



CULTIVATING RESILIENCE

MBGNA Strategic Plan

2023-2027

Executive Summary



**MATTHAEI BOTANICAL GARDENS
AND NICHOLS ARBORETUM**
UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

ORGANIZATION SNAPSHOT

MBGNA hosts 525,000 annual visitors, and – through MBGNA’s collections, natural areas, programs, and faculty research – that’s 525,000 opportunities to move the needle of public understanding relative to the grandest challenges of our times: climate change and sustainable futures, environmental justice, and all that the University of Michigan is doing to lead and innovate on these fronts.

525,000 annual visitors

TRAILING ONLY
MICHIGAN
MEDICINE AND
UM FOOTBALL IN
ATTENDANCE

APROXIMATELY
30% OF UM'S
ANN ARBOR
FOOTPRINT

841 acres across 4 sites

Horner-McLaughlin Woods, Matthaei Botanical Gardens
and Campus Farm, Mud Lake Bog, Nichols Arboretum





SHAPING TOMORROW

Deep integration into UM's research and teaching mission

Over 40 UM courses annually, directly shaping the curricular experience of more than 3,200 UM students each year

A campus leader in student leadership development through Campus Farm and dozens of annual internship opportunities

Engaging more than 4,000 K-12 students through scores of annual engagements with school systems, serving more than 12,000 early learners annually

Active research partnerships with dozens of units across the University, ranging from Engineering and Sustainability Science to Architecture and American Culture

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Leadership in Michigan

More than 20 years of active, authentic relationships and mutually beneficial partnership with Tribes in the State of Michigan

Durable partnerships with SE Michigan BIPOC farms and food justice organizations



MBGNA is a living, immersive museum designed to help students learn, UM faculty conduct research, and the public understand ourselves as part of the natural world at a time that it's most urgent.

MISSION

Matthaei Botanical Gardens and Nichols Arboretum is a transformative force for social and ecological resilience through the waters and lands we steward. We turn this commitment into action by:

Positioning humans as active participants within the natural world and compelling the university community and our publics to negotiate the full complexity that entails

Advancing partnerships, programs, user experience, and all that we steward to catalyze equity and justice in a radically changing world

Emerging as University of Michigan's premier partner for research, teaching, and public impact in sustainability, climate-forward practices, and biocultural diversity

Promoting healthier communities, cultures, and ecosystems through active care and cultivation of the gardens, fields, natural habitats, and dynamic systems that sustain our world



PILLARS

MBGNA's Strategic Plan activates this mission in three thematic areas across six "pillars," each of which is a commitment and a container for scaffolded, strategic goals. Despite being presented and nested as pillar-specific, goals within each of the six pillars operate as a web; they interarticulate and inform each other. Goal actualization is similarly cross-functional and interwoven across large-scale initiatives led by interdisciplinary staff task forces, ad hoc groups, and formal committees.

Equity, Justice + Biocultural Diversity

Catalyzing Equity and Justice through Biocultural Diversity and Polycentrism

Institutionalize shared vision and co-liberatory futures with Indigenous partners

Propel access and justice through regional relationships

Center all forms of accessibility in organizational processes, spaces, and actions

Pursuing Social and Ecological Resilience for a Planet Under Threat

Prioritize climate resilience, carbon neutrality, and regenerative land-water stewardship

Broaden regenerative and justice-oriented food-agriculture impact

Establish an applied research and professional development biocultural diversity "corps"

Integrate human, cultural, and community health and wellness

Research, Teaching + Experience Making

Amplifying Knowledge Making and Learner-Centered Experience

Develop a unified, learner-centered education department

Prioritize polycentrism across education-driven spaces, programs, and processes

Grow existing and establish new research partnerships

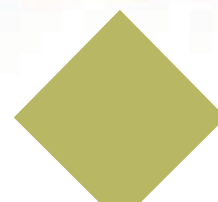
Instituting a New Communications, Engagement, and User Experience Paradigm

Develop a unified user-centered experiential design strategy

Renew strategic communications and digital infrastructure

Foreground biocultural diversity in place and print

Placemake for experience and impact



Organizational Evolution

Propelling Organizational Culture toward Equity, Efficiency, and Impact

Evolve internal systems and governance for transparency and efficiency

Scaffold equitable and effective staffing structures

Increase organizational legibility and impact

Strengthen volunteer infrastructure and systems of engagement

Energizing Resources for Strategic Impact

Engage in a focused rebranding and identity-building campaign

Develop a future-facing budgetary allocation model

Establish a comprehensive sponsored research and activities infrastructure

Expand development strategy

Innovate revenue generation modalities





Matthaei Botanical Gardens and Nichols Arboretum squarely occupies the potent intersection of public impact and the natural world at a time when climate change has reached a tipping point, upending the natural systems and ecological dynamics with which we are all interdependent.





