



California Coastal Commission
**Environmental Justice,
Equity, and Tribal Affairs:**
Year in Review
2023



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Introduction to Environmental Justice at the Commission

Since gaining the authority to address environmental justice (EJ) in 2016, the Commission has re-evaluated how it approaches its programs and activities through this critical lens. In 2019, the Commission adopted its Environmental Justice Policy and began integrating principles of environmental justice, equality, and social equity into all aspects of the Commission's programs and operations. The creation of the Environmental Justice Unit has been pivotal in carrying this progress forward. This year, the EJ Unit worked with staff throughout the agency, as well as NGOs and community leaders, to advance both internal and external initiatives, with several key actions either newly introduced or significantly enhanced. These efforts have not only strengthened the Commission's commitment to EJ, but also fostered greater collaboration with coastal communities, ensuring more equitable outcomes. This annual report provides both transparency and accountability as the Commission continues its efforts to implement its EJ Policy.

The term “environmental justice” is currently understood to include both substantive and procedural rights, meaning that in addition to the equitable distribution of environmental benefits, underserved communities also deserve equitable access to the process where significant environmental and land use decisions are made.

~Environmental Justice Policy, California Coastal Commission

Leadership in Environmental Justice and Equity



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

Executive Director

2023 brought a year of steady progress to the Coastal Commission's Environmental Justice Program. It was the first year of Dr. Kate Huckelbridge's tenure as the Executive Director. Dr. Huckelbridge formerly managed the Commission's Energy, Ocean Resources and Federal Consistency Unit, and served as the agency's Tribal liaison. She was a member of the Commission's 2017-18 Government Alliance on Race and Equity (GARE) Capitol cohort and is the first woman to lead the agency. As part of her commitment to elevating environmental justice and equity to the forefront of the Commission's work, Dr. Huckelbridge made a concerted effort to deepen relationships with EJ partners and directly address project impacts to vulnerable communities. This manifested in new initiatives, including quarterly calls with Environmental Justice groups, the Executive Director, and senior managers, and the integration of related training for all staff within the agency which will be discussed in more detail within this report.

Dr. Kate Huckelbridge's dedication to integrating environmental justice into the Commission's coastal protection mandate set a strong course for her leadership, ensuring a balance between coastal access preservation and the needs of vulnerable coastal communities.

Environmental Justice Unit Staff Updates

Several staff concluded their time with the Environmental Justice Unit in 2023 and moved to other venues, where they will continue to advance the principles of equity, justice, and inclusion in the public policy arena. Noaki Schwartz, the Commission's first Deputy Director of Communications, Environmental Justice, and Tribal Affairs, left the agency to the Deputy Secretary of Equity and Environmental Justice with the California Natural Resources Agency (CNRA). Sumi Selvaraj, who began at the Commission as a NOAA Coastal Management Fellow and became the agency's first Environmental Justice Manager, accepted a new role at the United States Environmental Protection Agency in Washington DC. Both Noaki and Sumi were instrumental in creating the Commission's first Environmental Justice Policy, adopted by the Commission in 2019, and they built the EJ Program from the ground up. Although their vision and guidance as team leaders is missed, they established a strong foundation and enduring culture of excellence for current and future staff to build upon.

With Sumi's departure, Javier Padilla Reyes was promoted to the position of Environmental Justice Manager. Javier previously served as the Environmental Justice and Land Use acting manager at the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission and joined the Commission in 2020 as the EJ Analyst. In this new role, he continues to seek new opportunities to elevate equity and inclusion in the Commission's work.

The Environmental Justice Program also gained additional support through a new California Sea Grant State Fellow, Camila Pauda. Her primary role as a fellow was assisting the Statewide Planning Program & EJ Program with interagency projects, ranging from topics like smart growth to offshore wind. Another new, but familiar, face to join the Commission was Diana Garcia, the agency's inaugural Peter Douglas Environmental Justice and Tribal Affairs Coastal Planning Intern who left the Commission in 2022 after landing a prestigious internship with the U.S. House of Representatives in Washington, DC. Diana returned to the Commission in 2023 as a full-time Enforcement Officer in the South Coast District. Although not working directly for the EJ Program, her familiarity with the Commission's core policy of integrating EJ into all aspects of the Commission's work, and the Enforcement Unit's track record as a strong defender of public rights enables her to continue contributing to the agency's overall environmental justice efforts.



