



Community Conversations – Understanding the Public’s Priorities for Coastal Restoration in Mississippi

The public has been and will continue to be our biggest ally in the recovery from this disaster.

Mississippi Governor Phil Bryant, 2012

Using the best available science and meaningful public participation will help ensure the vision and values of the people of Mississippi are met, and an integrated coastal restoration plan is created.

Gulf Restoration Network, 2014

Background

Mississippi’s coastal landscape - the natural resources, habitats, and species that live here are all critical pieces of the interconnected system that creates our local, regional, and Gulf-wide communities. As a result of the *Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill* (DWH), Mississippi has an unprecedented opportunity to not only restore and foster our coastal landscape, but also to advance these natural resources, habitats and species to levels of health and sustainability for future generations of the Mississippi Gulf Coast. The public and their priorities are key features in understanding how we truly “*Make Mississippi Whole*”.

In March 2014, the Gulf Environmental Benefit Fund awarded \$3.6 million dollars to the State of Mississippi for the Mississippi Coastal Restoration Plan. This multi-phase, three-year project will develop a comprehensive plan for restoring and conserving Mississippi’s coastal natural resources under the Gulf Environmental Benefit Fund. As an initial part of the planning process and as next steps in Mississippi’s continued public engagement strategy, Mississippi held a series of Community Conversations – one in each of the coastal counties (Hancock – Bay St. Louis; Harrison – Gulfport; Jackson – Ocean Springs). A number of non-governmental organizations, community organizations and state and federal agencies assisted in facilitating small group discussions where community members were able to voice individual values, ideal characteristics, and visions for their communities. Participants were also able to identify and prioritize restoration targets and activities or actions associated with those targets. There were over 200 participants, representing 125 organizations, across the three coastal county locations. The following report outlines the outcomes of the Community Conversations. This foundational community information will help to complement the scientific data being collected for the Mississippi Comprehensive Ecosystem Restoration Tool (MCERT). These priorities will in turn be used to help guide the writing and development of the Mississippi Coastal Restoration Plan.

Within each Community Conversation, small break out groups tackled various questions that created discussions around individual and organizational values, characteristics, and visions. Six questions were asked of each participant in the Community Conversation. Please see Appendix A for the worksheet articulating the six questions, and the table which outlined the priorities in a spreadsheet format for questions four, five and six. The questions were:



1. Which values do you see as the most helpful for guiding restoration decisions?
2. As a group (i.e., the table) identify 1-3 characteristics that describe your ideal Mississippi Coast?
3. What do you want to see along Mississippi's Coast in 5 years? 50 years?
4. Look at the left "Restoration Targets" column. Identify which Targets are priorities for the table by placing a check in the Top Restoration Priorities column (no more than 3 per person). How do the values identified from the question one tie in to these priority targets?
5. Move across the Spreadsheet from left-to-right. Identify which "Restoration Actions/Activities" are priorities for the targets identified in question four. Which do you feel will achieve the greatest amount of good in your community and why?
6. Identify the THREE most important "Restoration Actions/Activities" and circle them on the Priorities Spreadsheet.

Values, Characteristics, and Visions

Values that Guide Restoration Decisions

Communities, organizations, and individuals thoughts and actions are affected by a wide range of social influences. More often than not those are connected to values. Values are intrinsic to communities and individuals representing a strong guiding force that shapes attitudes and behaviors. Values are also shown to influence our ecological footprints (i.e., what we would like to see in the environment around us?).

In the Community Conversations, question one asked participants to share values that they felt were most helpful for guiding restoration decisions. Similar themes quickly emerged across all three Community Conversations: primarily water quality, protection and preservation of natural resources, community heritage and culture, and sustaining our coast with restoration based on best available science. When collecting data in the form of community comments, a great tool in visual representation of priorities values is a word cloud. A word cloud displays common words with different sized font depending on how often the word is repeated. The word values that are repeated most often are represented with larger fonts (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Word cloud representing all Community Conversations and discussions of values (question one) of Mississippi residents as it pertains to coastal restoration.

