

# SHIFTING THE CURRENT

*Advancing Environmental Justice at the California Coastal Commission*



CALIFORNIA  
**COASTAL**  
COMMISSION

[www.coastal.ca.gov](http://www.coastal.ca.gov)  
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YEARS OF  
COASTAL  
PROTECTION  
CALIFORNIA COASTAL ACT

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*Front cover by Claire Wang*

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*“Wandering the Oceano Dunes”*



## Executive Summary

Since its passage in 1976, the California Coastal Act has guided the Commission's mission to protect coastal resources and ensure public access. These efforts have always been rooted in principles of equity and inclusion. Despite decades of progress, systemic gaps in equitable access and representation left Tribal Nations, communities of color, and low-income populations—many with deep cultural and economic ties to the coast—excluded from decision-making. In response, the Legislature enacted AB 2616, granting the Commission explicit authority to address environmental justice. Building on this mandate, the Commission adopted its Environmental Justice Policy (“EJ Policy”) in 2019 after extensive statewide engagement, marking a pivotal shift toward embedding equity into coastal protection and access.

This report fulfills the EJ Policy's mandate for public review and demonstrates measurable progress, highlighting key actions, outcomes, reflections, and areas for continued growth.

Since the adoption of the EJ Policy, the Commission has:

- Embedded EJ principles into permitting, planning, and enforcement processes.
- Expanded engagement with historically marginalized communities and Tribal Nations.
- Increased language access and public participation opportunities.
- Strengthened internal capacity through staff training and cultural change initiatives.
- Advanced partnerships and innovative tools to address inequities in coastal access and resource protection.

While these milestones reflect meaningful progress, the path forward calls for continued action. Future priorities include expanding engagement, removing access barriers, embedding accountability, investing in staff capacity, and advancing climate stewardship to amplify historically marginalized voices.<sup>1</sup>

This report is both a retrospective and a roadmap—reaffirming the Commission's commitment to equity, transparency, and inclusion as we shape the future of California's coast.

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<sup>1</sup> In this report, the terms “marginalized communities” and “environmental justice communities” are used interchangeably. These terms refer to low-income communities, communities of color, and other populations with higher exposure and/or sensitivity to adverse project impacts due to historical marginalization, discriminatory land use practices, and/or less capacity to mitigate adverse impacts.

## Background & Policy Foundation

The **California Coastal Act**, enacted in 1976 following Proposition 20, established the California Coastal Commission to protect coastal resources and ensure public access. From its inception, the Act was rooted in principles of public inclusion and equity.

The Commission has worked to uphold the Coastal Act’s vision of equitable coastal protection and access. Yet, despite decades of progress, that vision remained incomplete. Generations of environmental injustice enacted by government—particularly toward Native American communities, communities of color, and low-income populations—have led to unequal distribution of environmental benefits and burdens that are still present.

Concerns about these limitations surfaced long before the Commission had explicit authority to address environmental justice. As Commissioner William Burke observed during a 2009 hearing:

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***“It’s just not logical that we’re protecting rocks and not people” —***  
*Commissioner Burke, Coastal Commission Hearing, April 9, 2009*

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This sentiment underscored the urgency for change. As a response to the limitations of the Coastal Act by impacted communities and local governments, the California Legislature passed AB 2616, amending the Coastal Act to grant the California Coastal Commission explicit authority to consider environmental justice (EJ) in its decision-making. By March 2019, after two years of robust public engagement, consultation with Tribal Nations, and close collaboration with community-based organizations, the Commission unanimously adopted its Environmental Justice Policy with wide public support.