EJ Unit Staff from left to right: Javier Padilla Reyes, Sumi Selvaraj, Z Plascencia, Erik Martinez, Jessica Reed, Camila Pauda

Environmental Justice Program



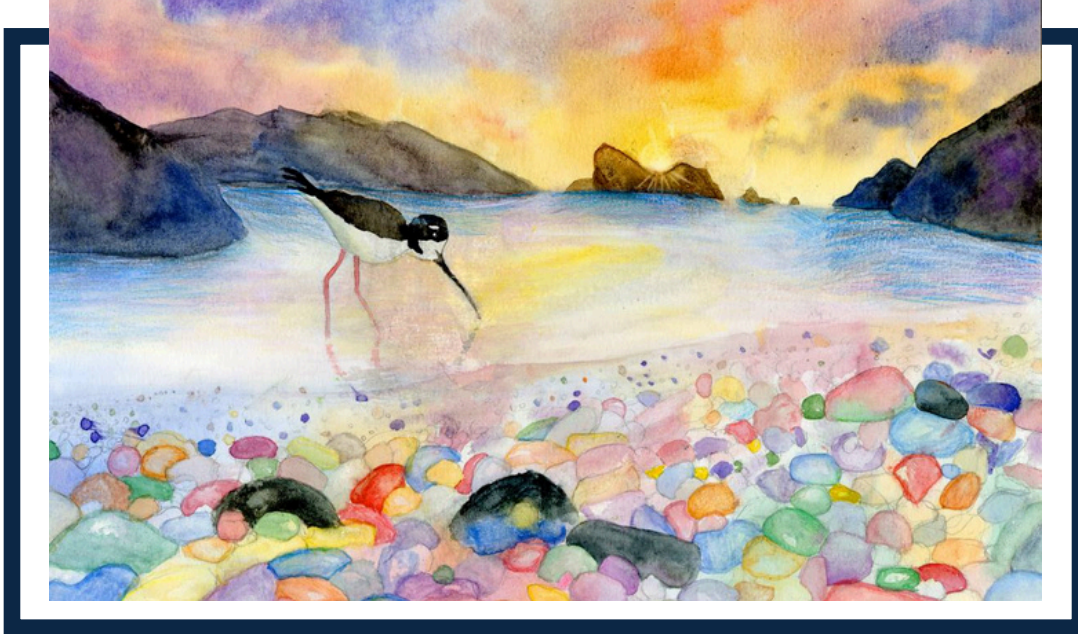
Photo by Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority.

Environmental Justice & Executive Director Partner Calls

In an ongoing effort to expand community outreach and transparency, the EJ Unit & Executive Director worked together to launch a standing Environmental Justice & Executive Director Partner Call (EJ Partner Calls) every quarter. The purpose of these calls is to enhance direct, meaningful engagement and create an open line of communication between environmental justice partners statewide and Commission leadership. Over a dozen EJ organizations have participated in each of the calls, engaging in substantive discussions on relevant topics selected by the EJ partner organizations, including offshore wind, equitable access to our beaches and housing. Through these calls the Commission has also been able to deepen its understanding of issues and projects that are important to EJ communities throughout the state and leverage that understanding to explore new opportunities for collaboration and improvement.



