteristics such as average income, education level, life expectancy, and so on. Region-specific reporting tools, such as the West Michigan Regional Dashboard, also rely heavily on standardized indicators (West Michigan Regional Prosperity Alliance, 2018).

Measuring and reporting the state of social equity and environmental justice concerning residents’ access to a natural resource in a particular place involves a number of factors that are not so generalizable. Such measurement and reporting would require defining location-specific indicators, to be revisited periodically to determine whether progress is being made. This strategy aligns with McKenzie’s (2004) observations—in situations such as ours, “definitions and indicator sets are often developed through consultation with community members” (16–17). Magee, Scerri, & James (2012) also recognize the need in such situations to “elicit community-based definitions and indexes of well-being” (241). The advantage is that measures developed through this kind of “bottom-up” process can be designed to reflect the specific local context and concerns. Magee et al. (2013) suggest that some predetermined common indicators also be included in a localized assessment and reporting tool, which will allow comparison with other communities alongside comparison of the focus community to itself over time.

This suggests how to develop and use a framework to measure social equity in Muskegon Lake shoreline access for Nelson and Nims residents. The framework should be developed in consultation with community members. Indicators need to be observable and measurable, and tied to objective characteristics of the community so far as possible. The framework will be used to establish a baseline of current measures, and to measure changes in the indicators at set future intervals (annually, or perhaps at longer intervals).

Identifying waterfront goods and values

In keeping with Rolston’s (1985) recognition of multiple economic and non-economic values of natural areas, the Winter 2018 projects highlighted the different ways that people in fact interact with waterfront areas, both at Muskegon Lake and elsewhere. These various kinds of interaction suggest a variety of different kinds of values at work. Social equity and environmental justice are promoted when more people have opportunities to experience and value the whole range of environmental goods supported by a place.

Identifying kinds of interaction

Through observation, public discussion, and consideration of other waterfront experiences, students readily generated a list of kinds of waterfront interactions and the valued experiences they support. It is helpful to organize these activities by the degree of access to the water itself that each requires. Kayaking, sailing, and boat-based fishing require access to the open water as well as a suitable put-in site for the watercraft, for example. Swimming requires access to the water, assurance of its safety (both in terms of toxins and in terms of reasonable protection against accidents), access to a beach area for entry, and a restroom/changing facility. Boat-watching and sunset watching require a suitable shoreline space with visual access to the water, benches or other sitting areas, and a restroom. Picnicking and barbecuing additionally require trash receptacles, and perhaps grills. Running and cycling require a suitable path or trail as well as visual access to the water. Recreational sightseeing requires visual access from the road.

It is also important to identify the varying needs of residents who will be using the site: people bringing infants or small children, or with restricted mobility, or who have travelled a long distance from home, may require additional support to experience the shoreline.

This initial list of kinds of shoreline interaction could be given as the starting point for a more thorough community input process, such as that described in Circles of Sustainability. The process would result in a more complete list of desired kinds of shoreline interactions, and of the features and amenities needed to support those interactions.

Identifying barriers to access

Observation and conversation with residents revealed numerous existing barriers to access along this section of Muskegon Lake shoreline. These barriers include tangible physical barriers including fences and locked gates, as well as intangible negative cultural attitudes and beliefs about the formerly polluted lake.

Bear, Elkins, Fleming, & Thomassen sorted the barriers into three groups: **physical** (including lack of pedestrian-friendly access), **psychological** (lingering fear of the lake as toxic, a history of treating the lake as “other” from the neighborhood, and “planning fatigue” from past efforts to improve access), and **social-political** (experience with tokenism in past planning processes, emphasis on economic benefits to exclusion of other values).

Steffens, Noworolnik, & McClees distinguished between “**old barriers**” (degraded water quality and industrial facilities that blocked physical access), and “**new barriers**” (inaccurate beliefs about current water quality, lack of pedestrian crossings on Lakeshore Drive, gates, fences, and signage that prevent or discourage access, the members-only access policy to the fitness center property, and lack of effective political engagement by residents concerning access).

Videki, Warrner, Clark, & Vela identified four categories of barriers to residents’ access to the shoreline: **environment** (including past pollution, physical barriers), **usage** (industry and transportation excluded more recreational uses), **culture** (class divisions, reported

perceptions that “the lake isn’t for me”), and **people** (including lack of interest or awareness of shoreline accessibility).

As with the preliminary list of kinds of shoreline interaction, **these lists of existing barriers to access could be used as the starting point for the community input process**, to develop a more systematic catalog of barriers to be removed.

Indicators and measures

This preliminary work provides a good starting point for identifying possible kinds of shoreline interaction, the kinds of values that could be realized in that interaction, and the multiple, interconnected and diverse barriers to shoreline access that currently exist. This work indicates that measuring and improving social equity and environmental justice for residents’ shoreline access is a complex, “wicked” problem that cannot be solved with a single strategy.