The Policy represented a turning point: for the first time, environmental justice principles were embedded into the agency’s mission of protecting coastal resources and maximizing public access under the Coastal Act. Its significance was widely recognized. Robert Garcia, a civil rights attorney and Director of The City Project, described the policy as:

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***“This is the best environmental justice policy I’ve seen from any agency, state or federal, in my 35 years as a civil rights attorney. This is the Magna Carta of coastal justice in California.”***  
*— Robert Garcia, Director, The City Project (speaking at the policy’s adoption in 2019)*

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The Commission developed its Environmental Justice Policy through an extensive, yearlong outreach process involving over 100 stakeholders statewide, including over 30 EJ organizations. Engagement included community meetings, webinars, trainings, and two public review periods. Feedback informed major revisions, adding sections on housing, local government, and implementation. The final policy was unanimously approved in March 2019 with widespread public support.

## The Environmental Justice Policy

The Environmental Justice Policy is grounded in the belief that all people — regardless of race, ethnicity, income, or geographic location — are entitled to the benefits of a healthy coast, meaningful participation in decisions affecting that coast, and equitable protection from environmental harm.

It also affirms that “environmental justice” encompasses both *substantive rights* (the fair distribution of environmental benefits and burdens) and *procedural rights* (the right to participate fully and effectively in environmental decision-making).

The policy established a Statement of Principles, which committed the Commission to advancing fairness, inclusivity, and transparency in every aspect of its work, from permitting decisions and enforcement actions to hiring practices and community engagement. These principles emphasize:

- Early, ongoing, and culturally appropriate outreach.
- Respect for Tribal sovereignty and cultural heritage.<sup>2</sup>
- Equitable distribution of environmental benefits and burdens.
- Data-driven approaches to identify and address disparities.

To put the Policy into practice, the Commission established the Environmental Justice Unit, made up of dedicated staff tasked with ensuring these EJ principles are integrated into all aspects of the agency’s work, from coastal development permit (CDP) review and Local Coastal Program (LCP) updates to enforcement actions, public education, and internal operations. The Unit’s creation marked more than a staffing change: it signaled a structural commitment to long-term, measurable progress in advancing environmental justice statewide. Through transparency, accountability, and partnership, the Commission has

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<sup>2</sup> In August 2018, the Commission adopted its [Tribal Consultation Policy](#) to establish a government-to-government consultation process with California Native American Tribes. This policy is separate from, but complementary to, the Environmental Justice Policy and provides a framework for effective communication and collaboration to protect coastal resources.

embedded EJ principles into its work—supported by cultural change and innovative tools to ensure equitable coastal access and protection.

This retrospective celebrates tangible results and reflects on milestones achieved from the policy’s adoption in 2019 through 2025. From groundbreaking policy integrations in sea-level rise planning and affordable housing approvals, to the creation of bilingual access programs, targeted youth programming, and landmark land back actions with Tribal partners.

The Commission’s environmental justice work is ongoing. The lessons of the past six years—from successes to challenges, will continue to shape how the agency carries out its mandate to protect California’s coast for all.

## Advancing Environmental Justice: Policy Implementation Overview

Since adopting the Environmental Justice Policy in 2019, the Coastal Commission committed to enacting the Policy’s implementation actions within a five-year timeframe. To date, the Commission has advanced a series of coordinated actions across programs and districts, guided by the policy’s implementation categories. Progress reflects both new initiatives and cultural shifts within the agency.

This retrospective summarizes the original goals set in 2019, actions taken, outcomes achieved, and areas for continued growth. It is not exhaustive but provides an overview of accomplishments in enacting the EJ Policy.



### a. Engagement with Affected Communities

#### Goals

- Establish consistent, proactive engagement channels with communities most affected by coastal decisions.

- Build trust through culturally appropriate outreach, accessible communication, and ongoing relationship-building.

