Invasive Species Blockbuster Survey Training and Information Exchange 2016 Final Report
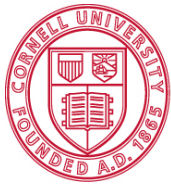
Figure 1: Survey volunteer in Rockland County

Prepared for:
The Lower Hudson Partnership for Regional Invasive Species Management

Ann Marie Palefsky
Interim Executive Director
Cornell Cooperative Extension of Rockland County
10 Patriot Hills Drive
Stony Point, NY 10980
845-429-7085

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Project Overview

Cornell Cooperative Extension Rockland County was awarded funding by the Lower Hudson Partnership for Invasive Species Management (LHPRISM) in 2016 to execute tasks identified in LHPRISM's education and outreach and information exchange goals in their 2016 action plan. This included a project to develop regional trainings and volunteer recruitment for the 2016 Blockbuster survey of invasive species and work to manage the website and social media for the LHPRISM.

Members of the LHPRISM created the Blockbuster survey program in 2015 to enhance understanding of the spatial dimensions of invasive species distribution in the Lower Hudson Valley. The survey consists of volunteer participants recording data on the presence or absence of specific lists of invasive species on 5km x 5km block grids. This program provides invaluable information for the creation of conservation targets and management, particularly pertaining to new introductions and possibly early detection species.

The LH PRISM's goal for the 2016 Blockbuster survey, as laid out in their action plan, was for the survey to fill data gaps and detect new introductions through the identification of target blocks, as this would expand the baseline understanding of the Invasive

Figure 2: Blockbuster surveying training at CCE Rockland County

Species present or absent in the lower Hudson Valley and guide the LHPRISM's approach to conservation, management and the possible elimination of established and emerging invasive species. In order to further this goal, the LHPRISM needed a strategy in place to recruit and train volunteers on a regional level who would be able to generate survey data in a systematic and accurate manner. Cornell Cooperative Extension associations in the Lower Hudson valley region were well poised to develop and carry out effective ways of recruiting and training individuals. This regional group –led by horticulture staff at Cornell Cooperative Extension Rockland County- applied for funding from the LHPRISM to develop and present both a recruitment training and in-depth survey training for volunteers. They were awarded funding in early spring of 2016 and immediately mobilized to begin work on trainings that would start in late spring.

While the horticulture staff at CCE Rockland focused on the Blockbuster survey, the communications coordinator and other staff members at CCE Rockland proposed and received

funding for a project to assist the LHPRISM in improving the effectiveness of its online communications in two main ways: by developing and maintaining its social media presence and by improving the design and usability of its website. The social media work pertained primarily to Facebook and included maintaining and making posts on the LHPRISM Facebook page and managing the social media end of the #UNselfie on Giving Tuesday, a day of giving during which donors to LHPRISM were encouraged to take a "selfie" in which they stated their reasons for supporting the organization.

The website work has been a collaborative process with the LHPRISM from the start. CCE Rockland's communications coordinator Charlie Pane met with the LHPRISM website subcommittee to develop a sense of the organization's goals and hopes for an improved website. He designed a mock-up and shared it with the LHPRISM; its execution is currently underway.

Figure 3: Specimen collection for Blockbuster survey

Blockbuster Survey Training

Four Cornell Cooperative Extension county associations in the lower Hudson region participated in this project, including Ulster, Dutchess, Putnam and Rockland County, the latter three of which are LHPRISM partners and actively participated in the development of the partnership's 2016 action plan. All four associations had access to large cadres of Master Gardener Volunteers and other stakeholders who served both as volunteers and educators to the general public. They also had the ability to increase the public visibility of the BlockBuster survey through concerted and relevant promotion and marketing. This publicity introduced more members of the public to the issue of invasive species and furthered the Lower Hudson PRISM's goal to support and optimize regional conservation through strategic invasive species management.

Deliverables

Cornell Cooperative Extension Rockland County (CCERC) and its partner associations developed educational presentations that addressed the need for well-trained volunteers. This included an introductory presentation for potential volunteers and an in-depth training for those who had signed up to participate in the survey. The introductory presentation provided potential volunteers with an overview of the project and general information on the goals of the program, species identification, surveying methods and expected time commitment. The in-depth volunteer training covered safety precautions, general plant identification characteristics, species identification, use of smart phone technology for mapping, surveying field protocol, collecting digital images and other relevant information. The training covered a list of 27

invasive plants determined a cause for concern by a LHPRISM subcommittee. CCERC's horticulture community educator Anne Christian-Reuter worked with CCE Putnam County's horticulture resource educator Jennifer Stengle to create a printed, laminated identification book to be distributed to all training participants, which identified the most common identification characteristics of all 27 plants and common look-alike species.