The importance of water quality to the Mississippi Gulf Coast was a common value voiced across all three coastal counties. Values like clean water, healthy watersheds, safe seafood, sewer



water management, and stormwater enhancement all tie to better water quality. Given the rich history of the Mississippi Gulf Coast it was no surprise to hear that the importance of the local culture, history, and heritage were also identified as leading values to coast communities. Participants felt strongly about the need to preserve our coastal heritage, our culture, and our way of life for future generations. Restoration, protection and conservation of natural resources using best available science and sustainable practices were other values voiced across the coast. Investing in sound science, investing in understanding how our systems work, and how to maintain them is critical for the sustainability of the Mississippi Gulf Coast. By starting with water quality and investing in sustainable ecological restoration, we contribute to so many facets of the coast such as driving economic development which, in turn, aids business and job growth; enhancing vibrant marine life for fishing, crabbing, oystering and shrimping for commercial, recreational and tourism opportunities; and protecting lands and connected ecosystems that provide opportunities for land recreation (walking trails, parks and greenways) as well as recreation on the water including swimming, boating, and kayaking.

Characteristics that describe your ideal Mississippi Coast now and in the future

The responses to questions two and three were aimed to understand what the ideal Mississippi Gulf Coast looks like today, and in the future, respectively. Many of the values identified in question one carried over as characteristics in questions two and three. The importance of water quality translated into clean water, sustainable fisheries, and improved habitat as characteristics of an ideal Mississippi Coast. Long term visions included increased eco-tourism and access to natural resources as a result of improved water quality as well as restoration and preservation of habitat and natural resources. The significance of education in achieving an ideal Mississippi Coast was also emphasized. Education, not only of future generations (i.e., K-12 education and outreach programs) but also of coastal residents, is imperative to truly translate how sustainable ecosystems create sustainable livelihoods, and a more resilient coast. Coast residents feel strongly that long term success of coastal restoration is dependent on educating the public on the importance of conservation as well as teaching conservation and restoration habits to future generations.

Figure 2 is a word cloud depicting all responses for questions one, two and three across the three coastal counties. Tangible common values, characteristics, and visions quickly emerge across all three coastal counties: water quality, restoration, protection, sustainability, and education stand out. Water quality emerged as the most common value and characteristic from all of the answers to the questions on what Mississippi resident's value about Mississippi, and what ideally the Mississippi Gulf Coast looks like in the future. Preserving our environment, preserving our heritage and culture, and ensuring that we leave the Mississippi Gulf Coast a better place for our future generations were also common characteristics and visions for how we need to "Make Mississippi Whole". Investments in education and outreach will be required to sustain our Gulf for future generations.

These initial questions in the Community Conversations helped construct the path forward for how we can achieve the values identified. The conversations then turned to identifying restoration targets to achieve those values. By communities helping to identify restoration targets and the priority actions associated with those targets, they help steer Mississippi restoration, and provide impetus to improving, holistically, the Gulf of Mexico ecosystem.



Restoration Targets and Actions

Upon completion of the values assessment, the conversations moved on to questions four, five, and six that required each table to identify three priority restoration targets (see attached supplement in Appendix A for the restoration table, and raw data associated with questions four, five, and six) and then the priority actions or activities associated with those restoration targets. These targets represent a mixture of actionable items (i.e., build certain habitat, or improve a certain aspect of the environment). We then asked the groups: if these were your priority targets for restoration, how would you set about achieving them? What do we need to do to reach those priority targets? Tables 1, 2 and 3 summarize these results for each county. All of the data associated with the responses can be found in the Appendix A.

Table 1. Responses from Community Conversations identifying restoration targets for **Hancock County** along the Mississippi Gulf Coast, and the associated actions and activities to achieve those restoration targets.

