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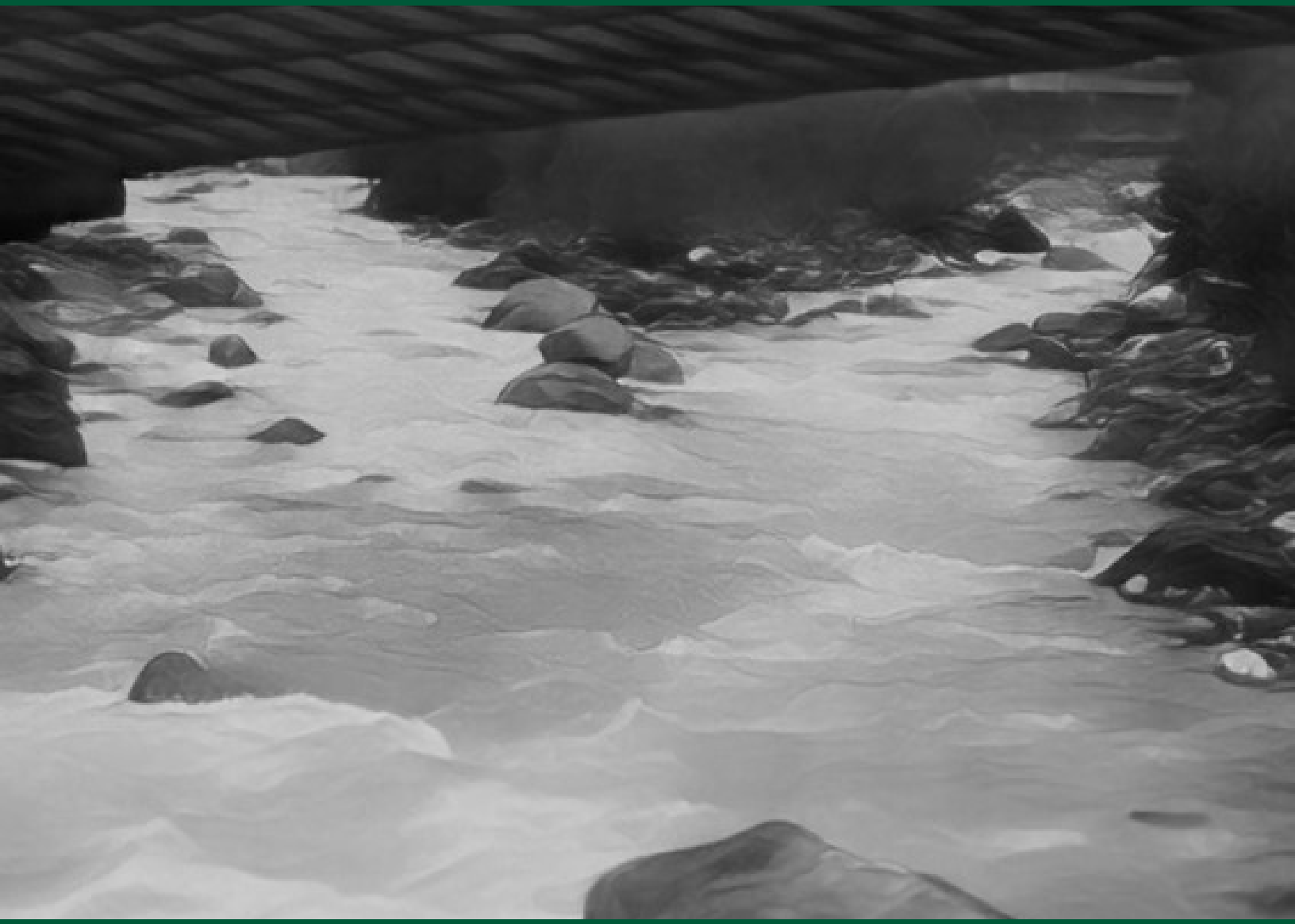
Stewardship Salons

A guide to collaborative learning spaces that foster and strengthen networks in natural resource stewardship. (Version 2.0)



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Stewardship Salons are collaborative, place-based co-learning spaces for the "stewards of stewardship". Salons are a place where participants are able to bring their expertise that they carry from all lived experiences, both personal and professional, into conversation with other distinct perspectives and ways of knowing. Salons provide a space for professional development where individuals feel validated in their experiences in natural resources management, building individual capacity that can lead to greater organizational and institutional sustainability. This guide provides an introduction to this type of co-learning space and guidance for creating Stewardship Salons in your community. It is meant to be a starting point and should be adapted to your community and their needs.

