# STAKEHOLDER AND GRANTEE PERCEPTIONS OF THE KENEDY COUNTY AGRICULTURAL CONSERVATION EDUCATION CENTER

A Thesis

by

ANNA SUE LANGFORD

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

August 2012

Major Subject: Agricultural Leadership, Education, and Communications

Stakeholder and Grantee Perceptions of the

Kenedy County Agricultural Conservation Education Center

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Approved by:

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Committee Members, Jeff W. Savell
Gary Briers
Head of Department, John Elliot

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# ABSTRACT

Stakeholder and Grantee Perceptions of the Kenedy County Agricultural Conservation Education Center. (August 2012)

Anna Sue Langford, B.S., Texas A&M University

Chair of Advisory Committee: Dr. Tracy A. Rutherford

Agricultural conservation education is an important concept globally and locally. The Kenedy County Agricultural Conservation Education (ACE) Center will be established in the very rural and agriculturally-based community of Sarita, Texas, using federal funds from a Coastal Impact Assistance Program grant. The purpose of this study was to identify grantee and stakeholder perceptions of the Kenedy County ACE Center. The results identified beliefs about the Center's purpose, who its stakeholders were, possible concerns about the center, and use of the center by the 4-H program. Additionally, intentions and expectations about the Center were identified; these included operation and management, benefits, programs and activities, and others intentions and expectations. Differences between grantees' and stakeholders' perceptions were found about main focus of the ACE Center, management, and degree of concern for the center's future. This study showed that overall, grantees and participants perceive a great deal of educational benefits from the ACE Center, mainly relating to topics important to Kenedy County's livelihood, including agriculture, livestock production, wildlife management, and range management. Other major expected and intended benefits are pride for Kenedy County, ability to use a new facility

in Sarita, and an increase in youth 4-H participation. This case study produced knowledge that will allow the Kenedy County ACE Center to have a clearer sense of purpose and direction and to be successful.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

> Kenedy County is a unique section of Texas, steeped in rich heritage and history. Kenedy County contains over one million acres of land, yet has a population of only approximately 400 people: giving it the fourth lowest population density of all US counties. Residential property accounts for less than one-half of one percent of total appraised value of the entire county. There are no retail business establishments anywhere in the county (Gardner, 2010 p. 8).

Few counties in the state of Texas can be described like this. Kenedy County is most often seen by driving down a long stretch of Texas State Highway 77 in the northern part of the Texas Rio Grande Valley. It is bordered on the east by the Gulf of Mexico, more specifically a body of water known as the Laguna Madre. The land in Kenedy County is part of the Coastal Sand Flats of Texas.

Kenedy County has always been extremely rural and sparsely populated with 369 residents in the county's 1,457 square miles (*Kenedy County, Texas*, 2010). The U.S. Census shows that forty-six percent of the people in Kenedy County are employed in the agriculture, forestry, fishing, hunting, or mining industry sector (*Kenedy County selected economic characteristics: 2005 - 2009*, 2010). Some cotton, sorghum, and hay are grown but more than 90 percent of the county's agricultural receipts are from livestock and livestock products.

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This thesis follows the style of the *Journal of Applied Communications.*

Approximately three-fourths of the land in Kenedy County was farms and ranches in the 1990s (Garza, 2010). There were 108 times more cattle than people in the county in 2000 (*Rural Texas in transistion*, 2001).

The primary use of land in Kenedy County is for livestock grazing and related agricultural activities (Gardner, 2010). Because Kenedy County borders the coast, this high level of agricultural activity impacts the Laguna Madre. This body of water is the largest estuarine system on Texas' coastline (Tunnell, 2002). The large ranches along the coastline of Kenedy County allow limited public access, which has helped to keep human perturbations at a low level. However, the ranching activity itself has affected the structure, health, productivity, and ecology of the Laguna Madre (Hilbun & Koltermann, 2002).

Kenedy County has not shifted away from agriculture or changed from rural to urban interests as many counties in Texas have. This transition away from agriculture in many parts of the country has brought about significant changes in the social and economic makeup of rural areas over the last few decades (Smithers, Joseph, & Armstrong, 2005). Combined with urbanization and technological progress, there is more distance between society and agriculture (Leising, Pense, & Igo, 2001). This distance can lead to a heightened sense of scrutiny of agriculture by the urban sector of society (Smithers et al., 2005). People are becoming concerned with the environmental implications of conventional agriculture (Knowler & Bradshaw, 2007). The production of livestock has been labeled as one of the most significant contributors to environmental problems, leading some to question the value of depending on livestock to help feed the

world (Janzen, 2011).

Agricultural sustainability is a popular concept in many societies today. There is a growing awareness that humans cannot compromise the ability of their race to survive in the future by actions taken today that may damage the natural resources needed to feed the population tomorrow (Hobbs, Sayre, & Gupta, 2008). Conservation agriculture (CA) is an agricultural management system growing in popularity in many parts of the world as a method to achieve profitable yet sustainable agriculture (Hobbs et al., 2008). The goals of CA are to conserve, improve, and use natural resources in an efficient manner through the integrated management of soil, water, and biological resources. CA contributes to environmental conservation and sustainable agriculture (Conservation Agriculture, 2010).

It has been recommended that agricultural practices change direction to create more sustainable management strategies, which will preserve the future productivity of existing land (Rains, Olson, & Lewis, 2010). In an area with such strong ties to the land and to agriculture, there is a vital need to ensure that the people of Kenedy County and surrounding areas will value and use conservation education in the future to keep the land productive.

## Purpose and Objectives

To ensure valuable and relevant agricultural education principles in this area of Texas, an agricultural conservation education center will be built in Sarita, TX, the county seat of Kenedy County. The grants committee of Kenedy County was awarded a Coastal Impact Assistance Program (CIAP) grant to build this center (Craig, 2010). The

Coastal Impact Assistance Program authorizes funds to be used for the conservation, preservation, and protection of coastal areas (*Coastal Impact Assistance Program guidelines*, 2006). The facility's purpose is to conduct projects and activities in agricultural conservation and associated coastal conservation and protection. The Kenedy County Agricultural Conservation Education (ACE) Center will facilitate the education and training of youth, teachers, and citizens in Kenedy County and surrounding areas on agricultural conservation. The grant "will involve the construction of the Center that will directly benefit the students and teachers of Kenedy County, provide the infrastructure for range/ranch/wildlife management and environmental educational opportunities for hands-on environmental demonstrations and field trips" (Craig, 2010, p. 5).

The final approved budget for the center includes funding for multiple features: an outdoor covered pavilion, livestock pens, stables, corrals, demonstrative wetland, wetland windmill, interpretative nature trail, and a bird attraction station (Gardner, 2010).

The Kenedy County grants committee and other individuals who worked together to submit the grant application and establish the Kenedy County ACE Center are considered grantees of the Center. The people who will use the Center in the future are considered stakeholders of the Center. There are currently no facilities in Kenedy County that could serve the purpose of this center, making it a valuable resource for the area.

Individuals involved in this project can be classified as either stakeholders or grantees. Participation in a project by a large number of individuals can involve multiple agendas (Glicken, 2000). Knowing the attitudes of those who use a resource can help managers to best understand the users and improve user satisfaction (Baker, 2009). These individuals, identified as stakeholders and grantees, should be involved in the planning process for how to use the Center because their input and guidance can help the Center develop goals and determine what the range is for these goals (Glicken, 2000).

The purpose of this study was to determine the perceptions, intentions and expectations of the Kenedy County ACE Center grantees and stakeholders, in order to provide the Center with a clearer sense of purpose and direction.

Two research questions guided this study:

(A) What are the attitudes and expectations of the grantees of the Kenedy County ACE Center?

(B) What are the attitudes and behavioral intentions of the stakeholders in the Kenedy County ACE Center?

**Significance of Study**

There is growing concern for conservation, sustainability, and the environmental implications of agriculture. Kenedy County has a large amount of agricultural activity, which affects the watershed into the Laguna Madre. This is an area where agricultural conservation education can truly be effective and make an impact. This case study will help the management of the Kenedy County ACE Center determine the perceptions of the Center's grantees and stakeholders. This knowledge will allow the Center to have a

clearer sense of purpose and direction and therefore be able to promote and teach conservation agriculture in the most effective manner.

Kenedy County is located in the Coastal Sand Plains of South Texas. The high level of agricultural activity that takes place in Kenedy County affects the Laguna Madre and the quality of the land. More than ever before, it is important that agricultural conservation be a priority in this area. The Kenedy County ACE Center, funded through the CIAP, can provide many opportunities to teach agricultural conservation for Kenedy County and the surrounding areas. Grantee and stakeholder intentions and expectations must be determined so that the Center can be used in the most effective manner.

## Literature Review

### Conservation Agriculture

Conservation agriculture (CA) is defined by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations,

> CA aims to conserve, improve, and make more efficient use of natural resources through integrated management of available soil, water, and biological resources combined with external inputs. It contributes to environmental conservation as well as to enhanced and sustained agricultural production. It can also be referred to as resource efficient or resource effective agriculture. (Conservation Agriculture, 2010, p.1).

The FAO identifies the three principles of CA as minimal soil disturbance, crop rotation, and permanent soil cover. These principles have tremendous potential for agro-ecological systems of all sizes. CA can unite

profitable agricultural production with concern for the environment and has been perceived by many as a way to sustainably manage land (Conservation Agriculture, 2010).

The terms sustainability and conservation often go hand in hand. The FAO defines sustainable agriculture as,

> The management and conservation of the natural resource base and the orientation of technological and institutional change in such a manner as to ensure the attainment and continued satisfaction of human needs for the present and future generations. Such sustainable development (in the agriculture, forestry, and fisheries sectors) conserves land, water, plant, and animal genetic resources, is environmentally non-degrading, technically appropriate, economically viable, and socially acceptable. (Conservation Agriculture, 2010 p.1)

Social acceptability is more important than ever and many people see the ideas of agricultural conservation and sustainability in a favorable light. Society is becoming more concerned about the availability of resources needed in the future to support and sustain the worlds growing population (Hobbs et al., 2008). The concepts of agricultural conservation and agricultural sustainability get more attention as social movements spur public interest and concern for the conservation of natural resources and the productivity of the land in the future (Brewer, 2002).

The significant changes in the social and economic makeup of rural areas over the last few decades (Smithers et al., 2005) combined with urbanization and

technological progress have caused society to put more distance between themselves and the agricultural roots we once all shared (Leising et al., 2001). This distance can lead to higher scrutiny of agriculture by the urban sector of society, particularly conventional and traditional agriculture.

Traditional livestock production is a sector of agriculture often accused of causing negative environmental effects. One report says, "Livestock, including cattle, produce about 50 percent of airborne ammonia in the United States. That, in turn, contributes to air pollution, acid soils, reduced biodiversity, and – along with nitrate leaching - eutrophication (dead zones) in the Gulf of Mexico and other estuaries." (Gurian-Sherman, 2011 pg. 7) (Anderson, Strader & Davidson, 2003) Goolsby et al., 1999), (*Ammonia emissions from animal agricultural operations*, 2005).

Another recent study in the journal of Global Environmental Change (McAlpine, Etter, Fearnside, Seabrook, & Laurance, 2009) suggested that beef production be reduced and that the promotion of beef consumption be stopped in order to lessen the negative environmental impacts to the world.

Although agriculture producers often consider themselves to be the original stewards of the land, public perception does not always coincide. The agriculture industry continues to face public pressure as topics like conservation, sustainability, and environmental preservation grow increasingly popular and become more prominent issues. This pressure will rest on fewer and fewer people as the number of those who remain involved in production agriculture decreases (Boudreaux, 2008).

Agriculturalists are also faced with a growing challenge to increase the amount

of food produced to meet the demands of a growing world population. The amount of land available to produce this food is shrinking due to urbanization. Producing more food from less land requires an efficient use of the available natural resources. By striving to make the impact on the environment as minimal as possible, the productivity of the land can be preserved for future generations. Conservation agriculture and sustainable agriculture may help achieve the goal of feeding an ever-growing world with diminishing resources (Hobbs et al., 2008), while improving society's view of agriculture.

Conservation in agriculture is not a new concept. Soil erosion was recognized as a serious problem in the United States in the 1930s (Lee, 1980). After the recognition of this issue, Hugh Bennett led a conservation movement that resulted in the establishment of the Soil Conservation Service in 1935. The agency is today known as the Natural Resources Conservation Service within the U.S. Department of Agriculture and Bennett is considered to be the father of soil conservation.

**Agricultural Education**

The NRCS helps teach farmers and ranchers how to protect the natural resources in their care. "NRCS works with landowners through conservation planning and assistance to benefit the soil, water, air, plants, and animals for productive lands and healthy ecosystems." (About NRCS: A legacy of conservation, 2011 p.1).

Agriculture and the environment have a multifaceted relationship and the agricultural sector is responsible for many of the interactions that take place between the ecosystems and human beings. The interactions from agriculture can impact the natural

environment and ecosystem. The natural processes of our environment are put to use in agriculture and help produce what is needed to support the growing world population (Verhagen, WÖsten, & DeJager, 2007).

Although dependence on agriculture is greater than ever, people have grown further disconnected from agriculture. Today society can be described as agriculturally ignorant. Learning about agriculture, natural resources, biotechnology, food, and environmental topics is not a top priority for many people, highlighting the great need for agricultural literacy today. It has been known for a very long time that agricultural education is important. In 1910, David Thomas, Ph D. of the University of Arkansas pointed out the shortage of agricultural colleges. He recommended that students study more agriculture and that farmers be exposed to more extension work (Thomas, 1910). Today, students of all ages need agricultural education but incorporating this into school curriculum can be a challenge (Leising et al., 2001).

Agricultural education is crucial in the process of improving the way people manage their environment (Bruening & Martin, 1992), which explains why agricultural conservation is an important part of agricultural education. Agricultural extension has helped educate producers about conservation and how to lessen their impact on the environment. Over time, members of the farming community have supported the use of techniques that reduce fossil fuel use, run-off, soil erosion, and loss of organic matter. Conservation tillage has been widely adopted over the past fifty years and a substantial percentage of agricultural land is farmed by this principle today (Hobbs et al., 2008). On the other hand, some agricultural educators have contributed to helping farmers adopt

production practices that were economically competitive, but did not always have a positive effect on environmental problems (Rasmussen, 1989).