In the late spring of 2016, each county horticulture educator provided the introductory presentation twice to interested participants. This included scheduling the presentation at previously scheduled events such as garden club meetings and Master Gardener Volunteer gatherings. These introductory presentations were also open to the public to attend and did not require registration. Participants learned about the LHPRISM and the importance of studying and surveying invasive species in the Lower Hudson region. A map of the block grids gave them the opportunity to consider areas where they might survey; many participants signed up to be volunteers after these presentations.

During the month of July, CCE horticulture educators presented two in-depth trainings for volunteers in Dutchess, Putnam, Rockland and Ulster counties, most of which were held at the Cornell Cooperative Extension offices. Linda Rohleder –the LHPRISM coordinator- also arranged and taught a training in Orange County for local volunteers interested in surveying. Trainings were scheduled during times of day to accommodate the schedules of volunteers in each county and were open to anyone in the region to attend. By the end of the training, volunteers were expected to know how to identify and survey for all 27 species on the list. This training presentation is now available on the LHPRISM website for public use.

In order to ensure that volunteers could identify these species in the field, Cornell Cooperative Extension Rockland County employee Anne Christian-Reuter worked with fellow CCE staff, Rockland Conservation Corps interns, Master Gardener Volunteers and the LHPRISM coordinator Linda Rohleder to create and organize an invasive species living library for use during the trainings. Anne also consulted with Jonathan Rosenthal and Radka Wildova of the Ecological Research Institute and Linda Rohleder on developing the survey protocol. This included a field test of the survey protocol at Schunemunk Mountain State Park just prior to the trainings, which allowed Cornell Cooperative Extension staff to accurately explain the process to volunteers.

Figure 4: Blockbuster survey training in Ulster County

Through these presentations and trainings and through concerted efforts to promote the program via print and electronic media, the associations also addressed the need to develop a strong volunteer base.

The original goal was to recruit five, committed volunteers in each of the four counties to participate in the BlockBuster survey program. By the end of 2016, these expertly-trained volunteers were to have surveyed a minimum of 20 blocks in Rockland, Dutchess, Putnam and Ulster Counties. These goals were well surpassed, as 114 people volunteered to survey, compared to 20 volunteers in 2015. Additionally, well over 20 blocks were surveyed, with at least 47 completed by the time of this report.

Number of surveyed* block grids per county in 2015 and 2016

County	2015	2016
Bronx	3	1
Dutchess	8	29
Putnam	2	16
Orange	3	8
Rockland	3	14
Ulster	1	12
Westchester	3	6

*Note: Includes partially completed blocks for which only some data was submitted.

Number of total volunteers, block grids assigned and block grids completed in 2015 and 2016

	2015	2016
Total volunteers	20	114
Total block grids assigned	39	104
Total block grids completed	23	47

Social media and website usability management

CCERC's communication coordinator Charlie Pane collaborated with the LHPRISM coordinator Linda Rohleder and other LHPRISM members to manage social media and website usability. In addition to maintaining the Facebook page, making posts, and managing the social media end of the #GivingTuesday and

Figure 4: Simonelli group at Bear Mountain, posted on the LHPRISM Facebook page

#UNselfie campaign, Charlie focused on the web-development aspects of the project scope. In fall 2016, Charlie met with the website sub-committee and worked to compile a wish-list of design aspects for the LHPRISM.org website, created a mock-up, and presented the design target to the LHPRISM Partners at the November 17th meeting. From there, he began research

on what resources were available in the Drupal community that could achieve the design concept. Charlie is continuing to work on implementing the website features into 2017.
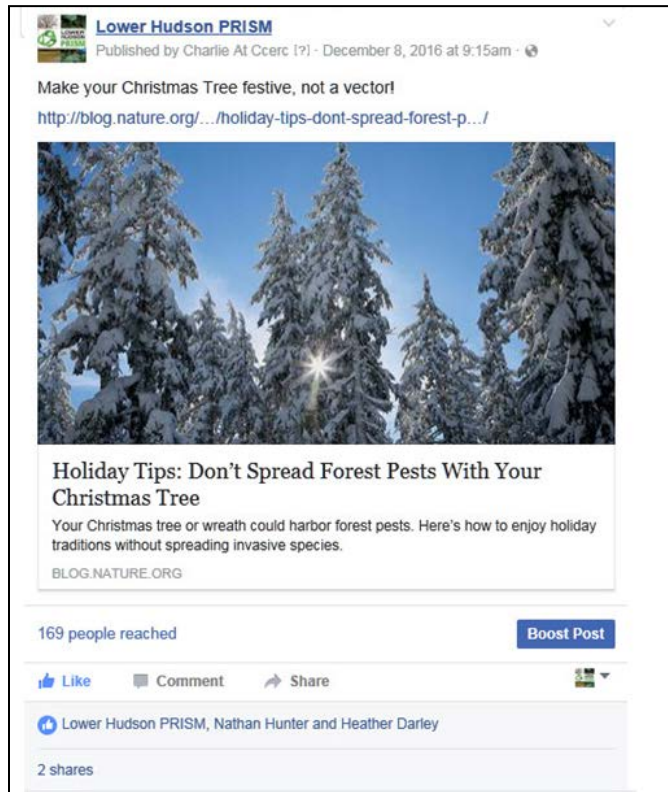

