

## NATURE-SMART LIBRARIES

### Case Study: San Francisco, California

#### Library + Parks Partnerships: How We Got Here

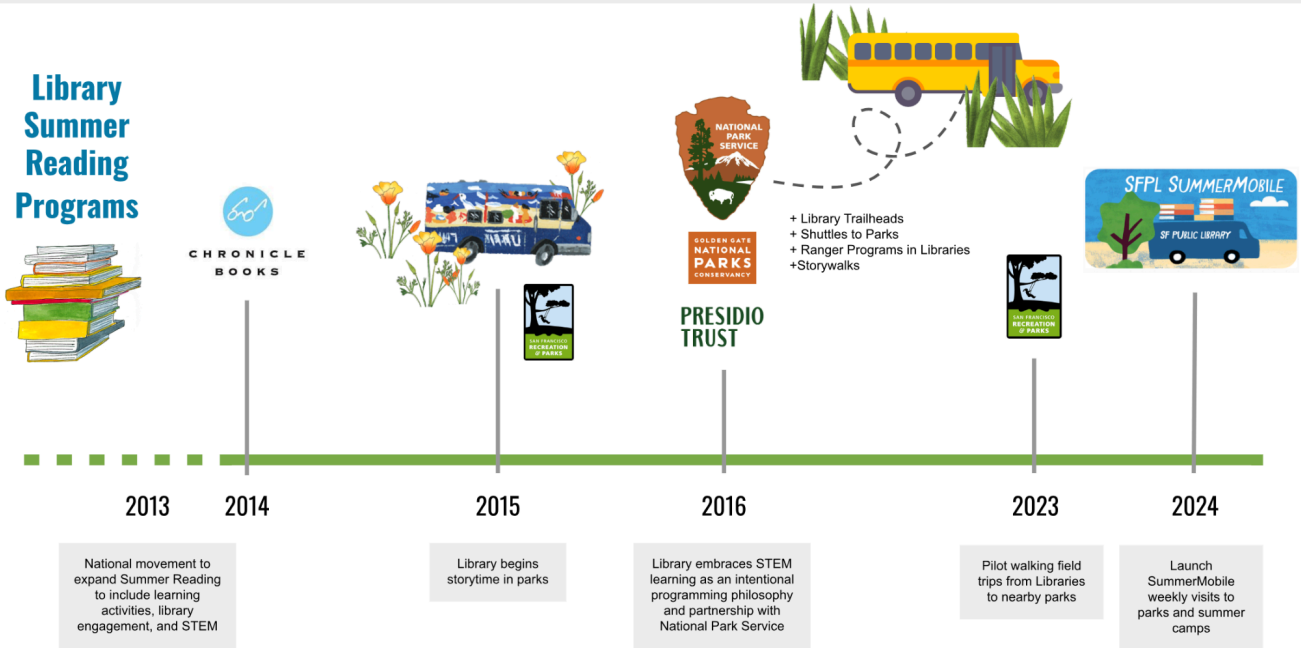


Photo credit: [San Francisco Children & Nature's Nature-Smart Libraries presentation](#) at Children & Nature Network Nature Everywhere Conference, 2024

## INTRODUCTION

San Francisco has long been a city known for its diversity and natural beauty. However, access to nature is not equally distributed across all its communities. Libraries are uniquely positioned as community hubs that serve patrons in their language, with a shared understanding of culture. With library locations in every neighborhood and bookmobiles bringing services to parks, events, schools, and beyond, the Library plays a vital role in expanding equitable access to nature programming throughout the city.

The City infrastructure includes the San Francisco Public Library system, which has 28 locations and 4 bookmobiles and is located near national, state, and city parks. [San Francisco Children & Nature](#) leads the city's children and nature strategies, which include active participation from over 40 government agencies, non-profit institutions, and community-based organizations, including SFPL.

For over two decades, the San Francisco Public Library has fostered strong partnerships with national and city parks and agencies to connect communities with nature. SF Children & Nature continues to strengthen and expand these collaborations through its [Nature-Smart Library strategy](#),

which integrates nature into library programming to “bring the outside in.” and also encourages patrons to get outside.

The city’s [Environmental Justice Communities](#) model provides an equity-focused platform to identify priority areas where children’s access to nature is most limited. This continuum of exposure opportunities allows children and families to engage in guided learning and experience nature in ways they might not have otherwise.