Although some conservation practices have become widely adopted and commonly used by agriculturalists, in many instances adoption of conservation has been modest (Pannell et al., 2006). Perhaps this is because people must first understand what natural resources are and appreciate their value is in order to have effective conservation (Flowers, 2010). A persons stance on conservation is closely related to the manner in which they are exposed to information about conservation (Trumbo & O'Keefe, 2001) and the adoption of conservation principles is most likely linked with the awareness and concern for conservation by an individual (Knowler & Bradshaw, 2007). The best chances to promote the ethics of conservation are linked with the ability to educate, motivate, and empower people about conservation (Johns, 2003).

**Coastal Impact Assistance Program**

The Coastal Impact Assistance Program (CIAP) was established through The Energy Policy Act of 2005 and signed into law on August 8, 2005. CIAP management was originally vested under the Secretary of the Department of the Interior, but authority and responsibility were delegated to the Minerals Management Service (MMS) and then to the U.S Fish and Wildlife Service. The CIAP authorizes the distribution of funds to coastal political subdivisions (CPS) of oil and gas producing states of the Outer Continental Shelf : Alabama, Alaska, California, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas. These funds are to be used for the protection, conservation, and preservation of coastal

areas (*Coastal Impact Assistance Program guidelines*, 2006). More specifically CIAP funds can be used for the following categories:

> Projects and activities for the conservation, protection, or restoration of coastal areas, including wetlands, mitigation of damage to fish, wildlife, or natural resources, planning assistance and the administrative costs of complying with this section, implementation of a federally-approved marine, coastal, or comprehensive conservation management plan, mitigation of the impact of OCS activities through funding of onshore infrastructure projects and public service needs (Coastal Impact Assistance Program guidelines, 2006 p. 6)

Within the states in the OCS, funds are allocated based on Qualified Outer Continental Shelf Revenue (QOCSR). This is the oil and gas money generated from each state's coast in proportion to the total QOCSR funds generated from all eligible states in the program (*Coastal Impact Assistance Program guidelines*, 2006). A noncompetitive grant process is used for distribution of funds.

A stipulation of this act requires each participating state to designate a representative agency to work with the MMS for CIAP purposes. For Texas, the Office of the Governor was designated to act as this agency by Governor Rick Perry. The Coastal Land Advisory Board was also established by Governor Perry to manage the Texas CIAP efforts and the General Land Office was given the

duty of providing administrative support for the Board (*Texas Coastal Impact Assistance Plan*, 2008).

Texas has eighteen counties that qualify as CPS. Since 2005, each of Texas' CPS have been awarded CIAP funds for various projects. Some examples include erosion protection of Pelican Island in Corpus Christi Bay, plugging of abandoned oil and gas wells in coastal state waters, San Jacinto Battleground seawall replacement, and digital aerial photography archives (*Texas Coastal Impact Assistance Plan*, 2008).

Many of these projects have been in the category of projects and activities for the conservation, protection, or restoration of coastal areas and hold a great deal of potential for conservation education and effective public outreach (*Texas Coastal Impact Assistance Plan*, 2008). A basic and broad way to describe several of these projects is as educational centers. The CIAP funded the Quintana Beach County Coastal Education Center in Brazoria County, Texas, to teach coastal wetland conservation. The San Luis Pass Educational Center is also going to be built in Brazoria County, intended to address coastal conservation education associated with the seasonal fluctuations in local coastal populations (*Texas Coastal Impact Assistance Plan*, 2008). In Cameron County, Texas, the Arroyo Colorado Watershed Wetlands Education and Outreach Pavilion and Interpretive Center is going to be established. This center will be used to educate local citizens and students about water quality issues and how people can influence the watershed in a positive way. Matagorda County is establishing the

Palacios Multi-Use Nature Site using CIAP funds. It will primarily be used for nature preservation and environmental education with opportunities for kayaking, bird watching, and other outdoor educational activities (*Texas Coastal Impact Assistance Plan*, 2008). The Austwell Wetland Information Center will be in Refugio County. It will be used as a place for local schools to conduct beach monitoring projects and teach environmental education. It is also going to be used for meetings and teaching the importance of the bird species and wetlands in the Austwell area (*Texas Coastal Impact Assistance Plan*, 2008).

Kenedy County is a CPS located on the southern part of Texas' gulf coast. Out of the $48,591,202.09 CIAP funds received by the state for the 2007 and 2008 fiscal years, Kenedy County was allocated $871,961.35 to be used for six projects. These funds were requested primarily for projects and activities in conservation, protection, and restoration of coastal areas (*Texas Coastal Impact Assistance Plan*, 2008). Kenedy County projects include

a. Education conservation programs,
b. Agricultural Conservation Education Center – Phase 1
c. Agricultural Conservation Education Center – Phase 11
d. Grant Administration and Program Management Support
e. Storm water Wetland Park Boardwalk and Kiosk Construction
f. Holistic Ranch Management Education Project

(*Texas Coastal Impact Assistance Plan*, 2008).

Kenedy County is comprised of largely undeveloped rangeland and grazing land in the Texas Gulf Coast region. Most of the people that live in Kenedy County work for the ranches that are made up by this undeveloped range, making education about the land very important. In particular, it is important to educate the youth of Kenedy County to prepare for their roles as future decision makers. Human impacts, especially from agricultural activities, can greatly affect coastal environments and the watersheds connecting with the Laguna Madre (*Texas Coastal Impact Assistance Plan*, 2008). The Laguna Madre is a particularly sensitive and important ecological system off the Texas coast, which has been affected by the farming and ranching in Kenedy County (Hilbun & Koltermann, 2002).

**Kenedy County and the Laguna Madre**

Agriculture has been a part of the South Texas landscape for hundreds of years. Spanish land grants issued in the late 1700s distributed land in 5,000 acre tracts to settlers so that they could have a dependable water supply for livestock and crops. Even larger tracts of land were issued to influential citizens through the grants for ranching and grazing purposes. These larger grants generally bordered the Gulf of Mexico and ranged from around 10,000 acres to more than 240,000 acres. Large herds of sheep and cattle were grazed on these lands (Hilbun & Koltermann, 2002).

When Texas initially became a part of the United States in 1845, the U.S. military was dispatched to South Texas to establish claim on all lands north of the Rio Grande. The Mexican Army had to be driven out of Texas and a treaty was signed to

establish the Rio Grande River as the official border. This treaty also declared all Spanish or Mexican land grants that had been issued up until 1848 would remain valid (Hilbun & Koltermann, 2002).

Around this time, two young men arrived on the border who would forever leave their mark on the history of South Texas and the ranching world. When they were young men, both Miflin Kenedy of Pennsylvania and Richard King of New York headed South for work. Eventually they ended up working on steamboats in the South together where they met and started what would be come a legendary friendship. Kenedy and King joined together as business partners in a small shipping enterprise moving supplies for the U.S. Army on the Rio Grande River in South Texas. In 1848, the two formed M. Kenedy and Company. Kenedy and King ran 26 boats on the river at one point, leading them to substantial wealth (Hilbun & Koltermann, 2002).

King took great interest in the potential of the ranching country to his north. He partnered with a Texas Ranger, Captain Gideon K. Lewis, and together they eventually bought more than 15,000 acres of land at a price of less than two cents an acre. They stocked the land with Mexican cattle and continued to expand. King acquired all interest in this partnership when Lewis was murdered in 1855 (Hilbun & Koltermann, 2002).

By 1860, the King Ranch had become a thriving ranching enterprise and Kenedy bought an interest. The operation raised and shipped cattle, sheep, horses, and goats. King and Kenedy continued to acquire land and livestock and formed a loyal and strong workforce, establishing agricultural roots in the people of this area for years to come. These two men were the leaders of the cattle industry in their time and played major

roles in establishing this part of Texas. They are continually recognized today for their contributions to the cattle industry. King and Kenedy dissolved their partnership in the interest of their heirs in 1867, splitting the ranch land between them (Hilbun & Koltermann, 2002).

The land in Miflin Kenedy's name would later become Kenedy County. Today, five hundred thousand acres of pasture and grazing land are operated as the Kenedy Ranch (Hilbun & Koltermann, 2002). Kenedy County is geographically the 13th largest of the 254 counties in Texas but the third least populated with only 369 residents. The combination of such large land area and small population gives Kenedy County a population density of only 0.22 persons per square mile. There are just three communities in the county. Sarita is the county seat and the largest community with 250 residents (Garza, 2010). The other communities are substantially smaller than Sarita. This county directly borders the coastline and the part of the Gulf of Mexico known as the Laguna Madre, or "Mother Lagoon."

The Laguna Madre is a coastal lagoon and the largest of all the estuarine systems on Texas' coast. This system is actually comprised of two separate lagunas: the Laguna Madre of Texas, U.S.A. and the Laguna Madre de Tamaulipas, Mexico (Tunnell, 2002). As a whole, the northern and southern parts of the Laguna Madre form the world's largest hypersaline ecosystem. The Laguna Madre extends for a little more than one hundred miles along the Texas coast alone. Although it borders the Coastal Sand Plains of Nueces, Kleberg, Kenedy, Willacy, and Cameron counties, very few communities or cities actually exist along it. This is due to several large privately owned ranches along

the coast as well as two federally protected areas – the Padre Island National Seashore and the Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge. This is a distinctive characteristic of the South Texas coast, which has benefited the land and surrounding waters in some ways. With very little urban development, humanly pressures upon the ecosystems of the Coastal Sand Plains and the Laguna Madre have been fairly low (Hilbun & Koltermann, 2002).

These plains and the bordering Laguna Madre are very unique ecological systems. Besides being a hypersaline estuary, the Laguna Madre has almost no freshwater inflow. Precipitation occurs less than evaporation, there is limited circulation, it is very shallow, and there is very little exchange with waters from the Gulf (Tunnell, 2002). Both the Laguna Madre and the Coastal Sand Plains have many diverse ecosystems. There is a great variety of vegetation and habitats such as seagrass meadows, shoal grass, and tidal flats. Active sand dunes, wetland areas, and mottes of a number of tree species create several unique habitats throughout the plains (Tunnell, 2002). Numerous research studies have been done in this area of Texas because of the importance for habitat conservation. It is home to 625 species, including 34 amphibians, 409 birds, 80 mammals and 102 reptiles. “In fact, the South Texas brush country and the near pristine Laguna Madre contain the last great wildlife habitat remaining in Texas.” (Who we are: The Caesar Kleberg Wildlife Research Institute, 2008 p.1), making it a region highly deserving of conservation and good stewardship (Fulbright & Bryant, 2004).

Although the human impacts to nature are lower in Kenedy County due to it’s

small population, the Coastal Sand Plains and the surrounding waters of the lagoon have still been affected. The ranching and agricultural activities that have taken place over the last century have affected the ecology of the area. As the amount of ranching increased in this region, the landscape increasingly changed. The cattle and other livestock that have been raised in the Kenedy County area over the last few hundred years have made a significant impression on the native grasslands of South Texas. Erosion along the coastline from the less vegetated terrain has also increased sedimentation of the lagoon. Agricultural activity has resulted in ground salinization and reduced vegetation diversity (Tunnell & Judd, 2002). Many of the major changes in fauna and flora throughout this area of South Texas are credited to agriculture, specifically cattle ranching, along the Laguna Madre (Tunnell & Judd, 2002).

> The primary land use in Kenedy County is for grazing and related agricultural business, which impacts the watershed that drains into the Laguna Madre. The Agricultural Education Conservation Center will increase student and public awareness, knowledge, and appreciation for natural resources of coastal habitats including wetlands. There are currently very few educational programs offered to schools emphasizing holistic natural resource management and there are currently no facilities in Kenedy County that could serve as an education conservation center. The Agricultural Education Conservation Center will be interconnected with Kenedy County's Range/Ranch Wildlife Management Science Project Development and the School District Conservation Education

> Administration Support programs that will provide the curricula, in-school science specialists, lab/field equipment, etc. The Center will provide an accessible location for students to conduct field studies developed as part of the holistic rangeland management curriculum. (Gardner, 2010 p. 4).

**Stakeholder Involvement**

Although environmental issues are often thought of as large-scale problems, the decline of an ecosystem or environment is often caused at a local level due to local land use decisions, such as urban development plans or disruption and destruction of habitats (Brody, 2003). These small scale decisions, often made by city councils, county commissioners, and community members, have the power to make large impacts on the environment and natural habitats of a region (Brody, 2003).

This explains why many natural resource and environmental management programs today are based on specific areas such as watersheds and local ecological systems. Successful management or preservation of an ecosystem relates more to ecological boundaries than political apportionments or county lines, creating the need for local collaboration and partnerships across the area of interest or concern (Brody, 2003).

Forming these partnerships requires planning. Program planning is often presented as a straightforward process. However, evaluation or planning for organizations with multiple levels of involvement from diffrerent groups or individuals can be very complex (Campbell, Patton, & Patrizi, 2003). The development of such

programs and partnerships with many levels of involvement often involves people who are considered stakeholders.

The term stakeholder has many varying definitions, which may depend on the context in which the term is used. However, a broad and basic definition of stakeholders is "individuals, groups, or organizations that can affect or are affected by an evaluation process and/or its findings." (Bryson, Patton, & Bowman, 2011 p.1). Any kind of people who make decisions about, desire information about, or can be affected by policies or programs can be considered stakeholders of those policies or programs (Bryson et al., 2011).

Stakeholders are those who are concerned with the outcome of a program and develop a commitment to it. Funders, teachers, community members, extension employees, and landowners are often considered stakeholders in environmental programs (Athman & Monroe, 2001). Although the stakeholders for a project can usually be put into different categories (Bryson et al., 2011), knowledge, resources, and land ownership are all common factors associated with stakeholders in environmental plans (Brody, 2003). Programs for ecosystem management often involve many different agencies, groups, organizations, and individuals, creating a high level of participation. Public participation is considered a key part of an effective planning process for ecosystem management programs. Inherently, when the planning process has many participants, it can entail several different interests, some challenging the other (Brody, 2003).