### Key Actions

- **Quarterly EJ Partner Calls** — Since 2023, the Executive Director has hosted eleven teleconferences with EJ leaders (12-22 participants per call). Topics are co-created and have included offshore wind, equitable coastal access, affordable housing, and a meet-and-greet with the EJ Commissioner.
- **Community Workshops & Education** — Partnered with EJ organizations to host workshops on affordable housing (2022–2023), pollution in the Tijuana River (2023), smart growth (2023), and sea level rise and EJ (2020, 2024, 2025) and how to provide public comment at the hearing (2025).
- **Targeted Outreach** — Maintained and updated an EJ contact list to notify communities of projects with potential impacts.
- **Monthly EJ Newsletter** — Reaches 1,800 subscribers; bilingual component added in 2025, making it the agency’s only bilingual newsletter at this time. Highlights upcoming projects with potential EJ impacts, promotes advocacy and participation, and promotes job postings for the agency to a diverse audience.
- **Plain-Language Resources** — Developed bilingual FAQs for many projects with EJ concerns to encourage informed participation.
- **Spanish Language Program** — Since 2021, certified bilingual staff provide interpretation at public meetings, translate materials, and assist applicants with multilingual outreach requirements.
- **Multiple Communication Channels** — Utilized flyers, social media, webinars, in-person meetings, and permit-specific marketing plans to reach EJ communities early in the process.
- **Educational Tools** — Created interactive StoryMaps on EJ, Tribal, and affordable housing issues, developed the Coastal California EJ Mapping Tool with a user guide, produced instructional videos on public comment participation, and published EJ resources tailored for teachers and students.
- **Tribal Partnerships** — Maintained regular consultation with California Native American Tribes through district Tribal Liaisons; all staff trained on Tribal Consultation practices by 2024; created a dedicated Tribal Coordinator position in 2025.

### Outcomes



- Regular participation from EJ groups influencing policy updates (e.g., sea-level rise guidance in 2024).
- Multiple hearings supported live Spanish interpretation, including satellite locations.
- Tribal collaboration milestones, such as returning 6.2 acres of sacred Bolsa Chica land to the Acjachemen Tongva Land Conservancy (2023).
- Increased participation in hearings and workshops, including Spanish-speaking residents.
- Strengthened relationships with Tribes, incorporating cultural knowledge into coastal planning.

### Reflections and Opportunities

- Outreach to rural and inland EJ communities remains inconsistent; more data and in-person engagement are needed.
- Geographic and resource constraints limit in-person meetings despite community preference.
- Language access has improved, but services beyond Spanish are needed.
- Need clearer protocols for ongoing feedback from EJ partners.
- The envisioned “Coastal Justice Public Workshop” has not yet occurred and remains a priority.



## b. Environmental Justice Staff Training and Support

### Goals

- Build staff capacity to understand and apply EJ principles in daily work.
- Provide specialized training on topics such as unconscious bias, cultural competency, and tribal consultation.

## Key Actions

- **Integrated EJ Across the Agency** — All staff trained to champion EJ principles; EJ Unit leads monthly calls.
- **Added EJ Staff Positions** — Secured funding for EJ Analyst, EJ Manager, and EJ Deputy Director.
- **Engagement Support for District Staff** — Developed guidelines, flow charts, and outreach lists for planners to identify EJ issues and connect with impacted communities.
- **Comprehensive Training Program** –
  - Initial all-staff EJ training post-policy adoption (2020).
  - Multi-module onboarding training for new hires (ongoing).
  - District-level refresher trainings (2023).
- **Unconscious Bias & Leadership Equity Training** — Participated in the first Government Alliance for Racial Equity (GARE) cohort for State Agencies training monthly for two years; conducted mandatory bias training for all staff; managers completed DEI leadership course in 2023. Internal teams work on incorporating the principles of belonging and inclusivity (e.g., the establishment of a mentoring program, improvements to website accessibility, etc).
- **Spanish Language Program** — Certified and compensate four bilingual staff for interpretation and translation.
- **Planning & Guidance Updates** — Integrated EJ principles into key Commission documents:
  - [\*Resources for Addressing EJ in Local Coastal Programs \(2024\)\*](#)
  - [\*Sea Level Rise Policy Guidance updates \(2024\)\*](#)
  - [\*Critical Infrastructure Guidance \(2021\)\*](#)
  - [\*Environmental Justice Resources for Teachers and Students\*](#) (lesson plans, videos, and recommended practices)

## Outcomes

- Increased cross-unit integration of EJ work (e.g., offshore wind planning team has cross-unit members, EJ staff attends permit reviews, Statewide coordination on guidance documents; and educational social media campaign on sea level rise).
- Monthly EJ calls are consistently attended by one-third of staff.
- Sea Level Rise Policy Guidance update successfully piloted stipends and early EJ community participation.