Cover

Meeting of rivers. Modified from licensed photo by Anuj.bhargava7.

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With gratitude to all of our salon hosts and participants with whom we co-create these exchanges!

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What are Stewardship Salons?

Stewardship Salons are collaborative learning spaces that foster a practitioner network for voices in natural resources care and stewardship that:

1. Transcend institutional hierarchies and organizational boundaries to build an informed community of practice for all voices.
2. Create a brave space where participants can feel valued and affirmed with their experiences in natural resource management.
3. Encourage sharing both professional and personal connections to nature and each other.
4. Amplify capacity for place-based stewardship and caretaking of the environment.

The Stewardship Salon concept drew inspiration from a 2017 workshop called "Learning from Place" that brought Kekuhi Kealiikanakaoleohaililani, a Native Hawaiian master teacher, and her learners from Hawaii to exchange with New York City (NYC) stewardship practitioners. Kekuhi encouraged us to organize our own community prior to the exchange, to prepare ourselves to be in dialogue with different ways of knowing and Indigenous practices. From this exchange, the Stewardship Salon concept commenced.

Stewardship Salons engage the "stewards of stewardship" including natural resource workers, land managers, scientists, artists, and other community-based stewards. The name, "Stewardship Salon", was chosen as **salon**[1] signifies a gathering of individuals who carry experiences and perspectives related to a particular subject, and, in the case of these spaces, **stewardship**, is our topic of focus. **Stewardship** is the act of protecting, taking care of, or being responsible for our environments, our communities, and those who we share them with– both other humans and the non-humans.

Stewardship Salons are a space to engage participants in experimentation and creative methods not normally a part of their daily work, while exposing them to new knowledge and perspectives. Participants build relationships over time with individuals who they might not have otherwise connected with in their work, fostering a greater appreciation of others' unique expertise. Importantly, this co-learning exchange is a source of inspiration for participants to see value in their own contributions to natural resource management. Together these spaces can help work to prevent burnout and provide a source of resilience against imposter syndrome, and feelings of isolation.

Our stewardship salons are hosted by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service and New York City Department of Parks and Recreation as part of the NYC Urban Field Station programming. This guide is meant to be a starting point for others who are interested in developing and hosting their own salons. We encourage you to adjust this however you want to your community and place.

[1] While the term "salon" evokes different things for each of us (role-playing activities in high school history classes, the Enlightenment Salons and coffeehouses themselves—whether elite or not, beauty salons, "third spaces" outside of home and work), a common thread that lives on in our conceptualization of the term is the feeling of learning in community through conversation, curiosity, and trust for those attending these events.

What is our typical format for the Salons?

Stewardship Salons typically are a 2-hour outdoor event—for those in the Northeastern U.S., it means our Salons occur during the warm-weather months between May and October. This format evolved from other iterations as we've learned from the participants and their needs, so as such, your format might look differently as well.

The Salons are not a field tour but a co-created experience. We have hosted on average 17 attendees at each Salon and **recommend keeping attendance at 25 individuals or less as smaller group sizes help to promote intimacy and provide space for participation from all attendees**. The location is dependent on the place-based conversation topic selected. We currently host four salons per year in the NYC region, each focusing on a variety of subjects including **land and water-based natural resources stewardship, the arts, indigenous, and other culturally rooted customs**. The frequency of Salons depends on interest, capacity, and desired outcomes; when we began hosting Salons, we gathered almost monthly.

