

Engaging non-environmentalists in Ontario

Environmental Defence designed *Project Reconnection* to test a sophisticated method of engaging with so-called *Civic nationals* in strategically important regions of Ontario before the next federal election. This large demographic segment, revealed in recent [research by EcoAnalytics](#), accounts for about one in five Canadian voters. Though not typically engaged in environmental action, and just beyond the reach of NGOs that are, they are highly concerned about climate change.

Project details

Where: Five regions in Ontario where Environmental Defence has policy interests but fewer supporters: York Region, Durham, Oakville, Brampton, and Burlington, with more to come.

When: Launched in winter of 2024, and ongoing

Target audiences: *Civic nationals* in the suburban regions of Ontario. Canadians in this segment, the majority of whom are women, tend not to be engaged in environmental action, but share a strong connection to nature, as well as a high level of concern about climate change and love of community.

Project Reconnection

[Project Reconnection](#) uses local coordinators, local events, door canvassing, newsletters and paid social media ads to connect with new audiences that share values around community and nature. Through activities like hiking and gardening, cooking and clothing swaps, this project brings neighbours together on a journey linking what they hold dear in their communities with engagement in public policy, and the power that they hold in securing the future that they want to see. These journeys aim to measurably increase participants' civic engagement. Hiking and garden guides and in-person events are some of the tools used to connect with people and build mail-lists. Events and guides include some relevant climate-related facts, but the focus of the project is connecting participants to community resources and other citizens and, ultimately, mobilizing environmental voters.

Q&A

Excerpts from interview with Suzanne Apelian, Managing Director of Engagement, Environmental Defence

How is the project going?

Good, we are reaching those outside our traditional audience and now have a wide network of community members attending events and downloading our hiking and gardening guides in each region. In some regions we are now moving to the next step: offering webinars on civic engagement and identifying those ready to be community leaders and to mobilize around issues of interest.

How are you identifying and targeting Civic nationals?

Based on the [EcoA Segmentation research](#) we were able to identify those beyond our base and develop an approach that appeals to the values of Civic nationals especially, based on the profiles developed by the researchers. We hired local coordinators to start conversations at the door-step, at events and online about local issues and shared values of community care and love of nature.

What are you doing with the people you connect with?

Most are not inclined at first to sign petitions or engage politically (which validates our approach and confirms that we are reaching beyond Progressive activists), but they do want to connect with their neighbours and help the community. So we find ways to build trust, facilitate community-building and help participants see how civic engagement can build a better community.

What's next?

Engaging those interested in civic engagement, and eventually, mobilizing the networks we've developed to get out the vote in support of environmental issues in the next provincial and federal elections. We will also begin to weave in resilience to misinformation. Along with building our lists in these regions we are expanding to other regions and working with partners to tweak this model to complement other similarly aligned initiatives that already exist in the community.