<i>Bay St. Louis – Hancock County</i>			
Priority Restoration Targets	Actions to Reach Priority Targets		
1. Water Quality	Restoration, Enhancement, Creation	Planning and Design	Maintenance and Management
2. Coastal Bay and Estuaries + Stormwater/Wastewater	Maintenance and Management + Planning and Design	Restoration, Enhancement, Creation	Data Collection and Monitoring
3. Coastal Wetlands	Maintenance and Management	Restoration, Enhancement, Creation	Planning and Design + Education and Outreach

Table 2. Responses from Community Conversations identifying restoration targets for **Harrison County** along the Mississippi Gulf Coast, and the associated actions and activities to achieve those restoration targets.

<i>Gulfport – Harrison County</i>			
Priority Restoration Targets	Actions to Reach Priority Targets		
1. Coastal Wetlands + Coastal Resilience + Water Quality	Restoration, Enhancement, Creation	Acquisition and Conservation	Maintenance and Management + Planning and Design
2. Coastal Bays and Estuaries	Restoration, Enhancement, Creation	Maintenance and Management	Acquisition and Conservation
3. Beach, Dune, and Barrier Island	Restoration, Enhancement, Creation	Maintenance and Management	Education and Outreach



Table 3. Responses from Community Conversations identifying restoration targets for **Jackson County** along the Mississippi Gulf Coast, and the associated actions and activities to achieve those restoration targets.

<i>Ocean Springs – Jackson County</i>			
Priority Restoration Targets	Actions to Reach Priority Targets		
1. Water Quality	Data Collection and Monitoring	Maintenance and Management	Education and Outreach
2. Coastal Wetlands	Restoration, Enhancement, Creation	Maintenance and Management	Acquisition and Conservation
3. Beach, Dune, and Barrier Island	Restoration, Enhancement, Creation	Maintenance and Management	Planning and Design

All of the priority restoration targets, as well as the actions identified to reach those priority targets during the community discussions, will be incorporated into the conceptual model for the MCERT. The model will locate and prioritize areas across the coastal landscape that are in need of restoration and conservation by utilizing a suite of modeling applications and currently available environmental and socio-economic data for the Mississippi Gulf Coast. Those prioritized areas will be validated and verified against Tables 1, 2, and 3 to see if the modelling exercise matched with public priorities. The Mississippi Coastal Restoration Plan will then identify the appropriate restoration or conservation actions to address the needs that were identified through public engagement and verified through modeling techniques.

Conclusions

Mississippi is committed to ensuring there is a transparent two-way public engagement process which will continue to energize and coordinate a strong and divergent body of passionate stakeholders across the Mississippi coastal landscape. The Community Conversations are one step in taking the voices of Mississippi residents and joining them into a chorus of action. The Community Conversations have pointed to some key characteristics, values, as well as restoration priorities for our Mississippi Gulf Coast communities. These common values are underpinned by the need to ensure that whatever we do, it must be sustainable to benefit future generations. The common themes that emerged included:

1. *Water Quality Restoration and Enhancement.* Water quality is the number one value identified by the Community Conversations and is a characteristic that is needed today as well as in the future. Restoration should focus on improving and enhancing water quality. By improving water quality, you can have a dramatic effect within the ecosystem and increase resilience, living resource dynamics, and overall Gulf health.
2. *Preserve and Restore the Gulf Environment.* We need to take care of our environment by protecting lands and sensitive areas and acquiring lands that we can restore that will aid



wildlife and fish species simultaneously. Coastal wetlands and coastal bays and estuaries are important habitats for restoration and preservation through various restoration and management techniques (i.e., use of beneficial use sediments, land acquisition, and water quality improvement).

3. *Sustainable Ecological Restoration.* We need to ensure that we invest in sustaining our ecological restoration efforts on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. By investing in science, monitoring and correct restoration techniques, we will ensure sustainability of vital ecosystems. Sustainability of coastal ecological health is intimately tied with economic development. Sustaining and protecting our environment will create thriving seafood industries, will create more jobs, enhance tourism and eco-tourism activities, and lead to economic growth. Ensuring sustainable ecological recovery will result in sustained economic growth.