## **NATURE-SMART LIBRARIES IN ACTION**

### **1. Nature Programming**

Programming within libraries includes a diverse set of activities that encourage engagement with nature, such as Ranger-led talks, Bug Clubs, Petting Zoos, and workshop presenters where youth engage in gardening projects and other nature-based activities. Summer Stride—a city-wide summer learning program—engages thousands of children annually. The program encourages outdoor exploration alongside reading, promoting both literacy and physical activity. Additionally, the libraries work to take patrons outside by organizing excursions to nearby natural spaces, such as parks and national parks. These outings are facilitated by free shuttles through a partnership with the National Parks Service, which transport families directly from the library to the parks.

### **2. Collections Development and Lending Programs**

SFPL has a robust collection of materials and even seed lending libraries at several branches. The Library utilizes bookmobiles, which visit parks, schools, and community events. The fleet of bookmobiles play a pivotal role in extending library services to underserved areas, allowing for lending programs to reach families regardless of where they live. The library also distributes free books for kids at parks and community events. Additionally, Little Free Libraries have been placed in parks to provide easy access to nature-focused books.

### **3. Natural Spaces**

SFPL branches have transformed physical spaces by creating nature-inspired environments. Library spaces have been redesigned to include educational materials on local flora and fauna, as well as nature-themed activities and exhibits. For example, Storywalks at parks and outdoor storytimes help bring nature literacy to life. SFPL utilizes many outdoor storytimes through its bookmobiles and also sets up library sessions in parks and outdoor spaces.

## **PARTNERSHIPS**

The success of San Francisco’s Nature-Smart Libraries initiative hinges on strong collaborations between various organizations and stakeholders.

### **1. Library and National Park Service**

SFPL has formed key partnerships with the **National Park Service (NPS)**, **Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy**, and the **Presidio Trust**, among others, to facilitate access to nearby natural spaces. These partnerships have allowed the library to arrange shuttles from

the library branches to national parks, overcoming the physical barriers some families face in reaching outdoor areas. National Park staff provide experiential nature-based programs for the community and youth that support meaningful connections to nature and the outdoors.

## 2. **Library and City Departments**

The **San Francisco Recreation & Parks Department (SFRPD)** plays a critical role in this initiative by leading the city's San Francisco Children & Nature initiative, "a cross-sector collaborative that works to ensure all children & youth growing up in the city have the same opportunities to play, learn and grow in nature." The city's parks serve as an extension of library services, and library staff engage in these spaces by hosting bookmobile visits, storytime and outdoor programming in parks and rec centers.

## 3. **Library and Community Collaboration**

SFPL's initiative has also benefited from collaboration with local schools and community organizations, ensuring that the outreach reaches the families and children who need these opportunities most. Every year, the Library, along with city agencies and community partners, host a community fiesta, [Día de los niños](#), [Día de los Libros](#) to celebrate children, literacy and nature. SFPL collaborates with local farms such as Hawk Creek Farm, Sisterhood Gardens, and SF Botanical Gardens to bring community members of all ages into these educational green spaces. These partnerships make it possible to bring nature-based learning to diverse communities throughout the city.

## **AMPLIFYING AND SUSTAINING THE WORK**

Sustaining the Nature-Smart Libraries initiative is as important as its implementation. San Francisco has created a framework to amplify and ensure the continuity of this work through partnerships between city, park, and library staff. San Francisco Children & Nature leads the city's children and nature strategies, and Nature-Smart Libraries are included in its strategic plan.

Libraries in the City, trusted institutions in communities of color, are now playing a key role in overcoming historical barriers to nature access. Their role in shifting mindsets is vital to making nature more inclusive. The initiative is supported by the San Francisco Public Library (SFPL), the National Park Service (NPS), Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy, the Presidio Trust, and the San Francisco Recreation & Parks Department (SFRPD), in addition to other local community organizations.

The strategic shift in resource flows is a significant component of San Francisco's work. Creating new roles, such as a mobile and outreach librarian position, complements investments in library spaces, mobile libraries, and transportation infrastructure. Library staff members work closely with pre-existing city park roles and are incorporated into city-wide nature programming efforts. Funding for these investments is shared among the various partners.

City-wide initiatives such as bookmobiles, park shuttles, and Summer Stride programming are part of the various partners' annual work plans and are included in San Francisco Children & Nature's strategic plans. SFPL is embedded in the city's nature programming planning efforts.