

California Coastal Commission

Environmental Justice,  
Equity, and Tribal Affairs:  
Year in Review  
2022



# Executive Leadership on Environmental Justice and Equity



Fitzgerald Marine Reserve, San Mateo County. Photo by Hanna Payne.

2022 brought many changes to the Commission. Executive Director Jack Ainsworth announced his retirement at year's end after seven years leading the agency through a critical generational change that capped a 34-year career with the Commission. Jack was appointed Interim Executive Director in 2016 and championed the passage of AB 2616 (Burke) that same year, which amended the Coastal Act to include the consideration of Environmental Justice (EJ). His leadership was key to the subsequent development of the Commission's Environmental Justice Policy, the creation of the EJ Unit, and the establishment of the agency's first Deputy Director of Communications, Environmental Justice and Tribal Affairs, EJ Manager, and EJ Analyst. Jack also invested in an early, intensive EJ and racial equity training program with the Government Alliance on Race and Equity (GARE) and spent two years with a cohort of Commission staff who traveled to Sacramento for day-long sessions every month.

Jack's commitment to integrating environmental justice into the fabric of the Commission's coastal protection mandate distinguishes his legacy among history's short list of Coastal Commission Executive Directors who have dedicated their careers to public service.



His successor, Dr. Kate Huckelbridge, is the first woman to lead the agency. She is also the former agency tribal liaison and was part of the GARE cohort. She has publicly committed to making EJ, equity, and tribal affairs a priority and plans to build on the progress made by her predecessor.

Executive Director Jack Ainsworth, pictured left, led the Commission for 7 years, retiring at the end of 2022. Dr. Kate Huckelbridge, pictured right, will serve as the Commission's new Executive Director starting in 2023. Dr. Huckelbridge is the first woman to hold the position in the agency's history.



# Environmental Justice



Photo by Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority.

The Environmental Justice Unit continued to make steady progress in integrating EJ and equity into the fabric of the Commission’s day-to-day work. To oversee this ongoing effort, the agency Promoted Noaki Schwartz as the Commission’s first Deputy Director of Communications, Environmental Justice, and Tribal Affairs, an important reaffirmation of the Commission’s commitment to prioritizing inclusion and diversity.

In an effort to encourage more participation from Spanish-speaking members of the public, staff created a [Spanish language landing page](#) on the Commission website, featuring important resources that have been translated into Spanish. Staff reports, FAQs, Commission contacts, a subtitled video on how to sign up to speak at hearings, and instructions on translating our entire website using Google Translate into Spanish and other languages are among the available resources.

The Commission also implemented live interpretation services from English to Spanish for the first time for a hybrid meeting in May in an effort to improve language accessibility to the decision over a controversial [Huntington Beach Desalination](#) facility proposed by Poseidon Water. The Commission provided a separate Zoom channel where remote participants could follow the entire hearing in Spanish. In-person participants had the option of listening through headsets in the hearing room. At the request of EJ groups, the staff report and related materials were also translated into Spanish. EJ groups, tribal representatives, community members, and ocean advocates welcomed the Commission’s unanimous denial of the project, as it would have significantly raised water rates while harming marine life through open-ocean intakes.