Special Thanks

The resiliency and dogged determination of Mississippi's coastal residents is well known and documented. Their energetic participation in the Community Conversations bears testament to these qualities. Overwhelming attendance in the conversations produced a platform of thoughtful and visionary comments which will underpin restoration efforts across coming decades. We extend our special thanks to those who so willingly gave their time and their thoughts to this effort.

Acknowledgements

Furthermore, the results of these conversations would not have been possible without the help of many volunteers from multiple agencies and organizations. These volunteers steered tough conversations around important and emotional topics of coastal restoration. The results speak for themselves. They all were a tremendous asset to this entire effort and their value is beyond measure. We would personally like to thank the following organizations for their support and time to ensure we had a successful series of Community Conversations:

Mississippi Environment Focus Group
Gulf Restoration Network
Land Trust for the Mississippi Coastal Plain
Wildlife Mississippi
National Wildlife Federation
Audubon Society
Ocean Conservancy
The Corps Network
Partnership for Gulf Coast Land
Conservation

USM Gulf Coast Research Lab
BMI Environmental Services, LLC
Mississippi Department of Marine Resources
US Fish and Wildlife Service
NOAA
Department of Interior
National Fish and Wildlife Foundation
RESTORE Council
Mississippi Coalition for Vietnamese-American
Fisher Folks and Families

Report compiled by the Mississippi Department of Environmental Quality
October, 2014

Appendix A

Facilitator Name: _____

Note Taker Name: _____

Community Conversations: National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF)

BREAKOUT GUIDE

TIME: 10 minutes

GOAL: Complete a Visioning Exercise to build a common foundation and identify shared values at each table.

QUESTION 1: Which values do you see as the most helpful for guiding restoration decisions?

Examples: *Sense of community, culture, history, an area of expertise such as engineering, fishing or academia.*

QUESTION 2: As a table, identify 1-3 characteristics that describe your ideal Mississippi Coast.

Examples: *Preserving the coast for future generations; swimming, fishing, boating, economic success, access to the gulf, storm protection.*

QUESTION 3: What do you want to see along Mississippi's Coast in 5 years? 50 years?

Examples: *Cleaner water, better recreational fishing, more fishermen/shrimpers, more recreation areas, robust tourism, more local jobs, improved quality of life.*

TIME: 5 minutes

GOAL: Using the Priorities Spreadsheet, identify the Top Restoration Priorities at each table.

QUESTION 4: Look at the left “Restoration Targets” column. Identify which Targets are priorities for the table by placing a check in the Top Restoration Priorities column (no more than 3 per person). How do the values identified from the first exercise tie in to these priority targets?

Facilitators: There are many issues, opportunities and challenges that exist when it comes to restoring Mississippi’s coastal resources from the oil disaster. What are the priorities that you will focus on? Do they align with the values and vision already discussed?

TIME: 10 minutes

GOAL: Using the Priorities Spreadsheet, identify priority Restoration Actions/Activities at each table.

QUESTION 5: Move across the Spreadsheet from left-to-right. Identify which “Restoration Actions/Activities” are priorities for the targets identified in Question 4. Which do you feel will achieve the greatest amount of good in your community and why?

Facilitators: Avoid guiding the conversation one way or another; instead, keep the discussion focused on types of restoration that the table wants to support. Do not debate individual projects!

TIME: 5 minutes

GOAL: Using the Priorities Spreadsheet, identify the table’s top Restoration Actions/Activities that should be prioritized for restoration.

QUESTION 6: Identify the THREE most important “Restoration Actions/Activities” and circle them on the Priorities Spreadsheet.

Facilitators: This will take negotiation, but the key is consensus: find shared priorities to highlight for decision-makers. If there are strong divides, the table should discuss why they exist.