Note that remediating the water quality and habitat damage in Muskegon Lake has involved numerous different strategies and projects over a period of more than thirty years. Remediating historically-rooted social, cultural, and psychological attitudes and restoring physical access to the shoreline is perhaps not quite as large a task, but this change will also require a planned, multi-faceted effort that extends over a period of years.

It will be necessary to identify indicators of the level of resident access in order to measure social equity in Muskegon Lake shoreline access. A large part of this reporting can be tied to *the presence of the kinds of barriers already identified*. The removal of existing barriers such as fencing and signage, and the installation of support facilities such as restrooms and a swimming beach, would be easy to observe and track over time. Surveys could be used to measure the force of cultural, social, and psychological barriers to access. Another part of the reporting project can be tied to *observable indicators of the actual level of resident access* to the shoreline. The number of people observed swimming, kayaking, fishing, picnicking, and so on in a given period of time can also be observed and tracked.

Promoting greater social equity and environmental justice in the neighborhoods

A planning process centered on community input, such as that outlined in the Circles of Sustainability framework, is the appropriate way to develop indicators and measures for social equity and environmental justice, as well as to develop strategies to make progress on these measures. The shoreline can be remediated and barriers to access removed, over a period of at least several years, through such an approach.

Our interactions with residents indicated that there are other kinds of barriers in place, however, that would make such a process difficult to implement without a fair amount of preparation. Besides being *cut off from the shoreline* by physical and cultural barriers, Nelson and Nims residents seem also to be largely *cut off from the political and economic processes* that would allow them to campaign effectively for access to the shoreline. What started as an inquiry into equitable access led us to identify concerns about social and political justice more generally.

Issues to address

Our conversations with residents at two public meetings suggested that, while there is a small contingent of residents who are dedicated, passionate, and well-informed about Muskegon Lake remediation and shoreline development efforts, many or even most residents are either unaware of or are unengaged with these changes that will soon have significant effects on their neighborhoods.

Historically, the shoreline has been off-limits, “somebody else’s thing,” except as an employment site. Though the industrial facilities are now gone, the old physical and psychological barriers remain. Even the 500 yards of publicly owned property that is the focus of the ShoreLiveCity project remains layered with fences, signs, and locked gates. Perhaps because of this longstanding “not for us” attitude, there is surprisingly low level of awareness that a) the lake water itself has been largely rendered safe and b) the transition toward delisting and redevelopment presents a unique opportunity for residents to establish access to the shoreline.

While a planning process centered on community input is needed, it is likely to fail if the existing barriers to participation in such processes are not addressed first. Even committed, well-informed residents indicated that they feel discouraged politically and are suffering from what might be called “planning fatigue.” The problem is that there is already a history of many previous planning processes for Muskegon Lake—engaged residents have provided their input to these processes many times before. They now have the sense that very little benefit comes from such efforts. One resident remarked that there is a “long history of people coming from outside to decide what to do with the neighborhood”; it was also noted that past processes were not accommodating to the many Spanish-speaking residents in the neighborhood.

There appears to be some merit to these complaints: during the period from Fall 2017 to Winter 2018, there were two major planning processes underway: the ShoreLiveCity grant proposal, and a more comprehensive project called Imagine Muskegon Lake. These two projects were separate and overlapping in both time and intention. (In addition, another major planning document—the Muskegon Lake Resiliency Plan—had just been presented by a consortium of environmental non-profits, government agencies, and local governments in January 2017.) There seems to be little coordination or communication across planning processes, even though key figures were involved in both projects. It is perhaps telling that neither ShoreLiveCity nor Imagine Muskegon Lake has so far been endorsed or funded by any of their supporting bodies. These are only the most recent of many overlapping—and sometimes conflicting—planning processes implemented for the south shoreline in the past few decades.

The sense that their input is repeatedly sought, only to be disregarded, reflects a concern that past planning efforts have failed to achieve their promise as citizen-driven processes. Arnstein (1969) provides the following diagram to indicate levels of citizen input into planning processes:

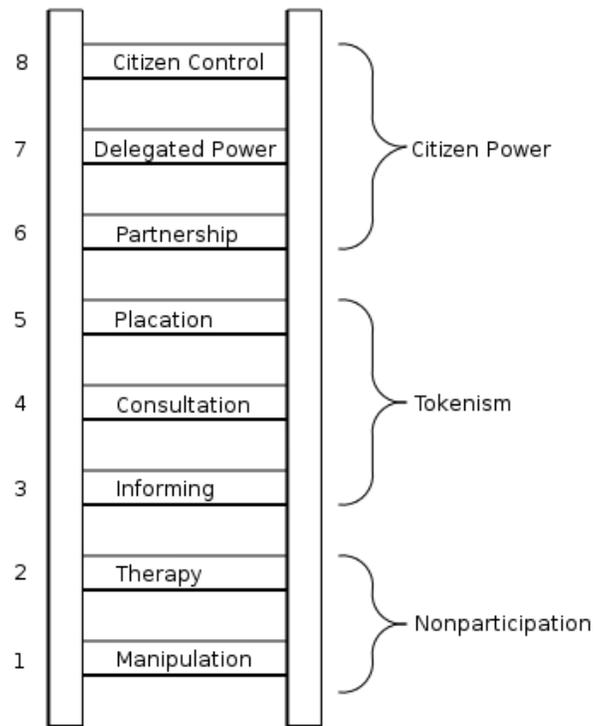


Figure 1. Ladder of Citizen Participation (Arnstein, 1969)