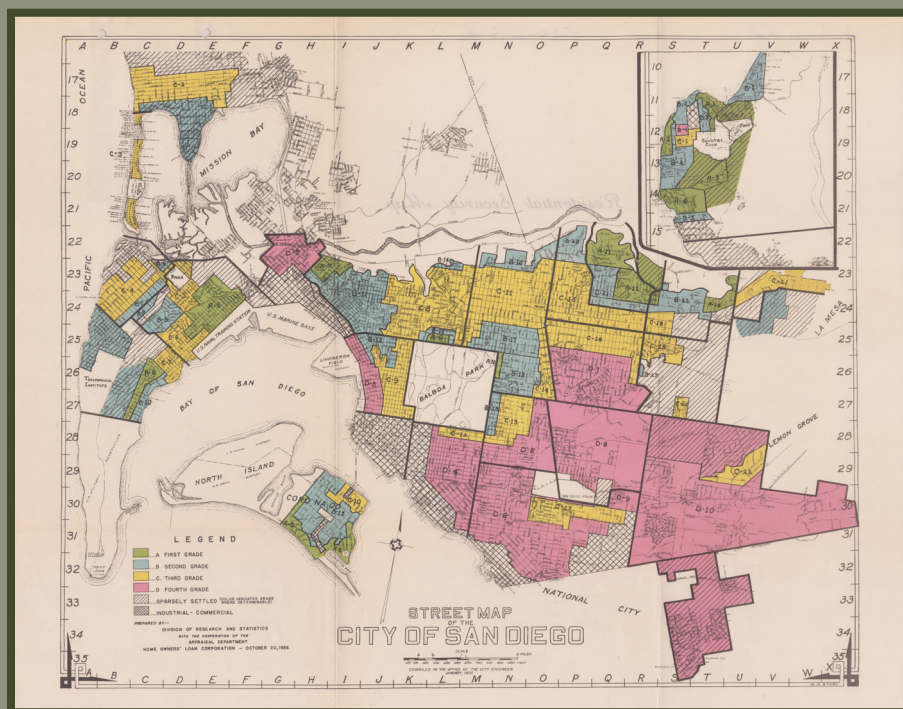


Oil Spill Destruction. By Ashley Shin, Grade 9.

Working with the Commission's Human Resources Division and Senior Management, the Environmental Justice Unit crafted language reflecting the agency's diversity, equity, and inclusion priorities that will now be included in the duty statements of all employees, allotting a certain percentage of staff time to further these goals. Duty statements for planners and enforcement analysts will also reference EJ and tribal work as part of their job requirements. Updating these documents reflects the Commission's expectation that Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (JEDI) principles will be honored and upheld at every level of the agency.

Noaki Schwartz, pictured left, became the Commission's first Deputy Director of Communications, Environmental Justice, and Tribal Affairs in May 2022. The Commission's EJ Unit, pictured from left to right: Korrin Davis, Jessica Reed, Javier Padilla, Sumi Selvaraj, Eric Martinez, and Noaki Schwartz.





A redlining map of San Diego from the mid-1930s, created by the Home Owner's Loan Corporation. Coastal and hilly regions were typically rated 'A' or 'B', while bayfront and inland locations were typically given ratings of 'C' or 'D'.

In June, the Commission's 2021 Sea Grant Fellow, Hanna Payne, capped her year-long fellowship with a presentation to the Commission on her research on the [historical roots of housing inequity in the coastal zone](#). By delving deeply into several revealing case studies, her report helps shed light on the systemic reasons why California coastal communities are, on average, whiter and wealthier than the state overall. The report provides important scholarship for the evolving conversation about how to address the state's affordable housing crisis.

The Commission welcomed its first Peter Douglas Environmental Justice and Tribal Affairs Coastal Planning Internship participant in June. Diana Garcia, a recent graduate of U.C. Berkley, was selected for the inaugural summer internship in Long Beach. This new program offers paid internships for undergraduate college students, including those enrolled at community colleges. Named in honor of the Commission's late Executive Director, who championed a similar program in the 1980s, this program aims to help build a more diverse workplace that includes the perspectives and experiences of a wide variety of qualified applicants. After her internship ended, Diana accepted another internship with Representative Salud Carbajal (D-Santa Barbara) in Washington, DC.



In October, the Public Education Unit and the Commission’s 2022 Sea Grant Fellow Korrin Davis presented an [equity analysis of the Commission’s Whale Tail Grants Program](#). This report presents an overview of recent efforts to advance equity, accessibility, and inclusivity for the WHALE TAIL® Grants Program, with a focus on the 2021/22 grants round. This work is related to the Commission’s Environmental Justice Policy, adopted in March 2019, which integrates the principles of environmental justice, equality, and social equity into all aspects of the Commission’s programs and operations. Commission staff worked with a California non-profit organization, Justice Outside, to analyze the grant application experience and revise materials, guidelines, and processes. Justice Outside works to remove the barriers that have historically prevented communities of color from accessing meaningful experiences in nature and professional opportunities in the outdoor sector. As a result of expanded outreach and improvements to the application, scoring and selection process, the number of Whale Tail grant applications in 2022 increased significantly in both overall numbers as well as the diversity of proposals and geographic area.