Salons have a featured speaker whose work and perspective highlight one or more of our focus areas listed above. These speakers are passionate individuals who are enthusiastic about facilitating discussion and learning from different ways of knowing. Our Stewardship Salons follow this sequence of events:

1. Opening Welcome (~ 30 minutes)
2. Host- Guided Activity (~ 75 minutes)
3. Closing Circle Discussion (~ 10 minutes)
4. Concluding Goodbyes (~ 5 minutes)

The Opening Welcome is meant to help initially connect participants to place, to one another, and to set expectations for the experience.

Facilitation Tip #1: Create community agreements or ground rules for your group that will be reviewed at the beginning of each Salon and provide an opportunity for new additions as the currently convening group sees fit. Community agreements set an important foundation for how the meeting will operate as well as guiding expectations for participation to help cultivate trust and understanding. See page 3 for the ground rules we use in NYC.

Our Current Ground Rules	
All in and be attentive	To ensure an intimate, distraction-free, community-building space. Honor the time together, be off devices and focused on the discussion.
Make space and take space	Some of us feel comfortable to immediately participate verbally in a conversation, others need space to feel comfortable—so share the 'microphone' with others, also have the courage to grab it.
Lessons leave, stories stay	It can take courage to share personal stories, and we acknowledge this. With that, we want to respect participants and keep stories confidential.
It's okay to disagree	We all won't have the same perspective.
Assume good intent, but acknowledge impact	Create space to acknowledge we don't know everything, and that our words can hurt intentionally.
Check your heirarchy at the door	This is space where organizational position does not impact your ability to be heard, validated and to participate.
Check your egos	Egos can be a barrier to the cooperative goals of the space.

Following the community agreements, salon organizers can guide participants through a community building practice to connect to one another and to place. This could include a land acknowledgment, the creation of a kuahu, discussing site history and ecology, a grounding or mindfulness practice, or even sharing tea while chatting informally.

- A land acknowledgment seeks to recognize the Indigenous stewards of the land where the event takes place and provoke thought about ways one can assist Indigenous peoples in uplifting their specific goals. It is recommended to reach out to local Indigenous communities to ask how they'd like to be recognized or even co-developing a statement with local Indigenous leadership.
- A kuahu, or altar of Native Hawaiian spiritual practice, can be created to facilitate an entry point to sacred conversation within the Salon. This adopted practice was inspired by the initial training workshop titled "Learning from Place". This practice involves participants bringing local plants of high personal significance to the event as well as other objects or symbols that have meaning. This practice brings the more-than-human elements into the space. Adorning the kuahu with plants as representations of the divine is followed by sharing the significance of items and plants that were placed on the kuahu. This process can help participants to establish a sacred space for dialogue, set intentions, bring a personal dimension to conversations, and inspire creativity. The kuahu is then deconstructed at the end of the salon.

See **Resources** on page 12 for more information on both of these practices.

Kuahu build that symbolizes the harvest season in New York City. Forest Service photo by Lindsay Campbell.

The next step of the opening welcome is to introduce our salon's host and subsequently provide an invitation for all participants to introduce themselves.

Facilitation Tip #2: In addition to names and organizational affiliation (and pronouns, if they'd like), invite participants to respond to an opening prompt that goes beyond a typical introduction. This sets the tone for creating a brave space and is an important step in intimacy and trust building amongst participants. Here are examples of opening prompts from past salons:

- Wherever you define yourself as "from", what have you noticed changing in your place?
- From your personal, family, cultural, spiritual, or religious perspective, can you describe a sacred place that has meaning to you and how you interact with it?
- Is there a place or region other than New York where you consider yourself as having "roots"? How do you keep those connections to place, people, and land vibrant and present in your life?
- Share a brief story of an experience with an art exhibit or performance that resonated with you, and why?
- We invite you to think like a salamander—what do you need to thrive?

Spruce Tree Octopus Roots. Modified from licensed photo by David Berry.

When Stewardship Salons first started, participant introductions were centered around telling a story tied to a plant or item brought to the event by the participants for the kuahu. This practice of storytelling around an object can be seen in other relational spaces. For example, hosts of "Climate Circles", a project out of the Billion Worlds Lab, that provides an intimate space for talking about the emotional and psychological impacts of the climate crisis, bring several items that participants use to tell a personal story. Using an object to prompt a personal story is a good option, especially for more reserved or timid individuals, as it helps to divide the group's attention between the individual and object. More about "Climate Circles" and similar relational spaces can be found in **Resources** on page 12.