The past use of residents' input to planning processes too often appears, unfortunately, as "tokenism." Before initiating a new planning process, including the one proposed here, this barrier of perceived tokenism must be addressed so residents can engage the process with a sense of power and good faith participation.

Even setting aside this perceived disregard of community input, it must be observed that having multiple, separate, often competing processes (which has demonstrably occurred) is a very ineffective way to plan. Awareness of this inefficiency is no doubt a major source of residents' "planning fatigue."

Any future processes should perhaps be vetted, endorsed, and their eventual recommendations provisionally funded with a budget set-aside by those with the authority to make implementation decisions. Decisions and the rationale for final recommendations should be fully transparent to the public. Whatever the strategy, something must be done to assure residents that their input does matter.

Strategies for becoming "lake people"

To prepare the way for a meaningful planning process centered on community input, residents must be engaged anew. Based on the student presentations and other discussions, the following strategies appear worth considering.

- **Old fears about the lake itself can be addressed through educational, outreach, and marketing efforts.** The existing “Watch Us Go Boating” kayaking program, established in 2017 by the ShoreLiveCity grant writer, appears to be one such successful program: it gets residents physically onto the water. Other suggestions include holding a neighborhood music series on the shoreline, an annual boat parade, a community picnic, and other activities that draw people to the shoreline or onto the water.

Longer term projects include building a creative/community space—perhaps a picnic shelter or a community center building with restrooms—that could facilitate such events, and holding a summer science camp for neighborhood children to learn about the lake and its successful remediation.

- **Developing the residents’ political voice is a prerequisite for a successful planning process.** It is also essential to driving meaningful ongoing progress in social equity and environmental justice. There are neighborhood associations for both Nims and Nelson residents, but it was not clear that current levels of participation make these organizations politically effective. Besides such formal organizations, informal and recreational community events such as those already suggested may help build awareness of the shoreline as a neighborhood focus, as well as helping establish new connections among residents.
- **Establish a community-driven planning and implementation process.** This will be a continuing process that follows the design thinking model (of which the Circles of Sustainability framework is one example). This process could achieve several things at once:
 - Identify a set of indicators and measures directly relevant to social equity and environmental justice in Muskegon Lake south shoreline access.
 - Provide a forum and opportunities for overcoming old fears of the lake through education, marketing, and outreach.
 - Provide a forum and opportunities for residents to further develop their political voice(s) and learn how to engage in effective neighborhood advocacy.
- **Ensure that equity and justice concerns are central to the planning process.** The most distinctive aspect of the original ShoreLiveCity proposal was its innovative emphasis on social equity as a guiding concept. Following this vision, social equity and environmental justice considerations should be prominent considerations in every step of the planning and implementation of shoreline access remediation. As previously indicated, though, existing predetermined assessment tools are not well-suited to support a focus on equity and justice issues.

The ENS 401 class experimented with using a “veil of ignorance” exercise to identify indicators that make these considerations central. This exercise is based on a

thought experiment described by John Rawls in his influential book *A Theory of Justice* (1971; see Freeman 2016 for a synopsis of key concepts). Applied to the question of equitable and just shoreline access for Nelson and Nims residents, it took the following form:

Imagine that you are told that you will be a resident of one of these two neighborhoods, but you are under a “veil of ignorance” so you do not know what your status or situation will be. You may be young or old; of any sexual orientation, gender identity, or biological sex; of any race, ethnicity, national origin, or religion; wealthy or poor; native or immigrant; English-speaking or not, uneducated or well-educated, healthy or in poor health, a property developer or an idealistic environmentalist, and so on. The point is that you have no idea what position you may find yourself in when you appear in the community, what advantages or disadvantages you may have, or even what special values and preferences you will have.

From the standpoint of this hypothetical “original position,” what rights, privileges, amenities, rules, laws, and provisions would you then want to have in place concerning access to the shoreline?

This exercise allowed the students to generate a list of very specific desired features for the south shoreline—features that directly promote the Rawlsian ideal of “justice as fairness.” Working through a similar exercise with residents would generate a list of objective features (including many observable features such as the absence of locked gates and the presence of public restrooms) that could be used confidently as legitimate indicators of social equity and environmental justice at this site.

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