VESPR, or Vision or an Ecologically Sound Platte River, is a collaboration of environmental conservation researchers and managers working within the Platte River watershed. VESPR came together with the goals of developing a long-term (50 year) vision for the Platte River that 1) takes a collaborative, ecosystem approach to water management, 2) focuses on wildlife/habitat needs, and 3) recognizes the importance of balancing the needs of wildlife, irrigation, ecotourism, and human consumption. VESPR is in the process of developing a 50-year vision and plan of action for the Platte River watershed and has been careful to note at which junctures critical, additional research is required.

The Platte River watershed is an example of a social-ecological system that is complex and dependent upon feedbacks between social and ecological processes. A great deal of resources have been directed to increasing our understanding of the many vital ecological functions of the Platte River watershed through research and on-the-ground efforts, but relatively little has been done to investigate the perceptions, values, or motivations of the human communities within the watershed that impact and are impacted by those ecological processes. In order to achieve a higher level of success in the implementation of conservation efforts within riverscapes, we need to bridge the gap between social and ecological sciences.

Success of any conservation effort is dependent on our ability to understand and integrate into our work the drivers behind human decisions and behavior that impact the riverscape. These decisions and behaviors are fundamentally connected to the values held by humans living and working within the watershed. In order to connect the goals that conservationists have for the Platte's riverine ecosystems with the social and economic goals of the humans living within the riverscape, we need to integrate research of the human dimension component into the ecological research, planning, and management already being done.

Just as the conservation concerns held by those interested in the ecological function of the watershed vary across the landscape, the public perceptions of those concerns and methods to address them vary as well. To more effectively focus conservation work within the riverscape, it will be important to have a spatial understanding of where support for those efforts already exists and where it needs to be fostered. An effective management plan will require the inclusion of a communication plan that is based on a better understanding of the beliefs, behaviors, values, and policy preferences of the stakeholders within the watershed and how those factors vary from one location to another within the riverscape.

Another benefit of building a human dimensions research component into the Platte riverscape is that it will allow managers to determine where discrepancies exist in how the benefits from ecosystem services are distributed. If we can determine where communities are located that have seen few obvious benefits from the services provided by the Platte River and associated ecosystems, or even where detrimental impacts have been felt, conservation managers will be able to more critically assess where overlaps between ecosystem restoration needs and community needs exist. Further, gathering input from not only landowners, but members of all socioeconomic groups living and working within the watershed, is important because it can help researchers understand how differences in land tenure throughout the watershed influence
drivers on human behavior and how different communities will be more or less served by voluntary land management programs such as conservation easements.

For these reasons, we recommend that a survey of the values, motivations, and perceptions of the people living and working within the Platte River watershed is conducted. A database of the desired ecological conditions important to conservationists working within the watershed is being collected and is relatively easy to ascertain, but it is vital that we collect input on the desired conditions important to the people within the Platte riverscape and how they are similar or different to those held by conservationists. Importantly, gathering this human dimensions data before investing a large amount of time and resources into the VESPR process is necessary so that potential conflicts can be identified early and our work is targeted and efficient. The most effective way to do this would be to conduct a public opinion survey, likely including both quantitative and qualitative methods of investigating public values, motivations, and perceptions, as well as a spatial component that can provide information on where conservation efforts should be geographically targeted within the riverscape.

Questions that the VESPR members would like to pose to community members within the Platte River watershed may include, but are not limited to:

- What are the benefits of living within the watershed? What are the downsides?
- What are their perceptions of the Platte River and the plant and wildlife communities that use it? Has their perception changed in the past 10 years in response to work that conservation entities have done?
- What should be the top priorities for conservation work in the watershed?
- Does the conservation work being done within the watershed impact their lives positively or negatively?
- How familiar are they with the conservation entities working on VESPR?
- Which conservation entities working within the watershed do they trust the most? The least?
- What are the perceptions that landowners have about conservation easements?
- What would motivate landowners to participate in conservation easements?
- How are they impacted by water quality? Are these impacts positive or negative? Are these impacts increasing or decreasing?
- How are they impacted by flooding? Are these impacts positive or negative? Are these impacts increasing or decreasing?
- How are they impacted by drought? Are these impacts positive or negative? Are these impacts increasing or decreasing?
- How are they impacted by plant and animal species within the watershed? Are these impacts positive or negative? Are these impacts increasing or decreasing?

It is expected that conducting the survey, holding a number of focus groups, and compiling the results would take approximately 6 months. The Playa Lakes Joint Venture is planning to hire a full-time staff member whose work will focus on the human dimensions component of environmental conservation. This staff person would be allowed to concentrate the majority of their efforts to this public opinion survey for the first 6 months after their hire date with the Playa Lakes Joint Venture (January 2021 - June 2021). This short investment in their time will be of future benefit to the group as it will lay groundwork for further human dimensions work in other portions of the watershed, or follow-up assessments that can be made later on to evaluate effectiveness of conservation efforts. The Playa Lakes Joint Venture staff member will work closely with an advisory team of VESPR researchers, and other appropriate researchers if necessary, whose role will be to guide the staff member in conducting the survey. In order to
cover the cost of conducting this social sciences work over 6 months, it is requested that the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission contribute a not to exceed amount of $50,000.

Deliverables will be a final report that includes 1) a detailed description of the research methods employed; 2) a final list of questions posed to the public; 3) quantitative results of survey questions, 4) qualitative results of responses collected in focus groups; and 5) a spatial assessment and relevant data files regarding how public opinion varies throughout the watershed and where conservation efforts should be targeted.