## Reflections and Opportunities

- Staff capacity limits early engagement with impacted EJ communities.
- Collaboration with EJ advisors for SLR Policy Guidance proved effective—should be expanded.
- Onboarding EJ training needs improved phasing and outcome tracking.
- Original plan for district-specific EJ contacts was replaced by centralized EJ team due to staffing challenges, experience, and capacity.



## c. Coastal Development and Environmental Justice Review

### Goals

- Ensure EJ analysis is integrated into permit analysis, LCP updates, and enforcement actions.
- Mitigate disproportionate burdens on vulnerable populations through project modifications or conditions.

### Key Actions

- **EJ in Local Coastal Program Assistance Grant Program** — Incorporated EJ into the program as a priority, supporting local governments in including EJ into LCPs.
- **Planning & Guidance Updates** — Updated key guidance documents (EJ in LCP resources, Sea Level Rise Policy Guidance, Critical Infrastructure Guidance).
- **Internal Resources to support Staff Review** — Developed several internal and external resources to support staff review and identification of EJ concerns and communities as well as potential impacts on those communities (memos, flow charts, user guides, and other reference documents).
- **Highlighting Environmental Justice Concerns in Staff Reports** — Added EJ sections to staff reports and developed mitigation measures to lessen, avoid, or fully mitigate identified impacts, where appropriate.

- **Coastal California Environmental Justice Mapping Tool (CCEJ Tool)** — Developed the CCEJ Mapping Tool to assist applicants, analysts, and the public with the implementation of the EJ Policy.

### Outcomes

- Local governments adopted EJ policies in planning documents (e.g., Sonoma County Land Use Plan,<sup>3</sup> Barrio Logan Community Plan<sup>4</sup>).
- Environmental justice considerations have been included in a wide range of reports, conditions, modifications, and enforcement orders to address concerns and protect EJ communities from disproportionate impacts. Since 2020, over 200 technical assistance requests have been submitted to the EJ Unit for review of CDPs, LCPs, policies, violations, and more.
- Although AB 2616 mandated the appointment of one Environmental Justice Commissioner, since then, many commissioners have championed EJ in their decision-making.
- Several underserved youth coastal access programs have been initiated from conditions to improve access for communities historically excluded from coastal access (e.g., free camping,<sup>5</sup> education and sailing program for under-resourced youth,<sup>6</sup> Huntington Beach Pier Youth Fishing Derby<sup>7</sup> and more).

### Reflections and Opportunities

- EJ integration is strongest when staff are involved early; late-stage project reviews risk missing opportunities for greater applicant collaboration and deeper mitigation.
- Since the EJ Policy's adoption, many approved projects and plans have not progressed enough at this time to provide reliable data on their impacts to EJ communities. This limits the Commission's ability to assess effectiveness and refine policies. Future reports will benefit from this implementation data.
- EJ organizations and communities have raised concerns that Coastal Act section 30604(h) does not offer strong enough protections or require sufficient mitigation, especially when a project is highly political.
- Similarly, concerns have been raised regarding the limitations of the Coastal Act's authority on housing, ports, and air quality.

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<sup>3</sup> [Sonoma County Land Use Plan update](#) – Promoted EJ and social equity as well as meaningful involvement

<sup>4</sup> [Barrio Logan Community Plan Update](#) – Required measures to improve affordable housing, limit displacement, and enhance public facilities.

<sup>5</sup> See [CCC-21-AP-01 Campland Executed Consent Agreement – Provision 16](#)

<sup>6</sup> See [5-19-0971 Dana Point Harbor Revitalization Report – Special Condition 26](#)

<sup>7</sup> See [5-22-0804 \(Surf City Partners, LLC\) Special Condition 6](#)





## d. Public Participation Improvements

### Goals

- Remove barriers to participation in Commission decision-making.
- Expand access through improved meeting formats, language services, and outreach tools.