Above: Un Mar De Colores, 2021 Whale Tail Grant recipient. Below: A Malibu beach outing organized by the EmpowerHer Institute, another 2021 Whale Tail Grant recipient.



**The equity analysis found, among other things, that out of 90 grant projects:**

- › 77 proposals focus on the inclusion of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC);
- › 75 focus on youth programming;
- › 67 applicant groups identify as part of the community they are engaging;
- › 61 engage low-income communities;
- › 42 offer translation services and/or bilingual resources;
- › 27 support ESL (English as a second language) students and parents
- › 13 engage people who identify as having a disability;
- › 12 engage Designated Rural Regions;
- › 11 engage inland communities;
- › 8 support a tribe or tribal entity or tribal programming;
- › 5 engage unhoused communities;
- › 4 engage people impacted by the carceral system;
- › 4 engage LGBTQ+ youth;
- › 4 primarily engage female and/or gender-expansive individuals; and
- › 4 engage youth in the foster system.



# Tribal Collaboration



Northern Chumash Tribal Council Chief Fred Collins, who passed into spirit on October 1st, 2021, at Lisamu' (Morro Rock). He is succeeded by his daughter, Violet Sage Walker. Photo courtesy of San Luis Obispo Tribune.

The Commission continued to implement its Tribal Consultation Policy throughout the year. An internal staff team of tribal liaisons representing each District office and Unit is facilitating improved communication and consistency related to building relationships with California coastal tribes. Early in the year, the team developed and conducted an all-staff training program on tribal consultation accompanied by internal guidance resources for staff. The team continues to meet monthly to discuss tribal issues that arise in regulatory and planning work and collaborate on policy issues.

Staff also continued to conduct formal tribal consultations on proposed projects to ensure that tribal voices are considered in the process. In April, staff from the Commission, State Coastal Conservancy, State Lands Commission and State Park joined Natural Resources Secretary Wade Crowfoot at Hollister Ranch in Santa Barbara County to meet with and listen to Tribal representatives with ancestral ties to the Gaviota Coast. As the state plans to honor its commitment to provide public access to the Hollister Ranch coastline, respecting Tribal concerns and protecting cultural resources will be central to the process.

In May, the Commission cleared the way through a [federal consistency determination](#) for sacred stones from the Port San Luis breakwater to be returned to Morro Rock, known as Lisamu' by the first peoples of San Luis Obispo, the Northern Chumash, Salinan, and yak titu titu yak tilhini (ytt). The joyous reunification took place in August with the Army Corps of Engineers barging approximately 10,000 tons of rocks 15 miles up coast, to be deposited about 1,500 feet west of Morro Rock. Violet Sage Walker, Chairwoman of the Northern Chumash Tribal Council, dropped the first of these sacred stones into the water from a traditional canoe as part of a ceremonial celebration. The plan approved by the Commission calls for stacking the stones in a modular design which has the potential to enhance the rocky bottom habitat for multiple species.



Mouth of the Smith River. Photo by the LA Times.

Staff has also conducted both formal and informal tribal consultations regarding a complicated series of violations in Del Norte County at the mouth of the Smith River, the ancestral home of the Tolowa Dee-ni' Nation. The final Consent Order, as modified by the Commission and approved in June, will restore vast swaths of salmon habitat, provide public access to the sloughs, provide for cultural resource surveys on Tillis Island—a deeply sacred site for the Tolowa—and transfer some very significant parcels of land to public or non-profit entities.



Commission staff also worked with the Tribal non-profit Kai Poma throughout the year on planned improvements to manage public access at Blues Beach in Mendocino County. The property is currently owned by Caltrans but will be transferred to Kai Poma pursuant to [SB 231](#) (McGuire, 2021). Eliminating the current unauthorized vehicle use while still allowing for managed pedestrian access on the beach and bluffs in a manner that protects cultural and biological resources requires creative planning and close collaboration. After more than a year of remote meetings, the Coastal Commission and Caltrans staff met with tribal leaders and local law enforcement in October to walk the land together in preparation for returning it to tribal stewardship.



Blues Beach in Mendocino County. Photo by the Coastal Commission.



Photo by Hayleigh Smith.



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