When stakeholders are properly identified and their knowledge adequately

analyzed, resulting evaluations can significantly enhance the intended uses or results of a given program. “Attention to, and involvement of, key stakeholders is presumed to enhance the design and implementation of evaluations and the use of evaluation results in decision-making.” (Bryson et al., 2011 p.1). Proper evaluation can result in a great deal of knowledge for an effective program or organization (Campbell et al., 2003).

As mentioned, in many cases stakeholders can have a wide variety of interests, that may compete with the interests of another (Bryson et al., 2011). However, this variety can give many perspectives, which may shape the focus and audience for the program. When stakeholders participate in the beginning stages of a program, it is more likely to be used by them once developed. A great deal of the literature supports stakeholder participation and representation in the process of planning a program (Brody, 2003). It is widely acknowledged that the stakeholders of a program are important (Bryson et al., 2011). However, counter arguments exist which suggest that high participation does not always lead to high quality. Those with opposing views claim that high levels of participation can lead to conflict, frustration, and weaker final plans (Brody, 2003). Also, careful analysis of the interests, needs, perspectives, and priorities of different stakeholders is not always performed (Bryson et al., 2011).

Stakeholder participation is considered important, particularly in the environmental area, which can be seen across the literature. This is likely due to the flexible style and approach that is needed for problem solving in complex and always changing environmental issues (Reed, 2008). Recent studies involving stakeholders and the environment include stakeholder preferences for land conservation (Strager &

Rosenberger, 2006), the integration of biodiversity into land-use planning (Strager & Rosenberger, 2006), and in stakeholder evaluations of place-based conservation education programs (Flowers, 2010).

Stakeholder participation is used frequently in natural resource, environmental, ecosystem programs and planning. Flowers (2010) reported on a study with stakeholders and intended users of a place based conservation education program to determine how effectively the program affected the outcomes for participants. This ensured that the findings could be used to benefit programming in the future and improve overall effectiveness. The evaluator worked with program decision makers, to build trust and rapport and determine if the existing programs were producing what the participants really wanted (Flowers, 2010).

The participation of stakeholders has been found to be essential in identifying the most effective strategies and projects for organizations that work in coastal nutrient management (Greening & Elfring, 2002). At a local scale, such as the watershed level, conservation planning and program implementation is likely to be most effective when multiple stakeholder interests are represented (Napier, McCutcheon, & Fish, 2008).

Stakeholder participation has been recognized as a valuable way to improve effectiveness of a program. Although barriers such as disagreements can arise, stakeholder participation can foster strong relationships in a program and provide opportunities for improvement (Gilliam et al., 2002).

Despite some criticisms, the basic belief is that stakeholder participation is an asset because of the valuable knowledge and resources stakeholders usually contribute to

plans (Brody, 2003). Stakeholder involvement continues to be a common element in programs relating to environment and natural resource management and conservation.

**Theory of Reasoned Action**

Conservation messages often tell people what they should do and how they should act with regard to the environment, nature, or natural resources. But what makes a person who has heard or seen a conservation message actually act upon it? When studying conservation behavior, many researches question what it takes to make an individual act with conservation in mind. The behavior of individuals, and why one acts as they do, has been a common research interest in the areas of conservation, natural resources, outdoor activities, and agriculture. In order to understand a person's behavior, its important to evaluate the factors that cause the behavior (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980).

In studying human behavior, many researchers attempt to "predict behavior by understanding the attitudes that underlie this behavior" (Bright, 2003 p. 327). Even since early social psychology work, it has been believed that a positive correlation exists between attitude and behavior (Marandu, Nkisang, & Joseph, 2010). There are many theories and linear models of attitude and behavior. The theory of reasoned action (TRA) is considered one of the most common models used today to understand attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs (Bright, 2003). Martin Fishbein introduced the TRA in 1967. Fishbein later teamed with Izak Ajzens and together they provided more insight for the theory and developed the current form, which shows how attitudes predict behaviors (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980).

According to the theory of reasoned action, the majority of social behavior by humans is in volitional control and therefore intentions alone can predict behavior (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). This implies that researches should be capable of predicting specific behaviors from a subject's intention to take part in the behavior (Ajzen & Fishbein, 2005). Because the TRA tells us that a person's action or behavior is determined by the corresponding behavioral intention, the factors that decide behavioral intentions are of great importance. There are two main factors determining behavior intentions. These are the personal, attitudinal component and the social, normative component. Azjen and Fishbein define attitude very simply, either feeling favorable or unfavorable (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980) towards any concept. The attitudinal component of the TRA basically encompasses ones attitude towards a behavior as would a person be in favor or against performing the behavior (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980) A persons' perceptions, beliefs, and intentions are separate concepts but can all be related to attitudes.

The social, normative component of the TRA addresses the influence that social environments have upon intentions and behaviors. These influences affect the subjective norm. A subjective norm is a person's perception about what other people would think of them for performing, or not performing, a behavior (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). If a person thinks that others who are important to him would approve of him performing the behavior, his intention to perform the behavior will be stronger. Likewise, if he thinks these important people would disapprove of the behavior, his intention to perform the behavior will be weaker.

Subjective norms are determined by how an individual believes others expect them to behave and how willing one is to comply with the perceived societal views (Ajzen, 2005). Subjective norms are thought to be a combination of what people feel others perceptions of a behavior are and whether others think the behavior is appropriate or not (Sparks, Shepherd & Frewer, 1995) or the perceptions an individual holds for the appropriateness of a particular behavior relevant to the situation of importance (Baldwin, Perry, & Moffitt, 2004).

The attitudinal component and social component, or subjective norm, are measured to give the overall behavioral intention. When determining behavioral intentions, it is important to remember these components and the weights of their measure will be different for everyone. For some people, their own attitudes are more important than subjective norms for a particular behavior and vice versa. Variables such as time, age, sex, status, and personality can all affect the importance of the components for an individual (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980).

The relation between behavioral intention and actual behavior is not always perfect. Obviously, it is possible for something to change between the measure of intention and the observation of the behavior. However, if appropriate measures of the attitude and subjective norm are taken, these components should be a very strong predictor of behavioral intention, which can then predict behavior (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980).

The theory of reasoned action is useful because it can be applied to a number of behavioral domains and is considered to be a very general theory applicable to the

explanation of many human behaviors (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). It has been used as the theoretical framework for a number of studies in natural resource and conservation related research (Bright, 2003) and a wide variety of agricultural topics. The TRA has been used to assess attitudes and implications towards fisheries management (Baker, 2009), preferences for the development of outdoor recreation facilities (Bright, 2003), and water conservation behaviors (Marandu et al., 2010). Farmers' attitudes and adoption behavior of new livestock technologies were evaluated through the TRA (Rehman et al., 2003) as well as the role that attitudes play in the adoption of technologies on dairy farms (Rehman et al., 2007). Intentions to purchase beef (McCarthy, de Boer, O'Reilly, & Cotter, 2003) and safe farm tractor operation intentions for adolescents have been studied through the TRA (DeBarr, Ritzel, Wright, & Kittleson, 1998).

**Place-Based Education**

For young students, learning about agriculture and conservation can begin with the study of nature and the environment. However, for many young children, simply hearing and reading about nature is not enough to gain a good education of the subject. Children learn best through actively engaging with nature in a hands on manner (Flowers, 2010).

Recent research done in the UK shows the need for improving children's knowledge of the land, it's management and how these connect with agriculture and food production. Learning that takes place outside of a classroom such as fieldwork, at outdoor centers, and after-school programs are thought to have a great deal of potential

for helping with this knowledge gap (Dillon, Rickinson, Sanders, Teamey, & Benefield, 2003).

Place-based education (PBE) is a style of learning that uses local landscapes, situations, and opportunities as a foundation for curriculum and emphasizes participation and personal engagement. The roots of PBE are in environmental education (Promise of place: Enriching lives through place-based education, 1999). "Through project-based learning, students make tangible contributions to resolving local and environmental issues and conserving local environmental quality"(Promise of place: Enriching lives through place-based education, 1999 p. 1).

"Place-based" programs encourage an out of the classroom education where children study about the outdoors and natural resources through an active learning experience. These programs allow students to understand not only what natural resources are, but "how they are used, and how they can play a part in sustaining fish, wildlife and associated habitats through shared use and sound management." (Flowers, 2010 p. 165). There are a growing number of place-based education programs for youth, which facilitate learning of biological and ecological relationships through firsthand experiences in local landscapes and communities (Flowers, 2010).

Place based education is not only effective for children. Programs, seminars, short courses, field demonstrations, and field days are all forms of PBE. In agriculture, these methods of education often help teach farming or ranching knowledge and can bring a lot of interest to a topic (Bell & Rickman, 2008). These programs and demonstrations are usually offered by groups like the Extension Service, state university

specialists, and agricultural government agencies, and are often regarded by farmers as the most useful sources of information about conservation (Bruening & Martin, 1992). Farmers prefer these kind of local field demonstrations and country meetings to learn new information or technologies due to the sense of community participation and ownership these methods convey (Bruening & Martin, 1992).

Within public education, many teachers often report the same needs regarding conservation education including requests for opportunities to learn concepts in a relevant area, planned out instructional activities, region specific resources, low cost instructional materials, and special interaction with scientists and educators throughout the school year (Brewer, 2002).

Agricultural centers are good places for applying the place-based education concept. These types of facilities provide hands on, interactive opportunities to learn for both children and adults. The Samuel Roberts Noble Foundation is an agricultural research and education center located in Ardmore, Oklahoma, that regularly hosts a variety of educational agriculture events (Ag Events, 1999). The Kern Agricultural Foundation, located in Bakersfield, California, hosts events to promote agricultural education for the local agriculture community and schools (Kern Agricultural Pavilion, 2007). The Luling Foundation in Luling, Texas, is an agricultural demonstration farm that hosts educational field days for adults and children over a variety of agricultural topics (What we do, 2009).

## Design

This research is considered to be an intrinsic case study. Case studies are used in

qualitative research to examine and gain insight into single, unique situations through extensive data collection. More specifically, intrinsic case studies are used when a researcher is primarily interested in a specific situation and understanding every part of the situation, or case (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009). Qualitative data were collected through respondent interviews with a representative sample of people considered to be the grantees and stakeholders of the Kenedy County ACE Center. Respondent interviews use directive questions to draw out open-ended responses from participants and are often used as a stand-alone method of collecting data. Participants are treated as authoritative speakers on behalf of their behaviors (Lindlof, 1995).

Selecting suitable participants for qualitative interviews is of great importance. One benchmark for good interviewees is appropriate experience with the cultural scene, meaning valuable experience with the critical events, decisions, and paths of the subject topic. Two other benchmarks are willingness of the interviewee to communicate about the subject topic and amount of time they interviewee can devote to the project (Lindlof, 1995).

## Population

The population for this study was individuals who represented different stakeholder groups in the Kenedy County area and individuals involved with applying for the CIAP grant or establishing the Center. These included employees of the Texas Extension Service, the Natural Resource Conservation Service, and the Texas State Soil and Water Conservation Board, local ranch employees including management and wildlife biologists, representatives of the Sarita 4-H Club, local landowners and

community members, employees of businesses working on the grant, Kenedy County elected officials and employees, and representatives of the Kenedy County school district (*N*=23).

## Sample

This study used a purposive sample. A purposive sample reaches the people with the most relevant information. After receiving approval from Texas A&M University's Institutional Review Board, the researcher contacted participants by phone and formally invited them to participate in the study. All twenty-three people contacted agreed to participate and a meeting time was scheduled for each interview.

## Instrumentation and Data Collection

Qualitative data were collected in twenty-three individual interviews with participants classified as stakeholders or grantees. In most cases, qualitative interviews can be conducted practically anywhere that is free of excessive distraction or noise. Researchers should try to arrange interviews in locations that are both comfortable and convenient for the participant (Lindlof, 1995). The twenty-three interviews were conducted by the researcher between January 13, 2012, and February 13, 2012, all across South Texas, including Sinton, Corpus Christi, Kingsville, Harlingen, Hebbronville, and Sarita. The researcher met with the interviewees at ranch headquarters, restaurants, offices, the Kenedy County court house, and Sarita ISD. The interviews lasted an hour and a half on average. The researcher took in-depth notes for inclusion in the interview transcription.

## Data Analysis

For the data analysis process, the researcher followed a qualitative data analysis model by Creswell. The process began with preparing the data for analysis and it was then transcribed, organized, and studied to determine coding methods. Coding the data then began. Data was categorized by topic and labeled with a term (Creswell, 2009). Pseudonyms were given to each participant to protect privacy. Member checking and peer debriefing were used to ensure trustworthiness of the data. Validity in qualitative research can always be considered an issue because of the opportunity for the researcher to impose a personal definition on the data. Researchers must try not to infer too much about the observations before data collection is complete. It is difficult to approach a study as a blank slate but the researcher should not hold on to any preconceived notions either. “Striking an optimal balance is a difficult and probably endless task.” (Lindlof, 1995 p. 216).

# CHAPTER II

# GRANTEE PERCEPTIONS OF THE KENEDY COUNTY AGRICULTURAL CONSERVATION EDUCATION CENTER

## Introduction

Conservation agriculture (CA) methods conserve and use natural resources more efficiently and can bring profitable agricultural production together with concern and care for the environment. Conservation and sustainability in agriculture often go hand in hand and both are becoming more important in terms of social acceptability. Our society has become more concerned about the availability of resources that will be needed in the future to support and sustain the worlds growing population (Hobbs et al., 2008). The concepts of agricultural conservation and agricultural sustainability get more attention as social movements spur public interest and concern for the conservation of natural resources and the productivity of the land in the future (Brewer, 2002).

The significant changes in the social and economic makeup of rural areas over the last few decades (Smithers et al., 2005) combined with urbanization and technological progress have caused society to put more distance between themselves and the agricultural roots we once all shared (Leising et al., 2001). This distance and knowledge gap about agriculture can place more public pressure on the declining \number of people still involved in production agriculture today (Boudreaux, 2008).