The Host-Guided Activity is a place-based conversation and activity led by the featured host. As mentioned before, the hosts, who often have participated in previous Salons, include people of different professions, backgrounds, lived experiences, and identities who bring their unique expertise to share with the group. Activities often include "learning by doing" moments, whereby taking part in the activity knowledge is gained and shared among participants, through sensory observation and past insight. With that, an activity labeled as a walk, is not simply a tour, but instead, a co-created experience. Here are examples of past salon activities:

- Using play-based theater to look into the world of stewardship and community care.
- A walk and talk through Ceremonial Stone Landscapes of a park by a leader in the Turtle Clan of the Ramapough Lunaape Munsee Nation.
- A collaborative field-based inquiry of the told and untold stories of a public park.
- Exploring the historical ecology of salamanders in Manhattan.
- Milkweed paper making while conversing about migration and nuances of language around native, non-native, and invasive species.

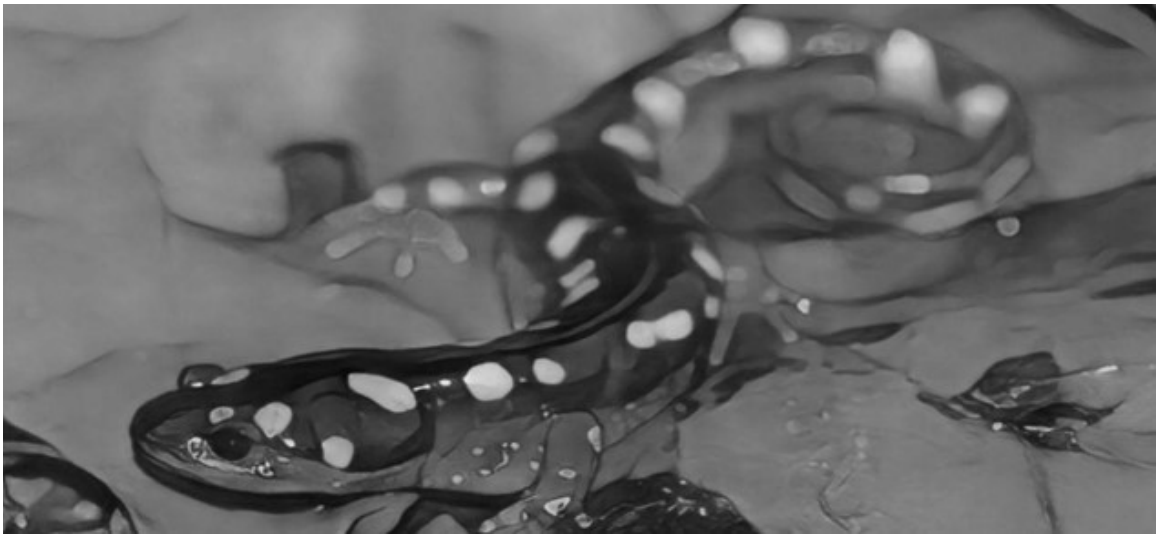
Milkweed. Modified from licensed photo by Melinda Young Stuart.

During the Closing Circle Discussion, Salon organizers and the host encourage participants to reflect and to share on one or more of the following: resonating themes or feelings, key takeaways, or calls to action.

Facilitation Tip #3: It is helpful to have brainstormed ahead of time focused prompts based on the content of the Salon in case people are nervous to share reflections. Other times it is beneficial to intentionally leave the prompt general, asking "What, from today, are you hoping to integrate into your professional or personal practice?"

Here are other example prompts based on content:

- How can we keep salamander stories like this alive in our collective memory, including with species that we aren't allowed to hold or touch?
- Can you reflect on any new connections between topics that came up for you today, including the relationships between plants, land management, and art?
- How can art transform our experience of place and the environment?
- What does it mean to steward a connection as opposed to a site?



