

# Sapelo Island National Estuarine Research Reserve

## Community Engagement Best Practices for Research Applicants

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### About the Community

If the relevance of a project to the local community is unclear, it's important to reconsider how the research is framed or why this location was chosen. Work conducted here should reflect both scientific value and a connection to place. Effective science communication plays a key role in fostering public understanding and support for research on public lands like the Reserve. Demonstrating how research connects to real-world applications can help sustain interest and funding over time.

This is particularly important because Sapelo Island is home to the Hogg Hummock community, one of the last remaining Gullah Geechee communities in Georgia. The [Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor](#) recognizes this region for its deep cultural, historical, and ecological knowledge rooted in West African traditions and coastal lifeways.

Community members on Sapelo Island have longstanding relationships with the land and water, including traditional ecological knowledge related to fishing, farming, foraging, and land stewardship.

Researchers should approach this work with an understanding that:

- This is a living community, not just a study site
- Knowledge shared is often cultural, generational, and therefore considered sensitive
- There is an unfortunate history of outside researchers extracting knowledge without reciprocity, which has understandably led to tensions and conflict between the research community and the descendants

### Guiding Principles

#### **1. Build Relationships First**

Engagement should begin with listening, not asking. Whenever possible:

- Work through SINERR staff for introductions
- Attend community events or gatherings (when appropriate)
- Be transparent about your project goals and limitations

#### **2. Avoid “Extractive Science”**

“Extractive science” occurs when researchers collect data, stories, or knowledge without meaningful return or benefit.

To avoid this:

- Do not approach community members solely to gather information
- Ensure there is **clear value for participants**, not just the research goals
- Always ask permission before documenting or sharing knowledge
- Respect that some knowledge may not be appropriate to share or that you may not be the appropriate person to be dictating a story
- Treat local knowledge as equal to scientific knowledge. Most elders of the community have lived the research you are gathering and their input should be treated as valuable additional resources
- Do not use a single ‘source’ as speaking for the entire community. They are individual people with individual perspectives and should be reflective that while they are of this

community, they have different perspectives.

### **3. Use Participatory Approaches**

Whenever feasible, incorporate elements of Participatory Action Research:

- Involve community members in shaping the questions or methods before beginning the research
- Invite participation in fieldwork, interpretation, or discussion
- Community members do not need you to “inform” them. Many have expressed that they want to have conversations, not lectures. While they may not call things by the same name or process as the research community, many of them know more about the island than we can ever hope to understand.

## **Engagement Options**

While not every project has the same resources, timeline, or flexibility, engaging the local community is a fundamental part of being a good scientist. Researchers should be able to clearly articulate why their work matters in the context of the local community. Community engagement is not a checkbox, it is a core component of conducting research at a state-supported site.

You may not get a huge number of participants, but when you are working under the Reserve, you are a reflection of our process and our community efforts. This may be on-island or in McIntosh County depending on the scope of your project. This means that even just hosting it for 2-3 people can make a difference in how research as a whole is perceived. While not every option below may be feasible for every project, please try to select at least 2 engagement strategies for each project. The Collaboration & Training Coordinator at SINERR is always willing to help with the production and customization of these options as long as the request comes in a timely manner.

### **Option 1: Community Talk or Informal Presentation to meet the Community**

- Host a short, accessible talk about your research at a local site (library, SICARS office, ect.)
- Focus on: “What are you studying and why should it matter to Sapelo or McIntosh County residents?”
- Keep it conversational and allow space for dialogue

**Best for:** Any project, especially short-term studies

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### **Option 2: Guided Field Walk or Demonstration**

- Invite community members to join a walk (e.g., fungi survey, marsh sampling)
- Share what you’re observing in real time
- Encourage participants to share their own observations if they wish

**Best for:** Ecology, botany, wildlife, or field-based studies

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### **Option 3: Educational Materials or Resource Sharing**

- Create a simple, visually engaging handout or guide (e.g., “Common Species of Sapelo Island”)
- Provide digital or printed copies for community use
  - Disseminate to the local church secretaries
  - Give copy to keep at Long Tabby Library

**Best for:** Projects with identifiable species or findings

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#### **Option 4: Youth or School Engagement**

- Coordinate with SINERR or local partners to connect with school aged kids on the island
- Offer a short activity, demo, or career talk

**Best for:** Researchers interested in education/outreach

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#### **Option 5: Community-Facing Summary of Results**

- Provide a brief, non-technical summary of your findings
- This can be a flyer, email, short presentation, or poster
- Share what you learned and how it may apply locally

**Best for:** All projects (strongly encouraged)

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#### **Option 6: Collaborative Knowledge Exchange (Advanced)**

- Engage in two-way learning (e.g., scientific + traditional ecological knowledge)
- Only pursue this with **guidance and established trust**
- Ensure proper acknowledgment and consent

**Best for:** Longer-term or returning researchers

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### **What Not to Do**

- Do not cold-approach Hogg Hummock residents requesting interviews or knowledge
  - Do not assume willingness to participate
  - Do not record, photograph, or publish cultural knowledge without explicit permission and ensuring that members have access to the work after publishing
  - Do not frame community knowledge as a “data source”
  - Do not misrepresent a single interaction as speaking for the entire community
  - Do not forget to include community members in your acknowledgements and citations
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### **Planning Your Engagement**

All researchers must coordinate with SINERR staff to:

- Identify appropriate engagement strategies
- Ensure timing aligns with community availability
- Determine whether introductions are appropriate

This should be something that you are thinking about BEFORE you submit a research application. Last minute community outreach is rarely successful.

Successful research on Sapelo Island is built on trust, respect, and reciprocity. Even small, thoughtful efforts toward engagement can contribute to stronger relationships and more meaningful science.