The Coastal Impact Assistance Program (CIAP) was established in 2005 to award funds to be used for the protection, conservation, and preservation of coastal areas (*Coastal Impact Assistance Program guidelines*, 2006). The program is for coastal

counties of the oil and gas producing states of the United States, including Texas. Since the beginning of the CIAP program, several public outreach projects have begun in Texas to teach conservation, including some centers for conservation education (*Texas Coastal Impact Assistance Plan*, 2008).

Kenedy County, Texas is located on the southern part of the state's gulf coast, along the Laguna Madre. This county was awarded CIAP funds for education conservation education programs and an Agricultural Conservation Education Center. Kenedy County is very unique in that it is primarily undeveloped rangeland of large cattle ranches, it has a very low population, and the majority of people who live here are involved in agriculture. The body of water it borders, the Laguna Madre, is also extremely unique and a very sensitive ecological area. These conditions make the need for agricultural conservation education very important for the people of Kenedy County and surrounding areas (Gardner, 2010).

Human behavior has been a common research interest in both conservation and agriculture issues. Researchers often question the behavior of individuals and what makes a person act like they do (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). In order to understand human behavior, it is important to evaluate the factors that cause the behavior (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). It is generally believed that a positive correlation exists between one's attitude and their corresponding behavior (Marandu et al., 2010).

The theory of reasoned action (TRA) is considered one of the most common models used today to understand attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs (Bright, 2003). The theory was introduced in 1967 by Martin Fishbein, who later teamed with Izak Ajzens to

develop the current form, which shows how attitudes predict behaviors (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980).

The TRA tells us that a person's action or behavior is determined by the corresponding behavioral intention. There are two main factors determining behavior intentions, the personal, or attitudinal component and the social, or normative component. The attitudinal component encompasses ones attitude towards a behavior whether they are supportive or not supportive of performing the behavior (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980).

The social, normative component addresses the influence that social environments have upon intentions and behaviors, which relate to the subjective norm. A subjective norm is a person's perception that the people he finds to be important would approve or disapprove of him performing the behavior (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980).

Subjective norms are thought to be a combination of what people feel others perceptions of a behavior are and whether others think the behavior is appropriate or not (Sparks et al., 1995) or the perceptions an individual holds for the appropriateness of a particular behavior relevant to the situation of importance (Baldwin et al., 2004).

The attitudinal component and social component, or subjective norm, are measured to give the overall behavioral intention, which will be different for each person. For some people, their own attitudes are more important than subjective norms for a particular behavior, and vice versa. Variables such as time, age, sex, status, and personality can all affect the importance of the components for an individual (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). If appropriate measures of the attitude and subjective norm are taken,

these components should be a very strong predictor of behavioral intention, which can then predict behavior (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980).

The theory of reasoned action can be applied to a number of behavioral domains and is considered to be a very general theory applicable to the explanation of many human behaviors (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). It has been used as the theoretical framework for a number of studies in natural resource and conservation related research (Bright, 2003) and a wide variety of agricultural topics, from attitudes towards fisheries management (Baker, 2009), preferences for outdoor recreation facilities development (Bright, 2003), and water conservation behaviors (Marandu et al., 2010) to farmers attitudes and adoption behavior of new livestock technologies (Rehman et al., 2003), (Rehman et al., 2007) and intentions to purchase beef and operate farm equipment safely (McCarthy et al., 2003), (DeBarr et al., 1998).

Throughout the process of applying for the CIAP grant, a number of people were involved with the establishment of the CIAP funded Kenedy County Agricultural Conservation Education Center. It became apparent that the attitudes and intentions of these people needed to be determined to guide the direction and future of the ACE Center. The TRA was used as the theoretical concept to discover how these "grantees" wanted to see the ACE Center be used to best realize benefits for Kenedy County and the need for agricultural conservation.

## Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to identify grantee perceptions of the Kenedy County Agricultural Conservation Education Center.

## Objectives

The objectives in this study were to

(A) Identify grantee beliefs about the Kenedy County ACE Center

(B) Identify grantee intentions for the Kenedy County ACE Center

## Methods

This research is considered to be an intrinsic case study. Case studies are used in qualitative research to examine and gain insight into single, unique situations through extensive data collection. More specifically, intrinsic case studies are used when a researcher is primarily interested in a specific situation and understanding every part of the situation, or case. (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009). Qualitative data were collected through respondent interviews with a representative sample of people considered to be the grantees of the Kenedy County ACE Center. Respondent interviews use directive questions to draw out open-ended responses from participants and are often used as a stand-alone method of collecting data. Participants are treated as authoritative speakers on behalf of their behaviors (Lindlof, 1995).

Selecting suitable participants for qualitative interviews is of great importance. One benchmark for good interviewees is appropriate experience with the cultural scene, meaning valuable experience with the critical events, decisions, and paths of the subject topic. Two other benchmarks are willingness of the interviewee to communicate about the subject topic and amount of time they interviewee can devote to the project (Lindlof, 1995).

The population for this study was individuals who had been involved with

applying for the CIAP grant or providing input for establishing the Center. These included employees of an engineering firm in Corpus Christi, the architect who designed the ACE Center plans, representatives of the Welder Wildlife Institute, representatives of the Sarita School District, Kenedy County governmental officials, and other individuals involved in the grant administration.

After receiving approval from Texas A&M University's Institutional Review Board, the researcher contacted participants by phone and formally invited them to participate in the study. All twelve people contacted agreed to participate and a meeting time was scheduled for each interview. In most cases, qualitative interviews can be conducted practically anywhere that is free of excessive distraction or noise. Researchers should try to arrange interviews in locations that are both comfortable and convenient for the participant (Lindlof, 1995). The interviews were conducted by the researcher in the Kenedy County area between January 13, 2012, and February 13, 2012. The interviews were conducted at ranch headquarters, the Sarita school, the Kenedy County court house, the Welder Wildlife Institute, and individual offices. They lasted an hour and a half on average. The researcher took in-depth notes for inclusion in the interview transcription. For the data analysis process, the researcher followed a qualitative data analysis model by Creswell (2009). The process began with preparing the data for analysis and it was then transcribed, organized, and studied to determine coding methods. Coding the data then began. Data was categorized by topic and labeled with a term (Creswell, 2009). Member checking and peer debriefing were used to ensure trustworthiness of the data.

The participants were given pseudonyms to protect privacy.

Validity in qualitative research can always be considered an issue because of the opportunity for the researcher to impose personal definition on the data. Researchers must try not to infer too much about the observations before data collection is complete. It is difficult to approach a study as a blank slate but the researcher should not hold on to any preconceived notions either. “Striking an optimal balance is a difficult and probably endless task.” (Lindlof, 1995 p.216).

## Results

All twelve participants were representative of some part of the grant process. Some categories were similar. Five individuals were involved with the grant because of where they are employed, three were representatives of the Kenedy Count school district, and four were Kenedy County governing or employed representatives. Table 1 provides the category type.

Table 1.1 *Grantee Interview Participants Representation*

| Pseudonym | Representation |
|---|---|
| G1 | Associated with grant by employment |
| G2 | Associated with grant by employment |
| G3 | Associated with grant by employment |
| G4 | Associated with grant by employment |
| G5 | Associated with grant by employment |
| G6 | School representative |
| G7 | School representative |
| G8 | Associated with grant by Kenedy County |
| G9 | Associated with grant by Kenedy County |
| G10 | Associated with grant by Kenedy County |
| G11 | School representative |
| G12 | Associated with grant by Kenedy County |

Because the goal of the case study was to gather and organize knowledge, participants were asked about their beliefs, intentions, and perceptions about the Center. After coding, the responses to the interview questions were categorized into two categories, beliefs and expectations. Four sub-categories were established under each of

these and this data was organized into common themes under the sub-categories.

**Objective 1: Grantee Beliefs**

*Purpose*

Grantees were asked what they believed the purpose of the Center was. These responses were grouped into general purpose, school use, 4-H use, and education. Nine grantees said they believed the Center is meant to serve as a multi-use educational facility. They said they believe the Center will provide education to people all over this region of Texas. G5 said "It is meant to be an educational tool for the community and a multi-purpose facility used for a variety of purposes."

Five grantees specifically said the purpose of the Center is for schools to use. They think it is meant to provide an outdoor classroom for the Sarita school and other schools in the region. The grantees believe it will allow students to have a unique and enjoyable educational experience. They believe it will help teachers satisfy required science curriculums by using principles that apply to conservation on Kenedy County rangeland. G12 said, "The school will use the ACE Center to help teach necessary science principles." G8 said it "…will be a place for kids to get out of the classroom and learn using hands on teaching methods so kids will enjoy it and have fun."

All twelve grantees said providing education about agriculture, wildlife, conservation, and land use in Kenedy County was a purpose of the Center. They believe topics in stewardship and sustainability in ranching, wildlife, range and habitat management are what people are meant to learn about at the ACE Center. Preservation of natural resources and water quality along with the environmental aspects of livestock

production were mentioned by grantees. G1 said the Center will be used to teach people about "…environmental waste management, water quality protection program, pollution control, and management of ranching operations with natural resource protection in mind."

The grantees believe that the Center is for teaching people about how these concepts apply to Kenedy County. "It is meant to be a hands-on Center to teach agricultural conservation, wildlife management, and how to manage, stabilize, and preserve the coastline – specifically the pristine environment of Kenedy County," G10. G3 said, "The Center will be used to teach kids about land management, water run-off, and negative environmental effects on the Laguna Madre." G5 said, "The curriculum taught at the Center will teach kids how to take care of Kenedy County lands along with what makes these lands special."

The grantees also said a part of the Center's purpose should be to introduce kids to possibilities in conservation, wildlife, and agriculture related areas they might not know exist. They want youth in Kenedy County to take more interest in these fields and learn about new opportunities and career paths. G9 said, "Part of our mission is to teach kids that there is so much more to the world of agriculture than just riding on a horse and working cows."

Five of the grantees said use by the 4-H program is a main purpose of the ACE Center. They said 4-H members will use the Center as a place to raise show animals and livestock projects. "It will provide pens, tack rooms, storage areas, and wash areas for

animals." G2. G9 said "It is meant to get more kids involved in 4-H and showing livestock projects so they can learn about agriculture through these experiences."

*Stakeholders*

Grantees were asked who they believed should be considered stakeholders or prospective users of the ACE Center. Residents of Kenedy County, youth and schools, and private entities were the emergent themes.

Nine grantees responded that everyone around the area could be considered a stakeholder, such as residents and community members of Sarita, local landowners, ranchers, and ranch employees, and the county as a whole. G4 said, "Everyone needs to be at the table."

Nine grantees specifically said schools and youth in the area are stakeholders, including students and teachers from the school and the students in the 4-H program. Eight grantees responded that public and private entities, programs, and organizations like the Extension Service and the NRCS would be Center stakeholders. They also mentioned the Caesar Kleburg Wildlife Research Institute, the Welder Wildlife Institute, Texas A&M University Kingsville, and local cattle companies like Thomas Charolais in Raymondville, Texas.

Six grantees believed that stakeholders should also be people from outside the county like community members and students from other small towns in the region. G8 said, "I have already had friends from other counties ask if they will be able to use it."

*Concerns*

Grantees were asked if they believed any problems or negative issues might arise from the establishment of the Center. The responses were grouped into concerns over the Center's use, the maintenance and care of the Center, and rules and guidelines for the Center.

Ten grantees brought up concerns involving whether the Center will actually be put to use and if it will be used for its intended purpose. They showed concern over having enough people become involved with using it and using it for educational purposes. The grantees said they want people to take advantage of the opportunity of having this Center in Sarita but are concerned people will not make the most of it. "Sometimes communities do not embrace good things when they have them" G2.

The grantees said they do not want the Center to set idle but they also do not want it to become just a place for social events. G6 said, "There is nothing for teenagers to do in this town, and it might turn into a collecting area for kids with nothing to do. Will it turn in to a hangout for kids after school or just a community party place?"

Six grantees brought up guidelines and rules for the Center. They said they needed to define these rules and determine who would be able to use the Center and what all will be allowed. G10 said "We need to iron out the details of who can actually use the Center and get people aware of these rules and regulations so they will know them before it gets up and running." G6 said, "Everyone is so connected here and I don't want anyone to feel offended if they are told they cannot use it."

The maintenance and upkeep of the Center was also discussed by seven of the grantees. They had concerns about how well people will take care of the facility when using it and if they will make sure it is left clean after they have used it. They are concerned about people having appreciation and respect for the Center. The grantees also said they were concerned with vandalism. G7 said, “Things getting taken care of around here is a huge concern for anything in this community.” G6 said, “I have concerns with vandalism and I do not want to see anyone spray paint it or carve it with knives.”

*Use by 4-H*

Grantees were asked what they believed about the ACE Center being used by the Sarita 4-H program. Five of the grantees had previously mentioned 4-H use as something they believed to be a main purpose of the Center. However, all twelve grantees were supportive and spoke positively about 4-H use when directly asked about it.

The grantees believe the 4-H should use the Center for meetings, prospect shows, show cattle seminars, activities, and for housing livestock projects. The grantees said they believe 4-H using the Center will help get many more kids involved in showing livestock projects and other aspects of the program. They said this was meant to be a part of the Center’s focus. G5 said, “The youth in 4-H who are showing livestock today usually grow up to stay involved in agriculture, meaning they will be the ones producing livestock and managing the range in the future. So, if they use the Center, they will be exposed to educational principles about conservation while there.” “Kids will not only

focus on raising livestock and their 4-H projects at the Center but they will also learn environmental effects of livestock production, wildlife management and range management" G1. The grantees said they expected more benefit for the kids out of the 4-H program than just show projects. G9 said, "There is so much more to 4-H than just showing livestock, and everyone will have the opportunity to raise livestock projects now that there will be pens for them to use."

However, four grantees did express hesitation about 4-H use. These people said they were worried that the Center might become only focused on 4-H use and create a reputation of being the 4-H center. G3 said, "The Center has morphed in focus from being for teaching about rangeland and conservation into the 4-H show barn due to all the 4-H interest." G7 said, "We definitely do not want to gear it only towards the 4-H."

**Objective 2: Grantee Intentions**

*Operation and Management*

Grantees were asked about their intentions for the Center's operation and management. Themes emerged out of these responses over how it should be managed, how one should contact the Center for use, and appropriateness of fees.