The Facebook campaign included posts from LHPRISM partners as well as relevant material Charlie shared that he encountered on other organizations' pages, such as Long Island Invasive Species Management Area (LIISMA) and Capital/Mohawk (CapMo) Region PRISM. Part of the campaign was dedicated to increasing awareness of LHPRISM's #GivingTuesday and #UNselfie fundraising efforts.

The second major focus of this grant was to improve the usability and aesthetic of the LHPRISM.org website. After reviewing comparable organizations' websites (such as the other PRISMs), the sub-committee created a list of design aspects that would best suit the needs and goals of the partnership, and from that Charlie created

Figure 5: Example of LHPRISM Facebook post

a mock-up of the design target. With some coding alterations, the Andromeda theme and the Flex-slider module are two key components of making the 'wish-list' website a reality. The mock-up of the website can be found in the "Deliverables" section of the report.

Deliverables

The LHPRISM Website Mock-up is pictured below, including notes on the updated website's features such as improving the navigation of the site and image rotations.
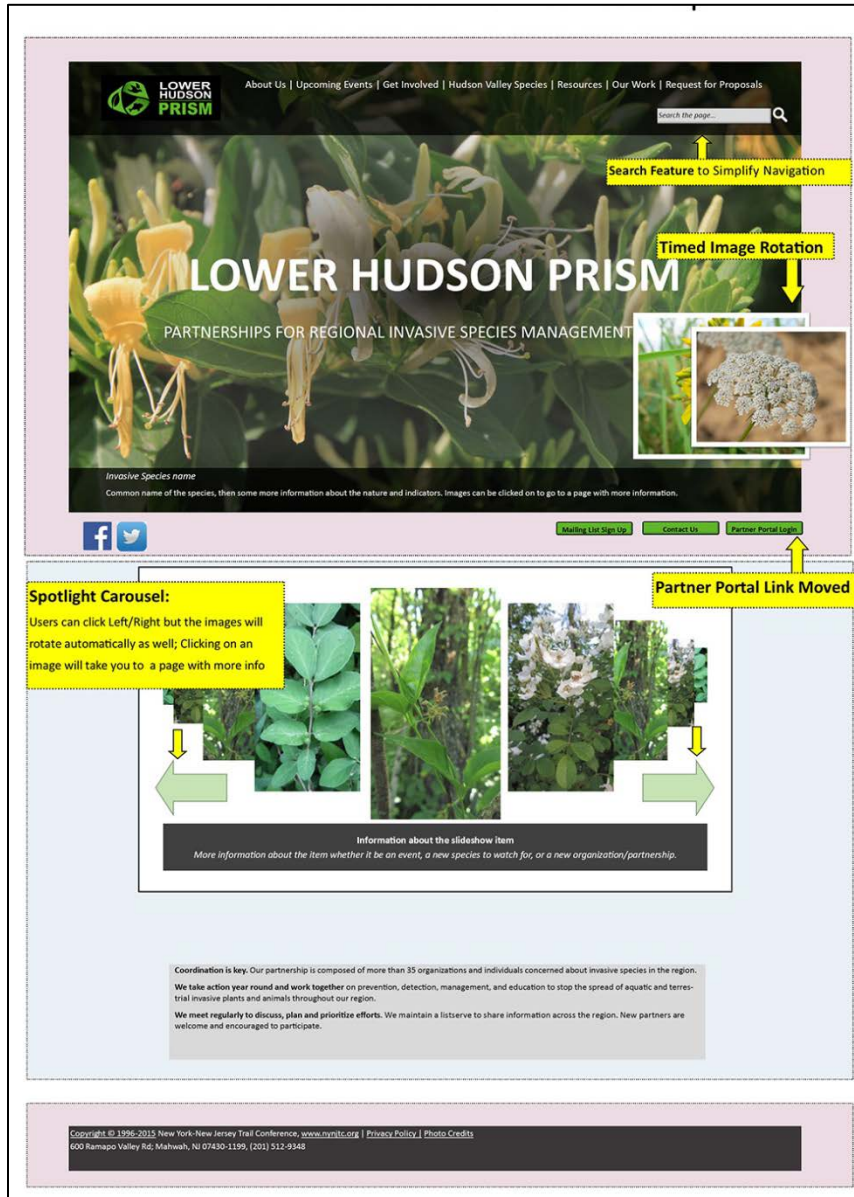