A LETTER FROM THE DIRECTOR



MBGNA began its strategic planning process in Summer 2021 in the midst of many interlocking transitions and challenges. Universities, communities, nations, and global systems began inhabiting “new normals” as COVID-19 continued to transform daily life; the murder of George Floyd just a year prior rendered the veil separating urgently needed action from historic and current racial discrimination uniquely thin,

further exposing institutional culpability in systemic violence; and many indicators of climate change reached a tipping point, upending the natural systems and ecological dynamics with which we are all interdependent.

And while some of these sweeping challenges are relatively new and others are woven into the fabric of American life and global systems, people of color and economically less resourced communities disproportionately bear their repercussions. Each of these serious challenges and the uneven distribution of their consequences require institutions and organizations like MBGNA to be truly self-critical – to step back and ensure the power alignments, assumptions, and values that have arrived us “here” do not persist unquestioned and continue to define our collective future.

Unique to living collections like botanical gardens and arboreta, for example, is a particularly loaded nexus: control and manipulation of land, water, and diverse species for aesthetic experience and scientific advancement; a history of racial and economic exclusion; and the separation of species from their Indigenous uses and context, contributing to the continued erasure of non-dominant relationships to “nature.” The forces that require institutional self-criticality and decolonial approaches to power are the same forces that necessitate addressing climate change, biodiversity loss, and other drivers of ecological crisis we urgently face; environmental justice and social justice are interconnected and cannot exist independently in the on-going climate crisis.

To meet the demands of our national and global moment, MBGNA has engaged in self-critical reflection around these dynamics and several key questions:

Within a university context, where and how can MBGNA yield – not wield – power toward decolonial and co-liberatory action?

Based on mutual respect and trust built over the last 20+ years, how can priorities and visions for the future identified by Anishinaabek and other sovereign partners be incorporated into MBGNA plans, and how can MBGNA mobilize resources to partner in those futures' actualization?

How can MBGNA catalyze ecological and social resilience within the university, in partnership with aligned equity and justice-focused organizations, and with communities in SE Michigan and beyond?

How can MBGNA best utilize UM's commitments and trajectory – University Climate Change Coalition (UC3), the Okanagan Charter, UM Environment, Sustainability, and Carbon Neutrality, and the emergent goals of DEI 2.0 – to navigate the opportunities and barriers to rebuilding power structures from within a leading public research institution?

Beginning with these self-critical questions, MBGNA's strategic planning process unfolded over the course of 18 months. Benefitting from the entire MBGNA staff's participation, the process utilized for this strategic plan was crafted specifically to elevate shared vision. Informed by the diverse literatures and emergent best practices from the many disciplines applied at MBGNA – Museum Studies, DEI, Ecology, Botany, and many more – we began by establishing not a new mission, but a shared lexicon. With it we were able to interrogate critical social and ecological challenges and share common conceptual frames and understanding as we moved forward.

What emerged were six “pillars” – at once commitments and containers for action. Each of the six pillars was led by a working group composed of MBGNA staff, students, and external members from the broader university, surrounding community, or sovereign Tribes. Each working group developed a current state analysis and a future state analysis, marking where we were relative to that pillar and where we needed to go.

After an organizational retreat where these future states were interarticulated, MBGNA established a writing committee that, together, drafted a version of the strategic plan from this shared vision and developed specific goals and subgoals to animate the next five years of action. This draft and new mission was sent to Tribal partners, university leaders, student advisory groups, donors, directors at other university botanical gardens and arboreta, and many others for their interrogation and feedback. Informed by their collective insights, the writing committee crafted MBGNA's strategic plan.

MBGNA is committed to catalyzing equity and justice, and will continue to reckon with itself and the history of living collections to do so. This strategic plan is our road map for how that commitment is turned into action; how MBGNA will continue to thoroughly examine and combat its participation in systemic injustices, and how we will co-create new ways forward with historically excluded communities through the years ahead.

Anthony Kolenic
Director, Matthaei Botanical Gardens and Nichols Arboretum

Matthaei Botanical Gardens and Nichols Arboretum
1800 N. Dixboro Rd. Ann Arbor, MI 48105
(734) 647-7600
mbgna.umich.edu