Spotted salamander. Modified from licensed photo by Peter Paplanus.

Concluding goodbyes are just that, the closing to another Stewardship Salon event. Usually, event organizers express gratitude for attendance and participation in this co-learning environment. Importantly, invitations are extended to participants to continue the conversation, remain in the community of practice network, and further grow connections with individuals beyond the current group.

Ideally, if schedules permit, participants and organizers take time after the Salon to continue conversations or even share a meal to solidify the relationship building that started during the event.

What are the first steps to implementing Stewardship Salons?

A key question to ask yourself when planning the launch of Stewardship Salons is "Who do I want to be in community with?".

- Scope out external natural resource stewardship organizations, community groups, cultural practitioners, etc., to collaborate with—especially those that approach stewardship from different lenses (e.g., neighborhood beautification, spiritual practices, Indigenous practices and ways of knowing), interest points, and worldviews, and begin to build relationships with them.
- Also, remember to look inward at your organization to individuals that may have perspectives to offer that may be overlooked in your organizational spaces. These individuals and organizations could be future Salon featured hosts as well as additional individuals to invite to participate more generally in the salons.

NERVOUS ABOUT FACILITATING YOUR OWN STEWARDSHIP SALON?

The planning committee and early hosts of Salons in NYC did not have facilitation backgrounds.

Likewise, facilitations skills aren't a requirement to begin hosting Stewardship Salons.

Instead, it is important for those embarking on the Stewardship Salon journey to embrace vulnerability, transparency to those gathering in community with you, and the iterative, learning process of navigating conversations in these spaces.

Find some facilitation resources on page 12.

Other key steps to implement Stewardship Salons include:

- Frame the experience to align with your organization's goals and mission, and find partners that can help support the organizational work. Not all organizations initially see value in creating these co-learning, community-centered spaces. In our experience, the Salons meet a need for professional development for natural resource practitioners that builds cultural competency and the skills necessary for effectively engaging with the public. In addition, Salons have been seen as productive because they are excellent networking opportunities. The connections made at Stewardship Salons are often more generative because of the uniqueness of the shared experience.
- Form a planning committee and begin thinking about potential topics, speakers (both internal and external to your organization), and locations for the Stewardship Salons.

This is an iterative process and practice that will grow and progress over time as your network and knowledge expands.

Building Your Community Worksheet

Fill in your responses to the prompts below to begin thinking about what a Stewardship Salon would look like in your community!

See the example shown in the **Resources** on page 14.

1. What brings me to this work?

2. What are some important topics or issues that impact my community?

3. Who do I want to be in the community with? Who do I want to learn from?

What needs to be planned before hosting a Salon?

Before hosting a Salon, think about ways that this experience could be documented both for the planning committee and to potentially share out to your institution's broader community including to those that may not have been able to attend. Aspects of your documentation plan could include having attendees sign in to keep track of attendance, maintaining a list of Salon hosts and themes, obtaining permission from Salon participants to take photos, taking notes during the activity to later summarize to share out broadly with your community, or sending out post-Salon evaluations to better understand attendees' experiences.

Example Stewardship Salon Summary Tracker Entry:

Date	Hosts	Location	Topic	Keywords	Related Readings and Resources	Attendees
September 28, 2023	Brady Simmons and Neha Savant	Highbridge Park	Salamanders in the City	outdoors, wildlife, BIPOC host(s)	Natural Resources Group. 2006. Dusky Salamanders Found in Northern Manhattan. Nature Notes.	12

Additionally, before hosting is a good time to proactively think about a communication or networking plan to continue the sense of community that is fostered with the Salons. This can include setting up a platform (e.g., email listserv, Slack, etc.) to continue communication or virtual or in-person meetings to continue building relationships between Salons. Choosing these platforms or mediums is best discussed with salon participants.

Once a featured host is decided upon by the planning committee, the planning committee and the host gather during 1-2 meetings prior to the event to discuss the aim of the Salon and agenda. This is part of the co-creative process that helps the future host get to know the intent of Salons and the community who takes part in this experience as well as helps the planning committee understand the vision and knowledge of the proposed host. Importantly, this opportunity for the planning committee and the host to get to know each other prior to the Salon helps to create and build trust among facilitators.

