

Stewardship Salons

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

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Image: Two rocky streams converging into one. A creative commons image.

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

Table of Contents

What are Stewardship Salons and why should we host them?.....	2
What is our typical format for the Salons?.....	3
What are the first steps to implementing Stewardship Salons at my institution?.....	9
What needs to be planned before hosting a Salon?.....	10
We just hosted our first Salon! What should we do next?.....	11
Resources.....	12
Stewardship Salon Checklist.....	13

What are Stewardship Salons and why should we host them?

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

- 1.) Transcend institutional hierarchies and organizational boundaries to build an inclusive and informed community of practice
- 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 Kealiikanakaoleohailani, a Native Hawaiian master teacher, and her learners from Hawai‘i to exchange with 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.

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, cultivating a renewed sense of belonging. 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 USDA Forest Service and NYC Parks 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 US, it means our Salons occur during the warm-weather months between May and September. 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 do not recommend having more than 25 individuals 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, and Indigenous knowledge and other culturally-rooted knowledges. The frequency of Salons depends on interest, capacity, and desired outcomes; when we began hosting Salons we would gather almost monthly.

Salons have featured a 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 other 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. To begin, the group's *community agreements* or *ground rules* are reviewed, with opportunity for new additions as the currently convening group sees fit. This *community agreement* sets an important foundation for how the meeting will operate as well as guiding expectations for participation to help cultivate trust and understanding.

OUR CURRENT GROUND RULES

ALL IN/ BE ATTENTIVE	<i>To ensure an intimate, distraction-free, community-building space. Honor the time together, be off devices and focused in the discussion.</i>
MAKE SPACE & TAKE SPACE	<i>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.</i>
LESSONS LEAVE, STORIES STAY	<i>It can take courage to share personal stories and we acknowledge this. With that, we want to respect participants and keep stories confidential.</i>
IT’S OKAY TO DISAGREE	<i>We all won’t have the same perspective.</i>
ASSUME GOOD INTENT, BUT ACKNOWLEDGE IMPACT	<i>Create space to acknowledge we don't know everything, and that our words can hurt unintentionally.</i>
CHECK YOUR HIERARCHY AT THE DOOR	<i>This is a space where organizational position does not impact your ability to be heard, validated, and to participate.</i>
CHECK YOUR EGOS	<i>Egos can be a barrier to the cooperative goals of the space.</i>

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

- A *land acknowledgement* seeks to recognize the Indigenous stewards of the land where the event takes place and provoke thought about what 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.



Image: Kuahu built from prompt– Please bring a plant, product, or object that symbolizes the harvest season in NYC. Some objects include apples, pumpkins, pencils, etc. Photo by Lindsay Campbell.

See [Resources](#) below for more information on both of these practices.

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. In addition to names and organizations (and pronouns, if they'd like), participants are invited to respond to an *opening prompt*. Introductions and sharings set the tone for creating a brave space and is an important step in intimacy and trust building amongst participants. Some example *opening prompts* from past salons include:

- *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?*



Image: Intersecting tree roots on the forest floor, anchoring trees into place. A creative commons image.

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 below.

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. Example of past salon activities include:

- *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, & invasive species*



Image: Milkweed in bloom. A creative commons image.

During the *Closing Circle Discussion*, Salon organizers and the host encourage participants to reflect and share any resonating themes or feelings, key takeaways, and/or calls to action. These ending prompts sometimes are more focused on the content of the Salon and other times are intentionally general. For example:

- *How to 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?*



Image: A spotted salamander resting on leaf litter. A creative commons image.

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 at my institution?

Some of the first steps to implementing Stewardship Salons include:

- ***Find a way to frame this experience to get buy-in from your organization*** or find a partner that can help support the organizational work. Not all organizations' leadership initially see value in creating these co-learning, community spaces. In our experience, we have had success through framing the Salons as a professional development opportunity for natural resource practitioners that builds cultural competency and the skills necessary for effectively and inclusively 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.
- ***Scope out external natural resource stewardship organizations, community groups, cultural practitioners, etc. to collaborate with*** – especially those that approach stewardship from other lenses (e.g. neighborhood beautification, spiritual practices, Indigenous ways of knowing), interest points, and worldviews, and begin to build relationships with them. Also, don't neglect to look inward at your organization to individuals that may have perspectives to offer that typically are not heard 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.
- ***Form a planning committee and begin thinking about potential topics***, speakers (both internal and external to your organization), and locations Stewardship Salons could be held at.

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

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, and/or sending out post-Salon evaluations to better understand attendees' experiences.

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.

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 the course of these meetings it is also necessary to ensure that your planning is inclusive. Think 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, level of accessibility, 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) & *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, and/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.

Resources:

[NYC Stewardship Salon Summary Table](#): hosts, locations, topic and approaches, and related resources 2017–2024.

Publications:

Campbell, Lindsay K.; Auyeung, Novem; Savant, Neha G.; McClain, Nichole; Piland, Natalia C.; Svendsen, Erika. 2023. Transforming Urban Natural Resources Management Through Co-Learning: Sharing Many Ways of Knowing and Biocultural Stewardship Approaches. Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=4655200> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4655200>

Campbell, Lindsay K.; McMillen, Heather; Svendsen, Erika; Rodbell, Phillip. 2021. Best Practices for Hearing All Voices in Our Urban Forests *City Trees: Journal of the Society of Municipal Arborists*. 2021. 24–27. <https://www.fs.usda.gov/research/treesearch/63307>

McMillen, Heather L.; Campbell, Lindsay K.; Svendsen, Erika S.; Kealiikanakaoleohaililani, Kekuhi; Francisco, Kainana S.; Giardina, Christian P. 2020. Biocultural stewardship, Indigenous and local ecological knowledge, and the urban crucible. *Ecology and Society*. 25(2): 9. <https://www.fs.usda.gov/research/treesearch/59971>

Information on land acknowledgements:

<https://nativegov.org/news/beyond-land-acknowledgment-guide/>
<https://nativegov.org/news/a-guide-to-indigenous-land-acknowledgment/>
<https://www.npr.org/2023/03/15/1160204144/indigenous-land-acknowledgments>
<https://americanindian.si.edu/nk360/informational/land-acknowledgment>

Information on kuahu:

Kekuhi Kealiikanakaoleohaililani, Aimee Y. Sato, Christian P. Giardina, Creighton M. Litton, Smrity Ramavarapu, Leslie Hutchins, Evelyn H. Wight, Michelle Clark, Susan Cordell, Kainana S. Francisco, Heather McMillen, Pua‘ala Pascua and Darcy Yogi. 2021. Increasing conservation capacity by embracing ritual: Kuahu as a portal to the sacred. *Pacific Conservation Biology* 27, pp. 327–336. <https://www.publish.csiro.au/pc/pdf/PC20010>

Information on Brave Spaces:

Arao, Brian and Clemens, Kristi. 2013. From Safe Spaces to Brave Spaces: a new way to frame dialogue around diversity and social justice. In Landreman, L. (Ed.), *The Art of Effective Facilitation: Reflections from Social Justice Educators*, pp. 135–150. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing.

Similar Practices:

*[Climate Circles](#) *[Climate Cafes](#) *[The UnInstitute](#)

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?
- Creation of a Documentation & 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 accessibility, location, etc.
 - Draft Salon Agenda
 - Brief summary of Salon
 - Location
 - Activity Details
 - Level of accessibility
 - 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 acknowledgement 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