Nine of the grantees intend for there to be some type of board established for the Center. The people in this group would serve as a committee or staff to manage the Center's operation and guide its path. They said they intend for this committee to establish the guidelines by which the Center will function and for these people to help get things up and running. G4 said, "There will be a committee to decide on who can use the Center and to schedule workshops, speakers, and the events held at the Center." G8

said, “The Committee needs to meet every once in a while to plan events, stay aware of what is going on, and be updated on what needs to be done.”

Six of the grantees intend for there to be one individual who will serve as the main contact person for the Center. They think this person should be a part of the committee or operating board and will be who people know to get in touch with if they want to book the Center or find out if it is available to use. “It will be best if there is just one person to contact. People will call and talk to this one person who will schedule and get the details of what they are going to use the Center for” G4. G2 said, “There needs to be just one contact person and they need to have a website or phone number people can reach that person by.”

Four of the grantees intend for the Center contact person or leadership to be treated more like a staff. They intend for this person or people to be paid to manage the Center and to be a position contracted out locally. G1 said, “It will work better if run by someone contracted out.” G9 said, “We will contract out with someone and will pay them to operate the Center.” Other grantees suggested that someone with the school or with the county offices could take on this managerial role, but that they might not feel like that is part of their job description. G6 said they had, “Originally heard the school would keep the Center keys and manage but school secretaries might feel like it is not part of their job to keep up with the schedule and be held responsible.”

All of the grantees expressed intentions for how the Center will be managed, ranging from what type of events will be allowed to how to make the Center a success. The grantees intend for those who end up managing the Center to ensure that it is used as

often as possible. They intend for new uses to evolve out of the Center once it is operating and for all possible avenues to be utilized. “The leaders must be visionary and use the appeal of the ranching atmosphere to get people involved and then maneuver the direction of the Center for success” G11. The grantees intend for the Center to host its own events and programs and draw other people, organizations, and entities in to use the facilities. “The committee should try to schedule events throughout the year, at least once a month, so it doesn’t sit idle. They should reach out to entities and offer it for use and to the big players in the area to try and get them involved” G10.

Eight grantees want educational activities at the Center but also intend for there to be recreational or social use. They intend for anyone to be able to use the facilities and think that the more people that get involved the better, whether for educational reasons or not. By establishing as big of a user group as possible, they think the Center will help more people be exposed to the educational principles taught at the Center. “Having a recreational aspect will help get people involved. The committee needs to build a clientele base with recreational events and work up from there. If they offer an assortment of programs, some being recreational, they will get people there and then have the opportunity to educate them” G11. G2 said, “They need to make the events and programs somewhat social and hold them on a regular basis. People will look forward to and plan on going to see their friends and have a meal while listening to a guest speaker.”

However, eight of the grantees still intend for education to be the main focus of the Center and to ultimately have more priority for use than other personal or social events. “The priority is for education for the community” G4.

All of the grantees intend for the Center to be available to use without a fee, particularly for activities that are educational. This includes use of the Center by schools, 4-H clubs, conservation programs, or other educational functions for Kenedy County. The grantees also think that for very simple uses there should be no fee, such as activities that only use a small part of the facility. “If it is being used for an event related to education or something for the entire community that everyone can take part in or learn from, then there should not be a fee” G3

However, most of the grantees intend for there to be a fee charged when the Center is used for activities that do not have a direct educational purpose, like social events or recreational use. These grantees intend for this fee to be affordable and mainly enough to cover any costs of maintenance and upkeep required of the facility. “If it is being used for a personal event like a baby shower or quinceanera then there should be a fee but it would be hard to charge a lot of money in this community” G7. Although the grantees do want this fee to be reasonable, they feel that a fee is important so that people will not take using the Center lightly. “If there is no fee there will be no accountability so a little fee needs to be involved” G11. G5 said, “There needs to be a way to make people be held responsible for using it.”

*Benefits*

Grantees were asked what kind of benefits they intended the Kenedy County ACE Center to create. They responded with awareness and educational benefits, and social or community benefits.

Six grantees said they had intentions that the ACE Center would improve both education and awareness for the community. G11 said, "Having this Center will prevent the kids here from ever having feelings about inferiority about the education they receive." G6 said the Center will, "Create a better educated community of adults and children and better leaders for the community in the future."

Ten of the grantees responded that they intended the ACE Center to provide a number of social and community benefits. They said an immediate benefit was that there would finally be something in Sarita and people would not always have to go somewhere else to participate in activities. G8 said it "…will provide something for the people of Kenedy County since there isn't a lot here now." G2 said, "People will have somewhere attractive and new to go." These grantees also intend for the Center to attract more people and involvement to the area. G11 said, "It will draw more people in to visit the area and economic opportunities for the community may arise out of this." G1 said it, "…Will get Kenedy County on the map.'" More pride in the community and respect for what makes the area special are other benefits the grantees said they intended the Center to create. G12 said "It will be a big source of pride for the community" and G11 said, "The Center should enlighten people of how Kenedy County's history formed this part

of the world and preserve and better showcase the sense of values this area is known for."

*Others Intentions*

Grantees were asked how they thought others would intend to use the Center, more specifically how stakeholders would intend to use the Center. Responses for this question were grouped into community center/social use and educational use. Ten of the grantees responded that they thought others would perceive the Center to be for community use and would therefore have intentions to use it as such. They think people will intend to rent it out like one would rent a community or civic center for social events or parties, because there is nowhere around the area that functions as such a place. Birthday parties, quinceneras, and wedding receptions were all mentioned by these grantees. “People will want to have social events at it because there are such limited facilities in Sarita” G10. G8 said, “People will definitely want to use it for community events.”

Five grantees also said that others would intend to use it for educational related activities. These grantees said people will want to have extension programs, agriculture events, programs for schools and landowners, research studies, and community meetings. G10 said, “For the most part, people will want to use it for its intended purpose and conservation related activities.”

*Programs and Activities*

Grantees were asked about what type of programs and activities they intended to take place at the ACE Center. The basic responses to this question were generic terms

such as field days, programs, seminars, events, classes, etc. Grantees were asked for more detail and these responses were organized into agriculture and conservation-related programs, wildlife-related programs, and assorted programs not related to agriculture or conservation.

Nine grantees said they intended for there to be programs about conservation, agriculture, land, habitat management, and other related topics. Ranch and rangeland management, farming, animal husbandry, water conservation and drought education, natural resource conservation, and preservation of local habitats were all mentioned. They intend for the Center to provide information on new agricultural technologies or new products and offer courses with continuing education credits and applicator license credits. G10 said they intend to "have programs based on landowner suggestions and needs since they know the real issues affecting this area."

Six grantees said they intend to have programs relating to wildlife. These included Texas Parks and Wildlife programs and hunters education courses. Fishing and invasive species management were mentioned. G12 said they wanted the Center to host "a program for kids in the area to be able to hunt since hardly any of them are from families that own land."

Six grantees intend for there to be programs at the ACE Center that do not directly relate to agriculture or conservation but could still be considered beneficial to education or to the community. Grantees brought up classes for people in the area about health, nutrition, parenting, and family planning. How to write a resume and apply for a job were also mentioned. Grantees said there should be a Master Naturalist program at

the Center and prescribed burn education. Birdwatching programs were mentioned as well as activities for senior citizens.

## Conclusions and Implications

The grantees want the Kenedy County ACE Center to be a multi-faceted education Center that focuses on agriculture, wildlife, conservation and other concepts relating to the important industries of their home on the South Texas gulf coast. The grantees obviously felt there was an important need here for better conservation education and effective public outreach (*Texas Coastal Impact Assistance Plan*, 2008) about these concepts when they applied for the CIAP grant. Education about activities that directly impact the land is especially important here along the extremely ecologically sensitive coastal plains and Laguna Madre (Hilbun & Koltermann, 2002).

In general, the grantees attitudes towards the ACE Center are very similar. For example, all the grantees have positive attitudes about using the Center for education. Their subjective norms, or how they believe others feel, are similar also. Attitudes and subjective norms form the basis of an intention, according to the Theory of Reasoned Action. Because none of the grantees attitudes or subjective norms were extremely different, it can be expected that the grantees intentions were basically all similar.

The Center is mainly intended to be used by the Kenedy County school, the local 4-H program, Kenedy County residents, and agencies like the Extension Service and the NRCS. The grantees believe these agencies will use the Center to put on programs and events. The grantees expect for the Center to have very positive benefits

on both social and educational levels and they hope it will have an impact and be used by landowners, schools, students, and entities from all over the region.

Along with attracting people in to Sarita to use the Center, the grantees expect this new facility will help spread educational principles about conservation throughout the area. They also think it will instill more pride within the county. The grantees expect others to think highly of the county for establishing this educational center, considering agricultural conservation is more popular in terms of social acceptability than ever (Hobbs et al., 2008). This subjective norm probably affects the grantees attitudes as well.

The youth of Kenedy County have struggled in the past with participation in stockshows because many of them have not had the facilities or opportunities to raise a livestock project. This need was recognized by the grantees in the preliminary plans for the Kenedy County ACE Center and once built it will provide facilities for many students to house livestock projects. The grantees believe more of Sarita's youth would participate in livestock shows if they had the ability to. The felt that by allowing more kids here to have access to the facilities to raise a livestock project, these kids will gain responsibility, learn from mentors, increase their networking opportunities at a young age, and possibly have more chances of going to college by way of money earned on projects or scholarships. They also believe that by spurring an interest in 4-H, local youth will grow to care more about agricultural conservation and other concepts that will be taught at the Center, and take more of an interest in agriculture overall.

Helping more children to become involved in this aspect of the 4-H program is obviously an important purpose of the Kenedy County ACE Center, which all the

grantees support. However, some did imply that the Center does not need to become solely focused on 4-H use, which reiterates how strongly the grantees want to see education be a priority.

Along with providing 4-H support, the grantees want the Center to become a big part of the education of Sarita's youth. The school is intended to be one of the main users of the Center and a curriculum designed to meet educational mandates while teaching about agriculture, wildlife, range management, and conservation will be implemented to Sarita's students through the ACE Center. The grantees expect kids to enjoy their education more by being out of the traditional classroom, capitalizing on the benefits of place based education which facilitates learning through firsthand experiences about local landscapes (Flowers, 2010).

However, this place-based educational style will not only benefit schoolchildren of Sarita. Adults involved in agriculture and conservation prefer learning new concepts and new information through field demonstrations and programs that have a sense of participation (Bruening & Martin, 1992). The grantees intend for the Center to host a variety of meetings, seminars, and informational events for its users over agriculture, wildlife, conservation, land management, and other topics relating to the Centers purpose. These meetings are not only meant to be hosted by the Center but by individuals, groups, or agencies that want to book the Center to put on an event.

However, because education is the core of this project, some of the grantees intend for the Center to provide a wider scope of educational programs than those that

only relate back to the land. They want to see programs available that can benefit the people of Kenedy County in all aspects and improve their quality of life overall.

The grantees do not intend for those booking the Center for educational purposes to be required to pay to use it. However, most of the grantees intend for there to be some sort of fee to use the Center for non-educational purposes, like a social event or personal activity. They do not want this fee to be expensive and do not want it to discourage use of the Center but see this as an opportunity to generate some funds to cover the maintenance and upkeep of the facility or any expenses that incur.

These intentions for how the Center will actually be put to use will have to be handled by some type of management. The grantees intend for there to be either a volunteer management committee or paid staff that will plan events and handle all aspects of operation. Whoever this ends up being, they grantees intend for the management to make sure the Center is successful by ensuring people take interest in the Center and are happy with what it provides the community. Some of the grantees felt that allowing social activities would be a guaranteed way to ensure that people take interest in the Center.

It is apparent that the grantees believe education is an important purpose of the Center. They likely would intend to use, or have the behavioral intention to use the Center for an educational purpose in the future themselves. Therefore, it makes sense that many of the grantees expect other people to want to use the Center for educational purposes too. Behavioral intentions are formed from ones own attitude about a behavior and what they think others believe about the behavior. What an individual thinks others

think about a behavior or concept, known as the subjective norm in the Theory of Reasoned Action, is an important influence on how the individual will view the behavior themselves (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). Because the grantees believe that others will want to use the Center for education, they think others consider education for Kenedy County to be important too.

It is important to remember that while the grantees think people will want to use the Center for educational reasons, they also expressed concern for the Center not being used for it's intended purpose. The grantees expect people to also want to use the Center for social activities and non-educational events. Some of the grantees support recreational use because they see value in how it might help build a clientele for the Center and bring in more interest in the beginning. However, this expectation relates to some of the concerns the grantees expressed about the Center's future and its success. They worry about whether the Center will get used for its intended purpose of education. They are also concerned about it being used at all though; so recreational or social use may be beneficial in small amounts.

The grantees do not want to see the ACE Center sit idle and they also do not want to see it turn into a hangout for teenagers after school. Vandalism was a concern expressed by some grantees along with maintenance and upkeep of the facility. There are no other facilities in Sarita like the ACE Center will be and this asset will need to be taken care of, explaining why these concerns are legitimate.

Communication is an important aspect of any project that involves many individuals because different agendas can be at play and communicating helps attitudes

to be better understand (Glicken, 2000) (Baker, 2009). Most of the grantees responses had the same underlying tone or theme for each respective question. However, there was some variance in the responses, which led the researcher to believe that communication within the grantees about the Center's direction could be stronger. There were small differences about how the Center would be operated and by who. Some grantees intend for volunteers to manage the Center and some intend for a hired staff to manage. Some grantees intend for the Center to focus on education as much as possible and some intend for there to be a recreational aspect as well as educational.

Since the grantees think that people will want to use the Center for social activities, it is important that they address this expectation. It would probably be best for the Center to allow this to some extent because it will create more of a user base for the Center in general and help alleviate any concern of the Center completely sitting idle. However, the management will have to determine how to prevent the Center from being overtaken with social activity, which could definitely threaten its focus and intended purpose.

Because all of the concerns, intentions, and beliefs expressed throughout the interviews will ultimately fall on the shoulders of the people managing the Center, the responsible party needs to be determined as quickly as possible. Decisions need to be made about what the guidelines and rules will be for the Center and what is and is not going to be allowed. They need to consider how they will handle everyone's intentions without causing any kind of disagreement or discourse. The guidelines should be put on

paper and made available to the community so people will know what they are before the Center has even been put into use.