During these meetings, it is also necessary to ensure that your planning thinks about the needs of all potential participants—accommodations for accessibility, location, etc. Additionally, prior to the event, communicate necessary information: pre-readings, location, activity details, available accommodations for mobility/disability needs, transportation options to location, recommended dress, etc.

On the day of the Salon, especially at the first gathering, it might be helpful to have materials for name tags available for participants to write their name, pronouns (if they'd like), and affiliation to help facilitate community building and conversation.

We just hosted our first Salon! What should we do next?

Post-Salon, our planning team reconvenes to have a debrief—an opportunity to come together and reflect on the Salon. This includes meditating on questions such as:

- What resonated with you?
- What will you take away?
- What worked and what didn't?
- Where do we want to go from here?

Debriefs also involve thinking about and executing next steps, which can encompass:

- Implementing the communication plan (ex. sending out an email to invitees summarizing the event; adding new attendees to a listserv; organizing between-salon lunch meetups) and documentation plan (ex. creating a Salon Evaluation to send out to participants).
- Assigning someone the task to follow-up with attendees to share resources or photos taken during the Salon, a feedback survey, or information about future events to help further the sense of community created from the Salon experience.
- Brainstorming future salon hosts and topics. These debriefs help to maintain the momentum of the Salon space, so they become a repeated event.

These debriefs help to maintain the momentum of the Salon space, so they become a repeated event.

Resources

Stewardship salon supplementary table.
https://docs.google.com/document/d/17riBujmlqfC0DHVscggHh_hWL9N6qjaN/edit.

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Empatheatre. [N.d.]. **About: What is empatheatre?** https://www.empatheatre.com/about.

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Competendo. [N.d.]. **Divergent and convergent thinking: creativity handbook.** https://competendo.net/en/hb/creativecompetence.pdf.

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Example response to the "Building Your Community" worksheet

1. What brings me to this work?

- background in ecological restoration
- strong place-based relationship
- desire to help care for and restore people's relationship to place/animals/plants
- wanting to be in a community with others

2. What are some important topics or issues that impact my community?

- development
- farmland conversion
- state and private conflict
- indigenous displacement
- water quality
- waste disposal
- local ecological knowledge

3. Who do I want to be in the community with? Who do I want to learn from?

- other natural resource managers
- farmers
- local community groups
- nearby indigenous Nations
- artists
- community leaders

Stewardship Salon Checklist

Pre-work

- ☐ Identify your "why" - Who are you looking to build relationships with? What are you hoping to learn about? How might this transform or support your work?
- ☐ Form a planning committee
- ☐ Creation of a Documentation and Communication Plan
- ☐ Planning committee decides on a featured host
- ☐ Planning committee and the host gather during 1-2 meetings
- ☐ Relationship building among facilitators
  - ☐ Discuss aim and vision of the proposed Salon
  - ☐ Think about the needs of the participants—accommodations for mobility/disability needs, public transportation options, location, etc.
  - ☐ Draft Salon Agenda
    - ☐ Brief summary of Salon
      - ☐ Location
      - ☐ Activity Details
    - ☐ Recommended dress
    - ☐ Applicable, optional pre-reading for participants
- ☐ Send out Salon invitation and agenda to invitees

Day of

- ☐ Implement documentation plan
- ☐ Opening welcome
  - ☐ Ground rules establishment
  - ☐ Land acknowledgment or kuahu or recognition of place or grounding exercise
  - ☐ Introduce host
  - ☐ Introductions and Relational Prompt
- ☐ Host guided activity
  - ☐ Explanation of activity
- ☐ Closing circle discussion
  - ☐ Resonating themes/feelings?
  - ☐ Key takeaways?
  - ☐ Calls to action?
- ☐ Concluding goodbyes
  - ☐ Address opportunities to continue the conversation and grow connections

After- work

- ☐ Planning Committee debrief
- ☐ Implementation of post-Salon Communication Plan
- ☐ Optional Salon evaluations

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