### Key Actions

- **Hybrid meetings** — Post-pandemic, Commission monthly hearings are held in a hybrid virtual/live format.
- **Public Participation Enhancements** — Improved wayfinding signage in multiple languages, simplified public commentary sign-up, procedures, creation of visual graphics and instructional videos.<sup>8</sup>
- **Accessibility & Satellite Locations for Hearings** — Hosted hearings in locations accessible to affected communities where feasible, and, in some cases, provided satellite options.
- **Expansion of Spanish Interpretation** — Certified bilingual staff have provided limited interpretation services at public meetings, as well as coordinated contracts for live interpretation services and increased document translation.

### Outcomes

- Hybrid meetings have increased public participation and accessibility.
- Spanish-language public comment has increased since establishment of the program.

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<sup>8</sup> See [CA Coastal Commission - Public Comment Instructional Video](#) and [May 2025 public participation workshop for Coastal Commission hearings](#)

- Since 2020, there have been three occasions where Commission has integrated live Spanish interpretation for a hearing item.
- Expanded use of virtual participation has increased engagement from inland and rural EJ communities.

### Reflections and Opportunities

- Closed-captioning and subtitles needed for accessibility.
- Expansion of additional languages provides opportunities and challenges regarding selection of languages, implementation into materials and content, as well as cost.
- Metrics for speakers and public participation should be improved and standardized.
- The variable length of

## e. Strategic Plan Integration

### Goals

- Embed EJ commitments into the Commission's 5-Year Strategic Plan and provide transparent progress reporting.

### Key Actions

- **2021-2025 Strategic Plan Integration** — Incorporated EJ targets into the 2021–2025 Strategic Plan, with commitments tied to specific measurable actions. This process included public participation.
- **2026-2030 Strategic Plan Integration** — Integrated EJ implementation actions throughout the entire strategic plan, with public participation.
- **Transparent Reporting** — Published annual (since 2019) EJ Year-in-Review reports and EJ newsletter (bilingual relaunch in 2025).

### Outcomes

- Strategic Plan metrics have driven cross-program collaboration on EJ projects (e.g., WHALE TAIL® grant's equity analysis informing education program goals; supported meetings on Affirmatively Furthering Fair Housing Initiative in English and Spanish).

### Reflections and Opportunities

- Public tracking tools need improvement; opportunities exist for shorter reports and more fact sheets.
- Year in Reviews can be disseminated more effectively through use of social media platforms.

## Looking Ahead

The Commission's environmental justice work is ongoing, and the lessons of the past six years provide a roadmap for deepening impact. This report highlights progress since the EJ Policy's adoption in 2019 and marks only the beginning. The 2026–2030 Strategic Plan embeds environmental justice principles across all goals rather than in a standalone section. The adoption of the Strategic Plan for 2026 — 2030 further commits the Commission to building on successes and addressing gaps to strengthen equity and inclusion in coastal planning and protection.

Building on this approach, the next phase will focus on five priorities that align with the Strategic Plan's EJ themes:

- **Expand & Diversify Engagement** — Expand outreach, improve language access, and strengthen tribal partnerships.
- **Strengthen Equitable Access** — Remove barriers for coastal access, support lower-cost access, communities with disabilities, and support Tribal voices and leadership in the stewardship of cultural sites, consistent with the Commission's Tribal Consultation Policy.
- **Increase Accountability** — Review and analyze EJ Policy implementation and further embed EJ in planning and permitting.
- **Build Internal Capacity** — Foster an inclusive workplace and provide EJ, Tribal, and cultural competency training.
- **Advance Climate & Stewardship** — Through permitting and planning efforts, work to address the disproportionate burdens experienced by EJ communities.

These priorities encompass the Strategic Plan's goals and actions and allow deeper implementation of the EJ Policy. These efforts will ensure that future coastal planning reflects the diversity, needs, and voices of all Californians.