The expectations for the people who will manage the Center, whether paid to or not, will need to be addressed and should also be formalized. In reference to the grantees concerns about the Center being put to use, it is recommended that they put a lot of time and effort in planning how they will unveil the Center to it's stakeholders. The grantees should plan for some type of grand opening event and advertise about this and invite many people to come. It is critical that the Center makes a good first impression so people will take an interest in it, understand why it is here, and want to come back to participate in future activities.

At the time of data collection, the CIAP funds had not yet been released so construction had not begun. This means there should be adequate time to finalize the detailed plans for the Center and make these plans known throughout the community. It is important to have any guidelines that will be followed in place from the beginning so everyone can be on the same page.

After the conclusion of the data collection for this study, it is likely that many of the grantees realized there are some areas that everyone needs to get on the same page about. There is a definite need for stronger lines of communication between the grantees. More research could be done to investigate the perceptions of the management committee or leadership of the Center once this is determined. Their attitudes, intentions, and beliefs could be evaluated to form practical goals and plans for the Center, since they will be the people actually putting these plans into motion. A follow up study is

recommended after the first few years of the Kenedy County ACE Center operation to determine if the beliefs, intentions, and perceptions of the grantees had been fulfilled.

# CHAPTER III

# STAKEHOLDER PERCEPTIONS OF THE KENEDY COUNTY AGRICULTURAL CONSERVATION EDUCATION CENTER

## Introduction

Conservation agriculture (CA) as defined by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations,

> aims to conserve, improve, and make more efficient use of natural resources through integrated management of available soil, water, and biological resources combined with external inputs. It contributes to environmental conservation as well as to enhanced and sustained agricultural production. It can also be referred to as resource efficient or resource effective agriculture (Conservation Agriculture, 2010 p.1).

Conservation in agriculture is not a new concept. Soil erosion was recognized as a serious problem in the United States in the 1930s (Lee, 1980), which led to the establishment of the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). However, the concept of agricultural conservation has received more attention as social movements spur public interest and concern for the conservation of natural resources and the productivity of the land in the future (Brewer, 2002).

Today, the NRCS helps teach farmers and ranchers how to protect the natural resources in their care. “NRCS works with landowners through conservation planning and assistance to benefit the soil, water, air, plants, and animals for productive lands and healthy ecosystems.” (About NRCS: A legacy of conservation, 2011 p.1)

Agriculture and the environment have a multifaceted relationship and the agricultural sector is responsible for many of the interactions that take place between ecosystems and human beings. These interactions can cause major impacts on natural environments and ecosystems (Verhagen et al., 2007).

In order to feed to the growing world population, the dependence on agriculture is greater than ever. Yet people have grown further disconnected from agriculture. Society today can be described as agriculturally ignorant. Learning about agriculture, natural resources, biotechnology, food and environmental topics is not a top priority for many people, highlighting the great need for agricultural literacy today.

Agricultural education is crucial in the process of improving the way people manage their environment (Bruening & Martin, 1992) which explains why agricultural conservation is an important part of agricultural education. Agricultural extension has helped educate producers about conservation and how to lessen their impact on the environment. Although some conservation practices have become widely adopted and are commonly used by agriculturalists, in many instances adoption of conservation has been modest (Pannell et al., 2006). The best chances to promote the ethics of conservation are linked with the ability to educate, motivate and empower people about conservation (Johns, 2003).

For young students, learning about agriculture and conservation can begin with the study of nature and the environment. However, for many young children, simply hearing and reading about nature is not enough to gain a good education of the subject.

Children learn best through actively engaging with nature (Flowers, 2010) in a hands on manner.

Place-based education (PBE) is a style of learning that uses local landscapes, situations, and opportunities as a foundation for curriculum and emphasizes participation and personal engagement. The roots of PBE are in environmental education (Promise of place: Enriching lives through place-based education, 1999). "Through project-based learning, students make tangible contributions to resolving local and environmental issues and conserving local environmental quality"(Promise of place: Enriching lives through place-based education, 1999 p. 1).

"Place-based" programs encourage an out-of-the-classroom education where children study about the outdoors and natural resources through an active learning experience. There are a growing number of place-based education programs for youth, which facilitate learning of biological and ecological relationships through firsthand experiences in local landscapes and communities (Flowers, 2010).

The local application of PBE programs is logical because decline of an ecosystem or environment is often caused at a local level due to local land use decisions, such as urban development plans or disruption and destruction of habitats (Brody, 2003). These small scale decisions, often made by city councils, county commissioners, and community members, have the power to make large impacts on the environment and natural habitats of a region (Brody, 2003). Successful management or preservation of an ecosystem relates more to ecological boundaries than political apportionments or county

lines, creating the need for local collaboration and partnerships across the area of interest or concern (Brody, 2003).

Partnerships require planning and evaluation or planning for organizations with multiple levels of involvement from diffrerent groups or individuals can be very complex (Campbell et al., 2003). The development of such programs and partnerships with many levels of involvement often involves people who are considered stakeholders. A broad and basic definition of stakeholders is "individuals, groups, or organizations that can affect or are affected by an evaluation process and/or its findings." (Bryson et al., 2011 p.1). Any kind of people who make decisions about, desire information about, or can be affected by policies or programs can be considered stakeholders of those policies or programs.

When stakeholders are properly identified and their knowledge adequately analyzed, resulting evaluations can significantly enhance the intended uses or results of a given program. Stakeholders often have a wide variety of interests, which may compete with the interests of another (Bryson et al., 2011), but this variety can give many perspectives to help shape the focus and audience for the program.

Stakeholder participation has been used in studies about land conservation, land-use planning (Strager & Rosenberger, 2006), and place-based conservation education programs (Flowers, 2010).

The Theory of Reasoned Action is a fairly common theory to help understand a person's behavior. Many researchers believe that there is a direct correlation between behavior and attitude. The TRA, first introduced in 1967 by Fishbein, then later refined

by Fishbein and Ajzens, tells us that behavior is caused by behavioral intentions. These intentions to perform a behavior are affected by attitudes and social, or subjective norms towards the specific behavior.

The attitudinal component of the TRA addresses encompasses ones attitude towards a behavior whether or not an individual is in favor of performing the behavior (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). The social, subjective component is a person's perception of whether those he considers to be important to him would approve or disapprove of him performing the behavior (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980).

Although these components will usually be different for each person, if they are appropriately measured, they will be a very strong predictor of behavioral intention. This intention can then be used to predict behavior (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980).

## Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to identify stakeholder's perceptions of the Kenedy County Agricultural Conservation Education Center.

## Objectives

The objectives in this study were to

(A) Identify stakeholder beliefs about the Kenedy County ACE Center

(B) Identify stakeholder expectations of the Kenedy County ACE Center

## Methods

This research is considered to be an intrinsic case study. Case studies are used in qualitative research to examine and gain insight into single, unique situations through extensive data collection. More specifically, intrinsic case studies are used when a researcher is primarily interested in a specific situation and understanding every part of the situation, or case (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009). Qualitative data were collected through respondent interviews with a representative sample of people considered to be the stakeholders of the Kenedy County ACE Center. Respondent interviews use directive questions to draw out open-ended responses from participants and are often used as a stand-alone method of collecting data. Participants are treated as authoritative speakers on behalf of their behaviors (Lindlof, 1995).

Selecting suitable participants for qualitative interviews is of great importance. One benchmark for good interviewees is appropriate experience with the cultural scene, meaning valuable experience with the critical events, decisions, and paths of the subject topic. Two other benchmarks are willingness of the interviewee to communicate about the subject topic and amount of time they interviewee can devote to the project (Lindlof, 1995). Purposive sampling was used in the selection of participants as it is ideal in qualitative research because it allows the research problem to be studied in the most in-depth view (Creswell, 2009).

The population for this study was individuals who represented different stakeholder groups in the Kenedy County area. These included employees of the Texas Extension Service, the Natural Resource Conservation Service, and the Texas State Soil and Water Conservation Board, local ranch employees including management and wildlife biologists, representatives of the Sarita 4-H Club, and local landowners and community members.

After receiving approval from Texas A&M University's Institutional Review Board, the researcher contacted participants by phone and formally invited them to participate in the study. All eleven people contacted agreed to participate and a meeting time was scheduled for each interview. In most cases, qualitative interviews can be conducted practically anywhere that is free of excessive distraction or noise. Researchers should try to arrange interviews in locations that are both comfortable and convenient for the participant (Lindlof, 1995). The interviews were conducted by the researcher in the Kenedy County area between January 13, 2012, and February 13, 2012. The interviews were conducted at ranch headquarters, restaurants, the Kenedy County courthouse, and offices and lasted an hour and a half on average. The researcher took in-depth notes for inclusion in the interview transcription. For the data analysis process, the researcher followed a qualitative data analysis model by Creswell (2009). The process began with preparing the data for analysis and it was then transcribed, organized and studied to determine coding methods. Coding the data then began. Data was categorized by topic and labeled with a term (Creswell, 2009). Member checking and peer debriefing were

used to ensure trustworthiness of the data. The participants were given pseudonyms to protect privacy.

Validity in qualitative research can always be considered an issue because of the opportunity for the researcher to impose their own definition on the data. Researches must try not to infer too much about the observations before data collection is complete. It is difficult to approach a study as a blank slate but the researcher should not hold on to any preconceived notions either. “Striking an optimal balance is a difficult and probably endless task.” (Lindlof, 1995 p. 216).

## Results

All eleven participants were representative of a different category of stakeholder with various goals. Some categories were similar. Three were government organizations, four were employed by ranches, two were parents involved with the Sarita 4H club, one was a landowner, one was a community member. Table 1 identifies the pseudonym and category type.

Table *2.1 Stakeholder Interview Participants Representation*

| Pseudonym | Representation |
|---|---|
| S1 | Government agency |
| S2 | Government agency |
| S3 | Ranch |
| S4 | Landowner |
| S5 | Ranch |
| S6 | Ranch |
| S7 | Government agency |
| S8 | Ranch |
| S9 | 4-H |
| S10 | Community member |
| S11 | 4-H |

Because the goal of the case study was to produce knowledge for the Center's management to use, participants were asked about their beliefs, expectations, and perceptions about the Center. After coding, the responses to the interview questions were categorized into two categories, beliefs and expectations. Four sub-categories were established under each of these and this data was organized into common themes under

the sub-categories.

**Objective 1: Stakeholder beliefs**

*Purpose*

Stakeholders were asked what they believed the purpose of the Center was. These responses were grouped into general purpose, use by school, use by 4-H and conservation agriculture education. In general, stakeholders said they believed the Center is meant to be an educational facility available for many different uses. Eight of the eleven stakeholders responses were consistent with this theme. They felt it is meant to serve as a place to share ideas and information, to hold meetings for groups, to provide educational opportunities, and to serve as a link between agencies. S9 said, "It will be a multi-purpose facility used for all possible ways and options to educate."

Eight stakeholders specifically said the purpose of the Center is for the Sarita school to use. One said it will be "a way for kids to learn outside the classroom" S1 and another said "it will serve as a way to get kids out of the classroom, provide hands on education and get them excited about learning" S9.

Nine stakeholders cited providing education about conservation, agriculture, wildlife, and other topics pertinent to Kenedy County as a purpose of the Center. The stakeholders thought these topics should be taught in a general view as well as at a local level, meaning specific to Kenedy County. They believe it should teach big picture approaches to these topics. S6 said "It is meant to teach about conservation agriculture so the coastal lands here can continue to prosper and be useful." S4 said it "should be a hands on place for kids to learn about the Kenedy County rangeland, natural habitats,

plant life and native animals and what grows here, what survives here, what is best for here." These stakeholders also said a part of the education should be to introduce kids to new possibilities in conservation and agriculture related fields. S3 said it "should help kids to see agriculture as a possible area for them to study in college and go into as a career." S11 said the Center should help "make kids realize they don't just have to be a cowboy on the ranch like their parents and grandparents did and that there are many new career opportunities out there in agriculture."

Six stakeholders specifically addressed use by the 4-H program as a main purpose of the ACE Center. They said 4-H members will use the Center as a place to raise show animals and will help more kids participate in the program. S10 said, "The main purpose is to get more kids involved in 4-H and for them to have a place to house animals." S8 said, "The Center is for children of Sarita and surrounding areas to raise livestock projects for stockshows."

*Stakeholders*

Participants were asked whom else they believed could be considered stakeholders and whom they believed should be Center "users." Residents of Kenedy County, youth and schools, and private entities were the emergent themes. Eight people responded that everyone around the area could be considered a stakeholder, such as residents and community members of Sarita, local ranches and landowners, and the county as a whole. Nine participants specifically said schools and youth in the area should use it, including students and teachers from the school, the 4-H program, and any other youth groups. Five stakeholders responded that public and private entities,

programs, and organizations like the Extension Service and the NRCS should become users of the Center. They also mentioned groups like the Caesar Kleburg Wildlife Research Institute and the Texas and Southwestern Cattle Raisers Association. Six people noted that stakeholders should also be from outside the county like the schools located in small farming communities throughout South Texas.

*Concerns*

Stakeholders were asked if they had any concerns about the Center or if they foresaw anything negative arising from the establishment of the Center. Seven stakeholders made statements about the Centers management or leadership and the people who would be involved with managing it. Stakeholders said they want the Center to have enough people involved with it and for the leaders to keep it on a good path. They believe the leadership will have a great impact on the direction and success of the Center. They also said they did not want to see only a few people take over the Center. S8 said, "It should be for all people and not just the few that lay their claim to it first." S6 said they "want to see the right people stay involved in the management."

Five stakeholders brought up guidelines and rules for the Center and said they wanted to see these be defined. They said these rules should address what will be allowed and what will not. The maintenance and upkeep of the Center was also discussed by five of the stakeholders. They questioned who would be held responsible for upkeep. S10 suggested that the youth using the Center to house livestock projects could share responsibility for maintenance.

