

EcoTipping Points Facilitation Guides

Map It: Running a Community Mapping Session

Time: 2-3 hours

Difficulty: Moderate

Materials: Large paper, markers in two colors

A community mapping session produces a shared diagram showing how the community's ecological and social problems connect and reinforce each other — and where a change might find traction. Collective knowledge is essential, but building it together in the room creates shared understanding and anchors commitment to whatever comes next. People who helped draw the map will engage with it differently than people who were handed one.

Steps

1. Agree on the problem

Before gathering losses, get the group to a shared starting point. This takes ten minutes and prevents the session from fracturing into separate threads later.

Ask: "In one sentence, what is the main problem this community is facing?" Write responses. If they diverge, find the common thread and name it. Write it at the top of the paper as the agreed framing for the session.

2. Open with loss, not process

Don't explain the exercise upfront. Start with a concrete question about lived experience:

"Think back 20 or 30 years. What was different here: in the forest, the water, the fishing, the farming, the animals, the soil? What do you remember that you don't see anymore? What has become harder — in the fields, the home, the community — that used to be easier?"

Write responses on the paper as they come. Don't organize yet. Invite different perspectives: what fishing families lost may differ from what farming households lost; what elders remember may differ from what younger people have seen. Make sure all of it goes on the paper — ecological losses and social ones together.

If the group is quiet, try: "What did your parents have access to that you don't?"

Then push back in time further. Ask about changes that happened before the visible decline, in the decades leading up to it: new land management practices, shifts in ownership, industries or markets that arrived and changed how people used the land or water. External pressures — government policies, new technologies, outside economic forces — belong on this list as much as local ones. Some of the earliest shifts are where the story actually starts.

3. Surface the pressures

Once you have a list of losses, ask about causes. No cause is too large or too small:

"Why is there less [fish / forest / water / healthy soil] than there used to be? What changed?"

Keep collecting on the same paper without organizing. People typically name external causes first — new industries, government land decisions, outside markets. Acknowledge these as real. Then ask: "And within the community, is there anything happening here that's also contributing?"

4. Build the map

Pick one item, usually a core resource loss, and draw it in the center. Then ask:

"What caused this to happen? What happened first, before this?"

Draw the earliest cause they identify. Then: "What happened next?" Draw the arrow forward. Repeat this, working chronologically toward the present. The diagram grows as the story proceeds, and that's intentional: participants should see the chain extending as the session goes on.

Arrows can lead in multiple directions from the same event. They can also loop back to something already in the chain, which is when the diagram starts showing why things keep getting worse.

No impact is too small to map. Ecological changes spread across both the ecosystem and the social system. When participants mention something that seems minor, add it.

Facilitator tip: When a vicious cycle first becomes visible in the diagram, stop and name it explicitly. "So this loops back to here, which means the problem feeds itself. That's the pattern we're looking for." These reinforcing loops are often the most important places to break.

The session is working when someone in the room says "so it keeps getting worse because..." That's the feedback loop becoming visible.

If the group gets stuck: "Does this connect to anything else on the board?" or "Is there anything important that's missing from this picture?"

Once the diagram feels complete, ask participants to identify the earliest cause in the chain — the event or change that started the whole sequence. Circle it. This is the negative tipping point: the moment the system began moving in the wrong direction. Label it. You'll return to it in the next session.

Facilitator tip: Three things are distinct on this diagram: the negative tipping point (where the system began to tip); the specific location in the chain where the human-nature connection broke; and the nodes where a positive intervention might work. They often overlap, but not always. Knowing which is which matters for Reverse It.

5. Test and validate

Before closing, make sure the complete diagram is on the paper. Then read it back:

"So what we're seeing is: [walk through the loop]. Does this capture what's happening here? What's wrong with this picture? Is this leaving out any very important losses or potential causes?"

Give people explicit permission to correct it. Then ask: "Is there anything on this map that the community has some ability to change, even partially?" Circle those nodes lightly. This is a positive note to end on: the group has found places where they might have some traction.

Close with a brief, open question: "Is there anything in this diagram that we could change?" Don't take it further here. Just let the answers sit. That's the question *Reverse It* is built to answer.

Facilitator note: This question appears again at the start of Reverse It. That's intentional — it's a bridge, not a repetition. Ending Map It with it open plants the question before the group has a framework to answer it. Reverse It gives them that framework.

6. Close and distribute

Before people leave, name what the group accomplished: they've described their situation as a connected system rather than a list of separate problems, and that's what points toward where a change could matter.

The map should leave the room with participants. A shared diagram they can hold, study, and show to others does work that a map on the facilitator's laptop cannot. Photograph the original at the end of the session. If time allows, redraw a clean version before distributing — especially if the map got complicated. A clear layout, with vicious cycles and the tipping point visually legible, helps people keep thinking between sessions.

Watch For

Deference to one or two voices. Try breaking into smaller groups for part of the discussion. Ask quieter participants directly: "What do you see from your experience?"

Politeness masking disagreement. In many communities, people will nod or raise hands to be polite without intending to act. Don't read silence as agreement. Pause, ask the quiet people, and when someone nods, ask what the nod means.

Impatience for solutions. Acknowledge the urgency: "I know it feels slow to spend time mapping when things are urgent. What we're trying to avoid is acting fast in the wrong place."

A map that gets too complicated. Pull back: "If you had to identify just three or four things driving the decline, what would they be?" Some maps do get complex — that's not always a problem. But participants should be able to read it.

Materials Note

Large paper is ideal, but work with what's available: a whiteboard, a wall with sticky notes, or even a cleared patch of ground and sticks.

Two marker colors help distinguish problems from connections, but one color works.

Photograph the map at the end of the session and print before the next one. Printed copies for distribution matter. A shared map that participants can hold and show to others does work that a map on the facilitator's laptop cannot.