COMMUNITY CONVERSATION PRIORITIES

Restoration Targets	Restoration Action or Activity							
	Top Restoration Priorities	Acquisition and Conservation	Planning and Design	Education and Outreach	Restoration, Enhancement and Creation	Data Collection and Monitoring	Maintenance and Management	Other
Beach, Dune and Barrier Islands								
Coastal Wetlands								
Forests								
Coastal Bays and Estuaries								
Oysters								
Sea Turtles								
Marine Mammals								
Wildlife and Birds								
Fish and Shellfish								
Public Access/Recreational Use *								
Coastal Resilience								
Water Quality								
Stormwater/Wastewater *								
Other								

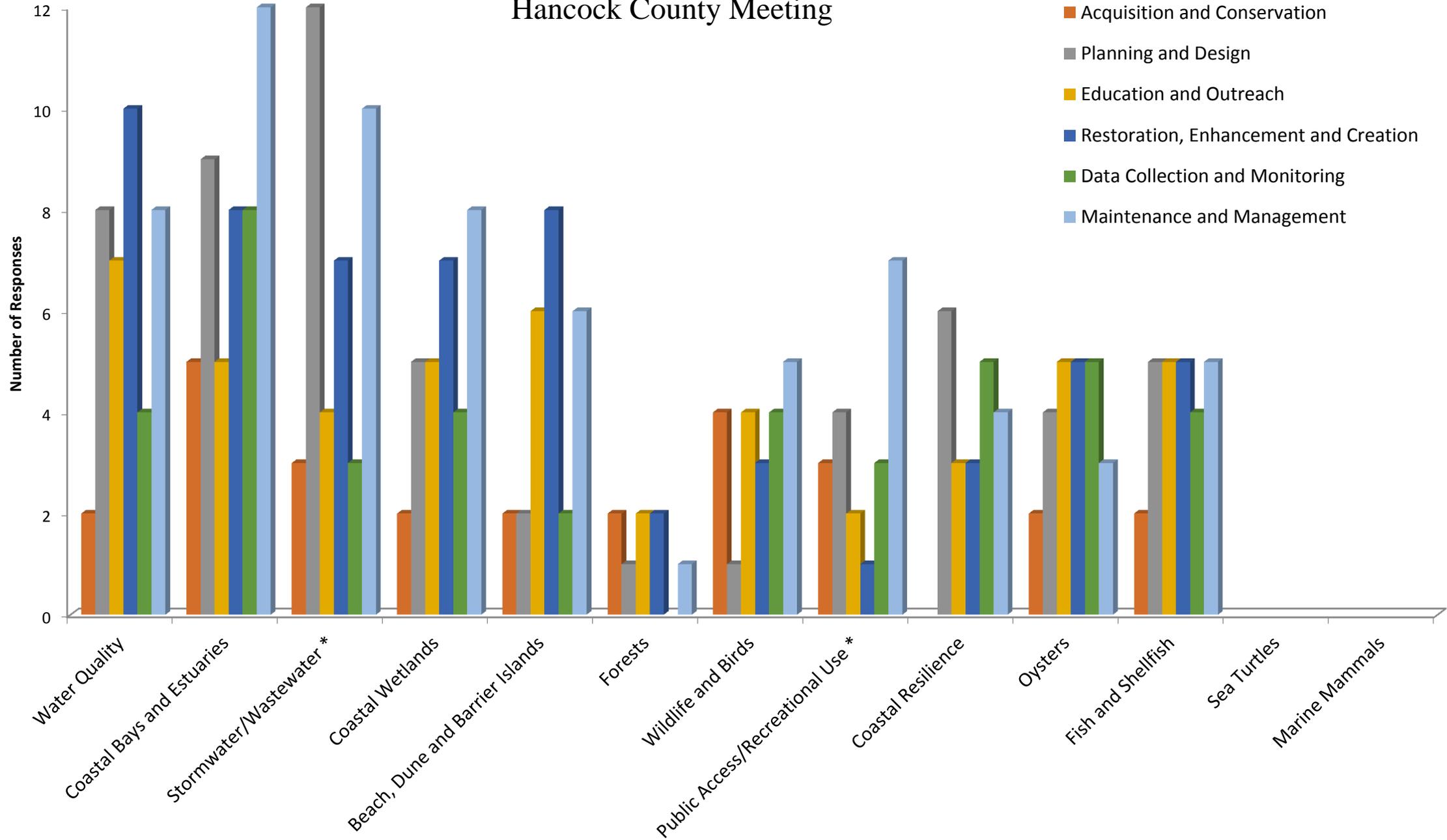
* NFWF's funding priority is to restore natural resources that were damaged by the oil spill; these categories provide complementary benefits and/or enhancements to this primary goal.