The most stakeholder concerns involved whether the Center will actually be put to use and if it will be used for its intended purpose. Nine people expressed these feelings. They said it would be bad to not make use of the Center for all it is worth and that the Center should not lose its focus. “The Center is there for the community but I do not want to see personal activities and events take over” S1.

*Use by 4-H*

Participants were asked how they felt about the Center being used for 4-H activities and what their view was on this topic. All eleven stakeholders were very supportive of the 4-H using the Center but four stakeholders expressed some reservations.

Stakeholders said the Center would help get more kids active in the local program. Many said more kids in Sarita and Kenedy County would raise livestock projects for participation in stock shows. Seven said the Centers facilities would provide a way for 4-H’ers to raise livestock projects. “So many kids would be more involved if they had the facilities to raise an animal or the means to create an area to raise an animal but they don’t here” S9. S8 said the Center “will allow more kids to be involved in and prepared for livestock shows because participation in livestock shows is such a big deal for kids in this part of Texas.” Also, five people specifically said that the Center should be used for 4-H related activities such as meetings, livestock judging meets, and seminars.

However, four stakeholders brought up issues they believed could arise from 4-H use. Overuse by the group and altered perception of the Centers purpose were the

general concerns. S5 said, “The people managing the Center should not just let the 4-H take over because perception will become that it is the 4-H Center.” S1 said they “were worried the Center might lose its focus and become a place strictly for 4-H parties and activities.”

**Objective 2: Stakeholder Expectations**

*Operation and Management*

Stakeholders were asked about their expectations for the Center’s operation and management. Themes emerged out of these responses over how it should be managed, how one should contact the Center for use, appropriateness of fees, and who should have top priority for use.

Nine of the stakeholders expected there to be some type of board established for the Center. The people in this group would serve as a committee or staff to manage the Center’s operation and guide its path. “There should be an advisory committee that will be the nucleus of the Center” S1. All of these stakeholders had expectations for how it should be managed, ranging from what type of events should be allowed to how to make the Center a success. The stakeholders expect the management of the Center to ensure it is used very frequently by hosting events on a regular basis. “There should be monthly or quarterly events” S7 “Do anything that will get people involved and get them to come to the Center and use it” S9 However, six stakeholders expect those managing the Center to focus on education. S1 said, “Priority should be for groups focused on the mission of the Center that support why it is there.”

Eight stakeholders expect there to be only one main contact person for the Center. They think this person should serve on the committee but be the one person who people will know to get in touch with if they want to find out if they can use the Center. “There needs to be a central point or place to go to with one person who has a record of what dates are available to use the Center” S4. “The committee will manage but one person needs to be available to contact to book it and organize things” S10.

Seven stakeholders do not think there should be a fee to use the Center, particularly for activities that are educational. This includes use of the Center by schools, 4-H clubs, conservation related activities or Kenedy County. The stakeholders also think that for very simple uses there should be no fee, such as activities that only use a small part of the facility. S11 said, “We might push people away in the community if they think spending money is associated with the Center.”

However, ten stakeholders expect there to be a fee charged when the Center is used for activities that do not have a direct educational purpose. All of these stakeholders expect a fee for the Center to be affordable and mainly enough to cover any costs of maintenance and upkeep required for the building. S8 said “There should be a fee to cover costs of cleaning up after events because otherwise people will abuse it.” A few suggested that some type of reimbursable fee could be considered. “The fee could be less if the renter is willing to clean it up themselves afterwards to a certain standard” S6. Six said that the fee to rent the Center could depend on the number of people coming, type of event, what parts of the Center are used, etc. S1 said, “The fee could depend on what type of activity the Center is being used for.”

*Benefits*

Stakeholders were asked what kind of benefits they expected the Kenedy County ACE Center to create and they responded with conservation benefits, social or community benefits, and educational benefits.

Ten stakeholders said that they believed the ACE center would directly benefit conservation efforts in the Kenedy County area. They expect it to enhance conservation efforts by teaching new approaches to basics of conservation in range management, livestock management, and wildlife management. These stakeholders expect the Center to influence ranches in the area to utilize more conservation techniques and provide the current and future employees of these ranches with a better education about conservation. S4 said "If we teach our youth and instill these educational principles in them when they are young, they will grow up using those principles and will cherish and appreciate what we have here." S5 said "It will bring good educational principles to an area that is very rural and very focused on agriculture."

Eight stakeholders responded that they expected the ACE Center would provide a number of social and community benefits. "People won't have to go to Kingsville for everything now. There will be something here" S4 "It will provide something for the community and area since there hasn't really been anything here before" S9.These stakeholders said they expected the Center to attract more people and involvement to the area. "It will bring more interest and activities to the area" S7. S4 said, "If it gets up and running well and is a worthwhile place to visit, then the Center might get more people stopping in and Sarita won't just be a blinking light on the highway anymore."

Five stakeholders said they expected the Center to benefit the education of both Sarita's youth and adults. They expect people to take more interest in learning when it is not done in the traditional setting of classroom. S9 said, "There will be better learning because more people learn by doing and touching than traditional ways." S10 said, "Getting at least a few kids here interested in their education will be a big accomplishment." These stakeholders also expect the Center to expand into topics not typically interested in schools which students might find interesting. "It will tap into education about things people generally don't think about like coastal estuaries, conservation, and natural resources" S1. S11 said "They can possibly get more kids interested in education and then going on to college which will be a big accomplishment."

*Others Expectations*

Stakeholders were asked about their expectations for use of the Center, more specifically how they expected other stakeholders or community members to want to use the Center. Responses for this question were grouped into community center/social use and educational use.

Nine of the stakeholders responded that they expected others to perceive the Center to be for community use. "If it is open to the public, people will want to use it for family reunions, birthday parties, showers, and little gatherings" S4."It will be seen as a community center" S11.

Nine stakeholders also said that they expected people to want to use it for its intended purpose of educational related activities. These stakeholders said people will

want to use it for educational meetings, programs, and events. S11 said, “It will be used by any kind of entity looking for a place to have educational events.”

*Programs and Activities*

Stakeholders were asked about what type of programs and activities they expected to take place at the Center. Basic responses included generic terms such as meetings, field days, programs, workshops, seminars, technical sessions, etc. Stakeholders were asked for more detail and these responses were organized into agriculture and conservation-related programs, wildlife-related programs, and assorted programs not related to agriculture or conservation.

Seven people said they expected there would be programs about conservation, agriculture, land, habitats management, and other related topics. Soil, water, and agricultural conservation, coastal land and rangeland management, applicator license training courses, and farming were all mentioned. “There should be soil conservation programs put on by the NRCS” S11. These stakeholders expected programs in livestock production topics such as artificial insemination, palpation, husbandry, watering schemes, and marketing. S6 said, “They should have programs on cattle marketing schemes other than just basic cow calf marketing.”

Seven stakeholders said they want the Center to have programs relating to wildlife. These included wildlife biology, management, identification, appreciation, and species control like feral hogs. Texas Parks and Wildlife programs were mentioned as well as gun safety, wilderness survival, and wildlife tracking, hunter education, and hunting. “There should be hunting and wildlife trade shows and conventions” S7.

Nine stakeholders expect programs at the ACE Center that do not directly relate to agricultural conservation. Stakeholders brought up classes for the people in this area about health, nutrition, and cooking. Language, reading, and college preparedness courses were mentioned as well as programs about alternative energies like wind energy and biofuels. They said there should be horticulture programs and gardening expositions and demonstrations. A bird watching program or set up area was mentioned as well as activities for senior citizens. S8 said "There should be scouting activities for kids. There is a lot of potential to get boys and girls involved in scouting. It is a great organization and there aren't many kids involved in it here."

## Conclusions and Implications

The stakeholders want the Kenedy County ACE Center to be a multi-faceted education Center that focuses on agriculture, wildlife, conservation and other concepts relating to the important industries of their home on the South Texas gulf coast. Because much of the stakeholder representation for this study included people who directly depend on the land for their livelihood, it makes sense that the stakeholders considered agricultural education a key factor in how people treat the land (Bruening & Martin, 1992). Education about activities that directly impact the land is especially important here along the extremely ecologically sensitive coastal plains and Laguna Madre (Hilbun & Koltermann, 2002).

In general, the stakeholders attitudes towards the ACE Center are very similar. For example, all the stakeholders have positive attitudes about using the Center for education. Their subjective norms, or how they believe others feel, are similar also.

Attitudes and subjective norms form the basis of an intention, according to the Theory of Reasoned Action. Because none of the stakeholders attitudes or subjective norms were extremely different, it can be expected that the stakeholders intentions were fairly similar.

The stakeholders mainly expect for the Center to be used by the Sarita school, the local 4-H program, Kenedy County residents, and agencies like the Extension Service and the NRCS. They want these agencies to come to the Center and put on programs and events. The stakeholders expect for the Center to have very positive benefits to the community and for education and conservation efforts in the area. They think it could be used by landowners, schools, students, and entities from all over the region, not only locals, to make an even bigger impact.

The stakeholders expect more visitors and people to come to Sarita to use the ACE Center and they expect the Center will influence some of the larger ranches to use more conservation techniques than they already were. They also believe it will help teach the current and future employees of the large ranches better educational principles to apply to their daily work. This is important because the people who work in agriculture are responsible for many of the interactions that can take place between the land and humans (Verhagen et al., 2007), particularly in Kenedy County where agricultural impacts from humans can affect the coastal environments and the Laguna Madre (*Texas Coastal Impact Assistance Plan*, 2008). The stakeholders also felt it would be a huge benefit to finally have something in Sarita so people would not always have to go somewhere else to participate in activities.

Many of the stakeholders mentioned that the lack of activity for youth in this area has always been an issue. The kids of Kenedy County have struggled in the past with participation in stock shows because many of them have not had the facilities or opportunities to raise a livestock project. One of the concepts the stakeholders were most excited about is using the ACE Center facilities for Sarita students to house livestock projects, because most of the people that live in Sarita do not have an area available to do so. Helping more children to become involved in this aspect of the 4-H program is obviously an important purpose of the Kenedy County ACE Center to the stakeholders. They considered this to be positive because new 4-H members could benefit from all of the lessons taught in the program. Also, agricultural education is considered necessary for students but is often difficult to incorporate into school curriculum. The stakeholders view 4-H use as an avenue to provide the agricultural education kids need and hopefully raise interest in agriculture as a whole. Today, students of all ages need agricultural education but incorporating this into school curriculum can be a challenge (Leising et al., 2001). All of the stakeholders had something positive to say about 4-H use of the Center. However, some did imply that they did not want the ACE Center to become thought of solely as the 4-H Center and only host 4-H activities.

Along with providing 4-H support, the stakeholders believe the Center will become a big part of the education of Sarita's youth. The school is expected to be one of the main users of the Center. The stakeholders think it is meant to provide a non-traditional style of education for students that will be more enjoyable and make them take an interest in learning. The stakeholders expect kids to enjoy their education more

by being out of the traditional classroom setting. This will capitalize on the benefits of place based education, facilitating learning through firsthand experiences about local landscapes (Flowers, 2010).

However, this place-based educational style will not only benefit schoolchildren of Sarita. Adults involved in agriculture and conservation prefer learning new concepts and new information through field demonstrations and programs that have a sense of participation (Bruening & Martin, 1992). The stakeholders expect the Center to host a variety of meetings, seminars, and informational events for its users over agriculture, wildlife, conservation, land management, and other topics relating to the important industries of Kenedy County. Wildlife and hunting-related programs were considered significant by many of the stakeholders, reinforcing how much these activities mean to the Kenedy County economy.

They believe these meetings and activities should not only be hosted by the Center but by individuals, groups, or agencies that want to put on events. Many of the stakeholders also expect the Center to provide a wider range of educational programs that are not necessarily within the scope of agriculture or conservation but could still be considered beneficial and educational. Overall, these stakeholders expect classes, programs, and activities that could improve education and quality of life for people in the area by providing an assortment of topics.

The stakeholders do not expect for those booking the Center for educational purposes to be required to pay to use it. They do not think there should be a fee for any type of educational use or for very simple uses that do not use much of the facility.

However, most of the stakeholders agreed that there should be some sort of fee to use the Center for non-educational purposes, like a social event or personal activity. They do expect this fee to be affordable but seemed to feel like if the Center is a good facility it will be worth paying to use it. S8 seemed to be considering how people would perceive the Center when he said, “People think free things are not as good as things they have to pay for.” Some thought it would be a good idea to pay different fees for different size groups or length of use.

These expectations for how the Center will actually be put to use need to be handled by the management. The stakeholders expect some type of management committee or board to plan events and handle all aspects of operation. The stakeholders expect the management to make sure the Center is used for education but they also want to make sure it is used regularly. They think the leadership should allow any kind of programs or events that will get people to come to the Center, helping to ensure the facility is used often.

The stakeholders believe education is an important purpose of the Center and have behavioral intentions to use it for such. It makes sense that they expect other people to want to use the Center for educational purposes too, because behavioral intentions are formed from ones own attitude about a behavior and what they think others believe about the behavior. What an individual thinks others think about a behavior or concept, known as the subjective norm in the Theory of Reasoned Action, is an important influence on how the individual will view the behavior themselves (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). The stakeholders believe that others will want to use the Center for education,

which means they think others consider education for Kenedy County to be important too. These underlying attitudes and beliefs are common among most of the stakeholders, which make it likely that people will actually use the Center for education.

The stakeholders also expect people to want to use the Center for social activities and non-educational events. They think people will want to rent it out like one would rent a community or civic center for social events or parties, because there is nowhere around the area that functions as such a place. The stakeholders believe that people are going to be excited about having a facility in the town of Sarita like this. Based on what we know about the TRA, this subjective norm might end up influencing the stakeholders to want to use the Center for more social activity themselves.

This directly relates to some of the concerns the stakeholders expressed about the Center's future. They seemed to be worried about how the Center will get used and if it will be used for its intended purpose. The stakeholders showed concern about gathering interest in the Center, it losing purpose quickly, and people taking advantage of the new community asset. The fact that the stakeholders and future users of the Center expressed these feelings is actually a positive thing because this shows that they do not all intend to just use it for social activities and actually care about people using it for education.