Figure 6: LHPRISM website mock-up

Social Media Campaign statistics from Facebook include:

- **38** Posts
- **7** Comments
- **87** Reactions
- **16** Shares
- **78** Lifetime Reach (per post average)
- **130** Lifetime Impressions (per post average)
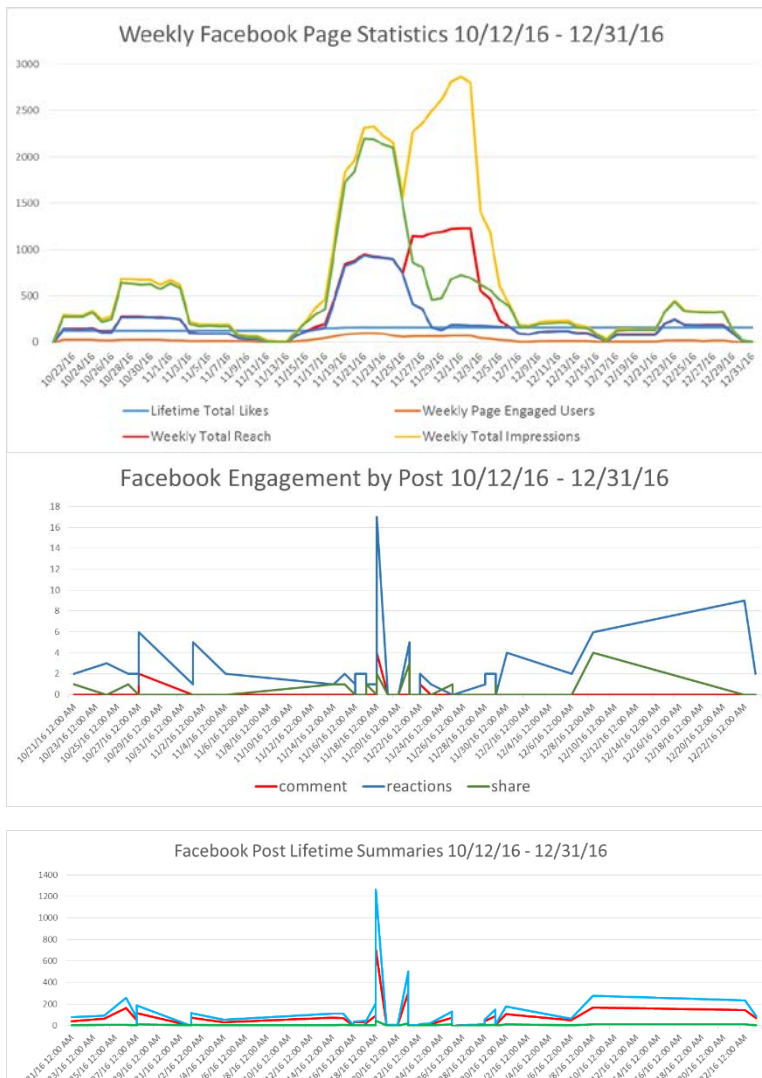- **6** Lifetime Engaged Users (per post average)

Figure 7: Facebook time series graphs on page statistics, weekly engagement and post lifetime.

Project summary

The Blockbuster survey training and website and social media work led to several successful outcomes. CCE offices in the Lower Hudson Valley recruited and trained a significantly larger pool of volunteers in 2016, which in turn led to over twice the amount of surveyed block grids than those surveyed in 2015. As a result of CCE Rockland's communications staff, LHPRISM had an active Facebook page with informative postings and a relevant and fun fundraising campaign; shortly the LHPRISM website will be new and improved as well. Qualitatively, these programs led to great collaboration within and among agencies committed to the issue of invasive species. Such collaborations will lead to even more public awareness and effective projects. This is an excellent step toward preserving the butterflies, birds and wildflowers that we love.

Cornell Cooperative Extension of Rockland County- 2016 Blockbuster Survey Training Final Report