Summary of Questions 4, 5 & 6 - Bay St Louis - Hancock County Meeting

	Restoration Action or Activity						
Restoration Targets	Top Restoration Priorities	Acquisition and Conservation	Planning and Design	Education and Outreach	Restoration, Enhancement and Creation	Data Collection and Monitoring	Maintenance and Management
Water Quality	7	2	8	7	10	4	8
Coastal Bays and Estuaries	6	5	9	5	8	8	12
Stormwater/Wastewater *	6	3	12	4	7	3	10
Coastal Wetlands	5	2	5	5	7	4	8
Beach, Dune and Barrier Islands	3	2	2	6	8	2	6
Forests	2	2	1	2	2		1
Wildlife and Birds	2	4	1	4	3	4	5
Public Access/Recreational Use *	2	3	4	2	1	3	7
Coastal Resilience	2		6	3	3	5	4
Oysters	1	2	4	5	5	5	3
Fish and Shellfish	1	2	5	5	5	4	5
Sea Turtles							
Marine Mammals							
Other							

* NFWF's funding priority is to restore natural resources that were damaged by the oil spill; these categories provide complementary benefits and/or enhancements to this primary goal.

Hancock County Meeting

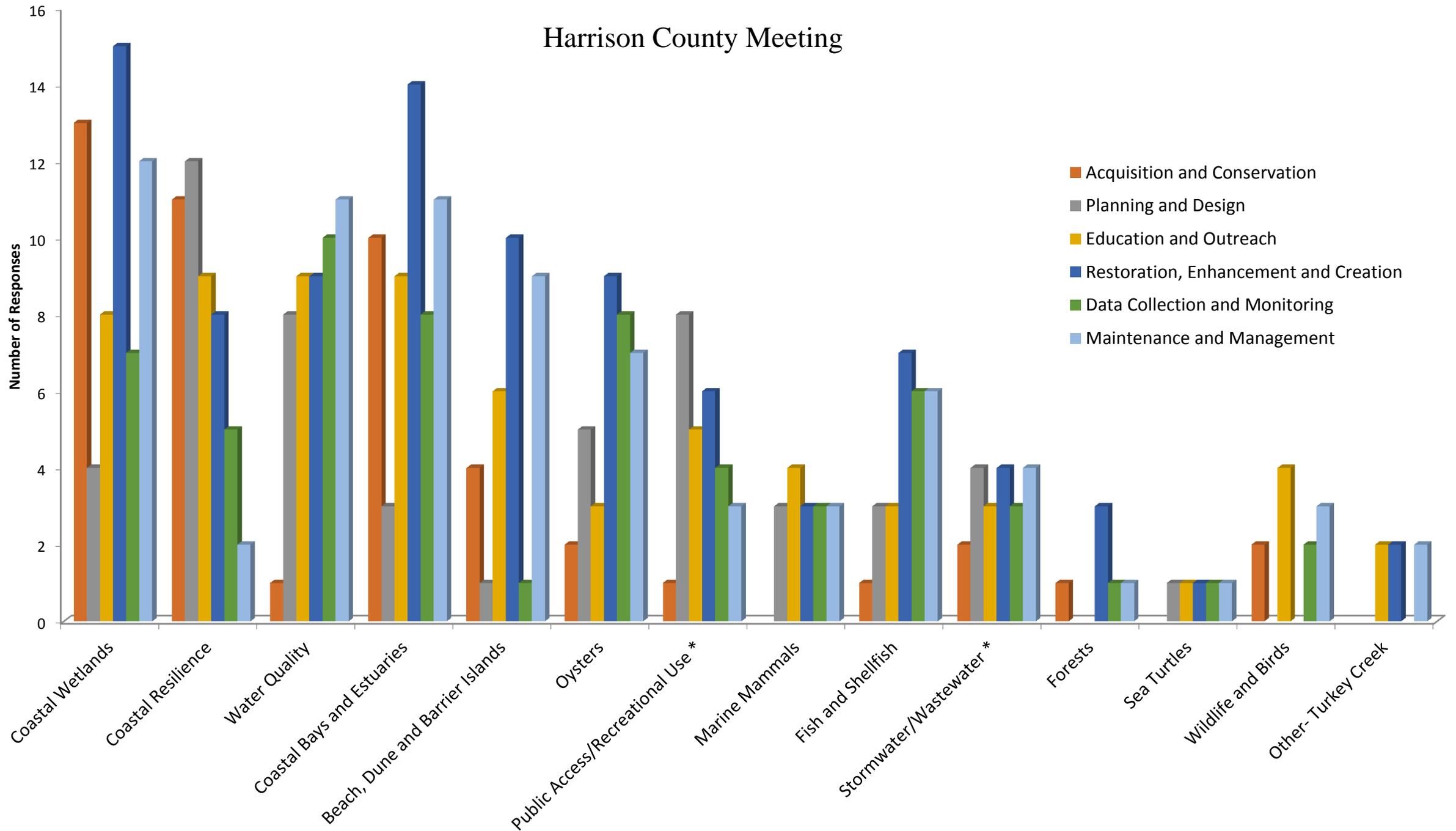


Summary of Questions 4, 5 & 6 - Gulfport - Harrison County Meeting

	Restoration Action or Activity						
Restoration Targets	Top Restoration Priorities	Acquisition and Conservation	Planning and Design	Education and Outreach	Restoration, Enhancement and Creation	Data Collection and Monitoring	Maintenance and Management
Coastal Wetlands	6	13	4	8	15	7	12
Coastal Resilience	6	11	12	9	8	5	2
Water Quality	6	1	8	9	9	10	11
Coastal Bays and Estuaries	5	10	3	9	14	8	11