The stakeholders also seemed to care about how the Center would be maintained and kept in good shape. They wanted to see rules be defined for the Center, which probably relates to their concern about the people who would be involved with the Center's management. The stakeholders seemed to worry about those leading the Center not keeping it on a good path and they think that the right people need to be involved so

it will be successful. With this Center being a rare and new addition to the community of Sarita it seemed like the stakeholders felt people might be battling for control.

Communication is an important aspect of any project that involves many individuals because different agendas can be at play and communicating helps attitudes to be better understand (Glicken, 2000) (Baker, 2009). Stakeholder participation in the planning process can significantly enhance the intended uses of a given program (Bryson et al., 2011) and can provide valuable knowledge to help make programs more effective (Campbell et al., 2003).

The stakeholders in this study had fairly consistent views among one another. Most of the responses had the same underlying tone or theme for each respective question. However, small variances were noted in what the stakeholders believed and expected to be most important at the Center. About half of the stakeholders considered education to be the most important thing focus for the Center. The other half was more interested in the 4-H using the Center and helping more of the local kids to get involved in showing livestock. As excited as the stakeholders are about the new addition to their community, they want the Center to be available for everyone to use and not just people of Kenedy County. This shows their support of the educational principles the Center is meant to teach, because they want others to learn from the Center as well.

Also, there was a lot of variety in the types of programs and activities the stakeholders expect to take place at the Center. From very technical topics like cattle palpation and feral hog control to wind energy and nutrition classes, the stakeholders seem open to learning about anything. Some of these classes might appeal more to

certain groups than others but the point is that the stakeholders think a little of everything is a good idea.

Because there was a good amount of interest expressed in using the Center for 4-H and for social activities along with educational purposes, the guidelines for what all will be allowed greatly needs to be addressed. The researcher recommends that all guidelines and rules be established before the Kenedy County ACE Center officially opens. At the time of data collection, the CIAP funds had not yet been released so construction had not begun. This means there should be adequate time to finalize the detailed plans for the Center and make these plans known throughout the community. It is important to have any guidelines that will be followed in place from the beginning so everyone can be on the same page.

More research could be done in the future to investigate if the perceptions of the stakeholders have been met or if the Kenedy County ACE Center has been effective.

# CHAPTER IV

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Kenedy County's roots in agriculture run deep and being an area so remote and unpopulated has helped to preserve this rare setting. After having conversations with the twenty-three participants in this study, the researcher was able to develop a good understanding of the county's dynamic. Almost all of the land here is owned by a handful of landowners and these large ranches employ most of Kenedy County's residents. Livestock, land, and wildlife are of major importance to the Kenedy County economy. Kenedy County residents depend on the land in some way for their livelihood, just as their parents and grandparents did before them, be it through working with cattle or with wildlife that call these lands home. Perhaps this deep connection to the land explains why residents of Kenedy County appreciate their rural surroundings and unique way of life and often choose to stay and raise their own families here. These people have remained loyal to the Kenedy County area for decades, despite lacking the conveniences and advantages that living in a more urban area could provide. Through the Coastal Impact Assistance Program grant process, the people here were given the opportunity to have something new – the Kenedy County Agricultural Conservation Education Center.

Overall, education and opportunities are the heart of the Kenedy County ACE Center. Because the funds for the ACE Center came from the CIAP, the underlying focus of the project is for protection, conservation, and preservation of coastal areas (*Coastal Impact Assistance Program guidelines*, 2006). The entire eastern border of Kenedy County is the unique and ecologically sensitive Laguna Madre, reinforcing why

agricultural conservation education would be important in this area (Gardner, 2010). With a population that is highly likely to work here on the land in the future, Kenedy County is obviously a great place to build an agricultural conservation education center. The ACE Center is a somewhat unique use of CIAP funds but one that will probably reach out and affect more people in a positive way than other possible CIAP projects.

The grantee and stakeholder intentions and expectations discovered in this study were all subject to somewhat common attitudes and subjective norms, the major factors of the Theory of Reasoned Action. The grantees and stakeholders are all people who have a connection to this part of Texas in some way, explaining why many of their underlying attitudes and subjective norms towards the ACE Center were fairly similar.

Fortunately, there are not many major differences between the grantees perceptions and the stakeholder's perceptions about the Kenedy County ACE Center, which means the grantees intentions will likely satisfy the stakeholder's expectations. All the participants fully support educational use of the ACE Center. However, more of the stakeholders were of the mindset that the Center should concentrate on 4-H use over educational programs. While all of the grantees and stakeholders supported the use of the ACE Center by the 4-H, it seemed that more of the stakeholders wanted the Center to focus on this. This may be related to the fact that the stakeholder participants had a more direct connection to the 4-H program than the grantee participants and know firsthand the issues the Kenedy County 4-H club has dealt with in the past.

Another clear difference was that some of the grantees intended for a paid staff to manage the Center whereas none of the stakeholders had any expectations of the Center

hiring someone to work for it. Either way, both groups made it clear that a group of people should take the lead in organizing and booking events, managing schedules, and making sure the Center stays active and on track. Keeping the Center active was a big issue for both groups so it is recommended that everything possible be done to prevent it from sitting idle.

The stakeholders also expressed more concern than the grantees overall. Some of this concern was about the Center's future in terms of who will be managing, leading, or operating the facility. Perhaps the grantees did not worry about this because some of the current people in these grantee positions may intend to be on the management committee or board in the future. Therefore, it would not make sense if they were to express concern for their own leadership abilities. There was also more concern and questions from the stakeholders about the maintenance and care of the Center and what the rules for the Center would be. Because the grantees have been involved with the process of getting the Center up and running and already have their established intentions for these areas, they probably did not consider those topics to be of concern to them.

Again, all of the participants in this study, both grantees and stakeholders, were glad the Center would be available for the 4-H to use and would provide the facilities for Sarita's youth to raise livestock projects. Greater participation in local stockshows is expected to be one of the most tangible benefits of the Kenedy County ACE Center in the near future. It is obvious that the people interviewed in this study revered the 4-H as a very educational and important program for kids to be involved in here.

Along with 4-H use and providing a hands-on way of learning about agriculture, wildlife, conservation, and environmental effects on the lands of Kenedy County, the grantees and stakeholders want the ACE Center to help kids take an interest more of an interest in agriculture and their future possibilities within agriculture. They hope this interest will make more of the youth in Sarita want to go to college to study an agriculture related field. The grantees and stakeholders alike want for kids around here to realize they do not have to be horseback working cattle everyday to work in agriculture and that there are innumerable opportunities available.

The historical ranching background of this part of Texas helped establish the way of life these people live here today. It is safe to say that many people in Kenedy County work for one of the big ranches or have family members that do. Quite often, the kids born and raised in Kenedy County will spend their adult lives there too. “The kids are almost expected to stay here and work for the ranch so this is an avenue to raise interest in going to college” S9.

In the past, most of Kenedy County’s youth would start working on the ranches when they were young. The participants said this has changed in the past several years due to labor laws and the kids here are missing out on that basic education they used to get out on the ranch. Their hope is that the ACE Center will help fill these knowledge gaps by teaching Sarita’s children about ranching, the rangeland and wildlife of Kenedy County, and conservation, in a way that all relates back to the science principles they are supposed to learn in school. This way school districts from across the area can benefit by providing their students a fun, hands-on educational experience that will keep them on

track with the required curriculum mandates. The Center truly has some innovate and unique plans.

However, for many of these plans, ideas, and intentions, there are no final decisions. How the management committee will be set up or who will be on it has not been established. It might be a good idea to consider some stakeholder representation in this group. Because the grantees and stakeholders want the Center to be used by others from outside the county and establish a large clientele and user base, they need to determine how they want to attract these users. Advertisement in local newspapers could be used to promote the opportunity to rent the Center or for a specific event. Placing a sign on the major road through Sarita, Highway 77, could be effective. A reporter from a news station out of Corpus Christi or the Rio Grande Valley could do a story on the first few events at the ACE Center. The first event or grand opening definitely needs to be an important day for the county. This will be the first impression that many of the future stakeholders will get from the ACE Center so it needs to be enjoyable and educational and make them want to come back to events and programs in the future.

Many of the grantees may end up participating in the leadership or management of the Center in the future. This group seemed to have more established intentions for the Kenedy County ACE Center than the stakeholders. However, all of the knowledge generated in this study should be considered by the grantees because it brought together views from a diverse group of people that will be involved with the ACE Center in the future. Interviews were an effective method of data collection because they allowed the researcher to obtain more detailed and personal results than any other method would

have permitted. Using this knowledge will allow the Center to have a clearer sense of purpose and direction and therefore be able to promote and teach conservation agriculture in the most effective manner. It will also help keep people interested in the Center and ensure its success.

At the time of data collection, the CIAP funds had not yet been released so construction of the Center had not begun. This means there should be adequate time to finalize the detailed plans for the Center and make these plans known throughout the community. It is important to determine how and who will manage the Center and on what terms. It is also important to have any guidelines that will be followed established and put into action from the beginning so everyone can be on the same page. These recommendations are directed towards the future management of the Kenedy County ACE Center.

A possible research opportunity for the future could investigate how well the intentions and expectations of the grantees and stakeholders were met, once the ACE Center had been in operation for a few years. Are the stakeholders satisfied with how the Center has been functioning? Do the grantees believe the Center is operating as the intended it to? Have any of the concerns these people expressed become a reality?

Another study could be over the effectiveness of agricultural education centers such as the ACE Center. Does having this type of establishment in an area actually improve stakeholder's agricultural knowledge and awareness? Are these centers used more for education or more for social use? Would an agricultural education center be more effective in a rural area or urban area?

There are many more research opportunities to complement the perceptions, expectations, and intentions discovered about the Kenedy County ACE Center. If there is more research done on agricultural education centers like the ACE Center, then these types of facilities can be made more effective and useful and might become more popular in other areas of the state.

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# APPENDIX A

## INFORMATION SHEET

**Stakeholder and Grantee Perceptions of the Kenedy County Agricultural Conservation Education Center**

**Introduction**
The purpose of this form is to provide you (as a prospective research study participant) information that may affect your decision as to whether or not to participate in this research. You have been asked to participate in a research study about the Kenedy County Agricultural Conservation Education Center. The purpose of this study is to identify the attitudes and expectations of the ACE Center grantees and the attitudes and behavioral intentions of the ACE Center stakeholders. This knowledge will provide the Center with a clearer sense of purpose and direction. You were selected to be a possible participant because you have been identified as a grantee or stakeholder of the Center; therefore your participation will be significant to the study.

**What will I be asked to do?**
If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in a semi-structured interview with the researcher. If identified as a grantee, you will be asked to participate in a semi-structured interview with the researcher.

**What are the risks involved in this study?**
The risks associated with this study are minimal, and are not greater than risks ordinarily encountered in daily life.

**What are the possible benefits of this study?**
The possible benefits of participation are that the ACE Center will be able to operate with a clearer sense of purpose and may be able to satisfy stakeholder's intentions for use.

**Do I have to participate?**
No. Your participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate or to withdraw at any time without your current or future relations with Texas A&M University or the Kenedy County ACE Center being affected.

**Who will know about my participation in this research study?**
This study is confidential, and pseudonyms will be used. The records of this study will be kept private. No identifiers linking you to this study will be included in any sort of report that might be published. Research records will be stored securely and only Anna Langford and Tracy Rutherford will have access to the records.

**Whom do I contact with questions about the research?**
If you have questions regarding this study, you may contact Anna Langford at 512-557-8431, annasue05@neo.tamu.edu. Or you may contact Tracy Rutherford at 979-458-2744, trutherford@aged.tamu.edu.

**Whom do I contact about my rights as a research participant?**
This research study has been reviewed by the Human Subjects' Protection Program and/or the Institutional Review Board at Texas A&M University. For research-related problems or questions regarding your rights as a research participant, you can contact these offices at (979)458-4067 or irb@tamu.edu.

**Participation**
Please be sure you have read the above information, asked questions and received answers to your satisfaction.

# APPENDIX B

**Kenedy County Agricultural Conservation Education Center**
**Interview Questions**
Moderator: Anna Langford

1. What are your beliefs or views about conservation and sustainable agriculture?
    a. What are your beliefs or views about range and wildlife management?

2. How important or applicable do you think these concepts are to the Kenedy County Area?

3. What do you believe the general purpose of the Kenedy County ACE center is?
    a. What do you believe the Center's mission and objectives should be?

4. What positive things do you think this Center will bring to Kenedy County?
    a. Do you think there are any negative things about the Center and if so, what are they?

5. How do you believe the Center will enhance the use of conservation or sustainable agriculture in Kenedy County in the future?

6. Who would you consider to be the stakeholders of the Kenedy County ACE Center?

7. How do you think most people will use the Center?
    a. What kind of programs or activities do you think the Center should provide?
    b. What would you most like to use the Center for (or see stakeholders use the Center for?)

8. How do you think the process for stakeholders to book time to use the Center should work?
    a. Do you think there should be a fee to use the Center?
    b. If so, what do you think would be an appropriate amount to charge for use of the Center?

9. Do you think priority for using the Center should be given to any particular stakeholder group?
    a. Do you think conservation education should be the top priority of the Center over other activities?
    b. How do you feel about the Center being used for 4H or FFA activities?

# VITA

Anna Sue Langford earned her Bachelor of Science Cum Laude in Animal Science from Texas A&M University in May 2009. She was active in Aggie Hostesses, the Texas A&M Meat Science Quiz Bowl Team, the Texas A&M Beef Cattle Association, and Alpha Zeta Agricultural Honor Fraternity. She studied in Guanajuato, Mexico at the University of Guanajuato during the summer of 2007 and completed an internship with Cargill Animal Nutrition in 2008.

Anna started her graduate work in 2009 and received her Master of Science in Agricultural Leadership, Education, and Communication in August 2012. While completing her graduate work, she was employed with the Texas A&M College of Agriculture and Life Sciences as a graduate teaching and research assistant in the Meat Science Department and at the Texas A&M Center for Student Athlete Services as a Learning Assistant. She can be reached through the Department of Agricultural Leadership, Education, and Communications at Texas A&M University at 600 John Kimbrough Boulevard 2116 TAMU, College Station, Texas 77843-2116.