Beach, Dune and Barrier Islands	4	4	1	6	10	1	9
Oysters	3	2	5	3	9	8	7
Public Access/Recreational Use *	3	1	8	5	6	4	3
Marine Mammals	2		3	4	3	3	3
Fish and Shellfish	2	1	3	3	7	6	6
Stormwater/Wastewater *	2	2	4	3	4	3	4
Forests	1	1			3	1	1
Sea Turtles	1		1	1	1	1	1
Wildlife and Birds	1	2		4		2	3
Other- Turkey Creek				2	2		2

* NFWF's funding priority is to restore natural resources that were damaged by the oil spill; these categories provide complementary benefits and/or enhancements to this primary goal.

Harrison County Meeting



Summary of Questions 4, 5 & 6 - Ocean Springs - Jackson County Meeting

	Restoration Action or Activity						
Restoration Targets	Top Restoration Priorities	Acquisition and Conservation	Planning and Design	Education and Outreach	Restoration, Enhancement and Creation	Data Collection and Monitoring	Maintenance and Management
Water Quality	11		15	16	8	25	16
Coastal Wetlands	9	18	11	9	27	13	23
Beach, Dune and Barrier Islands	7	8	14	5	20	8	19
Coastal Bays and Estuaries	6	12	11	15	22	12	15
Oysters	4		1	3	5	5	3
Coastal Resilience	3		9	6	5	4	6
Wildlife and Birds	2	1		1		1	
Fish and Shellfish	2		2	2	2	3	4
Public Access/Recreational Use *	2	2	13	3	7		11
Forests	1	1			2	2	
Stormwater/Wastewater *	1	1	3	1	3	3	4
Sea Turtles							
Marine Mammals							
Other							

* NFWF's funding priority is to restore natural resources that were damaged by the oil spill; these categories provide complementary benefits and/or enhancements to this primary goal.

Jackson County Meeting