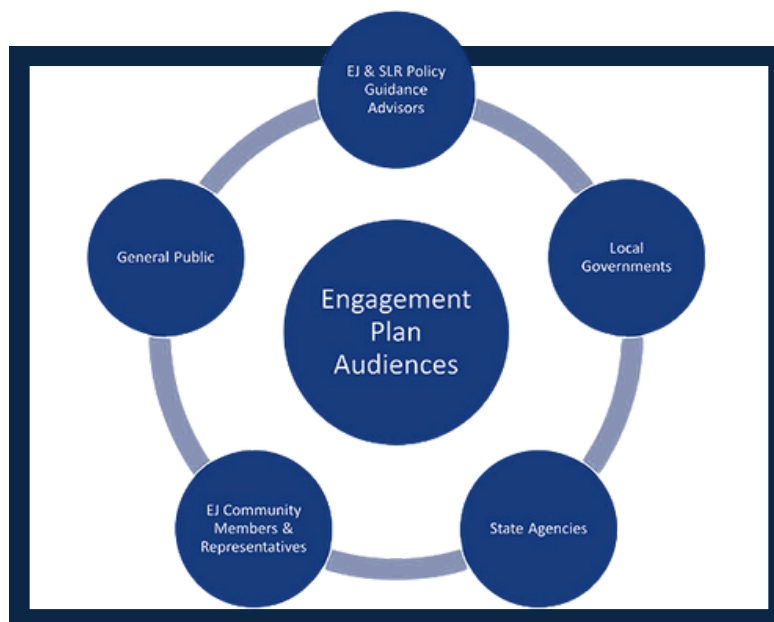
Topics and themes from the Commission's EJ Partner Calls



A Bird on Glass Beach by Sophie Han Grade 2, Dublin

Environmental Justice in Key State Policies

In one of the largest projects of the year, the EJ Unit and Statewide Planning Unit's sea level rise (SLR) Team began updating the Commission's sea-level rise policy guidance to better integrate environmental justice into resiliency planning. With funding from the National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), the EJ Unit convened a group of eight experts in EJ and SLR who met regularly throughout the year to support the drafting of the updated guidance. Their input has been essential in reshaping the Commission's approach to ensure that sea-level rise policy not only prioritizes equity, but also meaningfully engages and considers the unique needs of vulnerable communities. Importantly, the Commission was able to compensate all participants with a stipend for their time, providing the economic space for full and valuable participation. By collaborating with the EJ advisors, Commission staff reassessed the deliverable for the project and, instead of creating an additional document to the SLR Policy Guidance, EJ principles were integrated directly into the existing document. The final draft of the updated guidance is expected to be released in mid-2024.



The 5 Primary Audiences for SLR Engagement

Environmental Justice in Commission Projects

In addition to Sea Level Rise Guidance, the EJ Unit staff played a key role in contributing to various other documents and external letters, ensuring that environmental justice principles are consistently reflected in the Commission's work.

Two projects that exemplified this work were the Barrio Logan Community Plan Update (BLCPU) and the Santa Cruz Local Coastal Program Update (Sustainability Update). In the culturally diverse Barrio Logan neighborhood of San Diego, the EJ Unit worked with the City to ensure the BLCPU included robust community engagement, improved public facilities like parks, increased affordable housing, and strategies to limit displacement of residents. For the Sustainability Update in Santa Cruz County, the EJ Unit collaborated with the City and Commission staff to integrate affordable farmworker housing, protections against pesticide drift, reduced chemical usage near residential areas, and more comprehensive consultations with Tribal leaders. In both projects, the Commission made a concerted effort to not only speak with community members and local groups representing vulnerable populations, but to also ensure that their input was incorporated throughout the final deliverable. These efforts helped ensure that EJ principles of meaningful engagement and the equitable distribution of benefits and burdens were reflected in planning documents.

The Commission's EJ Program also helped safeguard a vital, low-cost recreational and subsistence activity: pier fishing. The Commission reviewed a proposal in Huntington Beach to convert a bait and tackle shop into a restaurant. EJ staff highlighted the significance of pier angling for local fishers, particularly from predominantly low-income communities of color who rely on it as a source of food. The loss of the bait shop would have eliminated an essential service for fishers, and the conversion to a restaurant also could have contributed to the displacement of this traditional activity through gentrification. To address this impact, the project was revised to increase accessible tables and seating for the general public, a biannual fishing derby designed to engage EJ communities, and additional inclusions to enhance access to the pier for this activity. These innovative modifications not only preserved pier fishing but also expanded amenities to support and sustain this vital, low-cost opportunity for all.

Other efforts also included the continued implementation of EJ principles in several CDPs, LCPs, and other planning documents. Additionally, the EJ Unit conducted several internal EJ trainings across the Commission's district offices and began holding EJ Office Hours to provide an opportunity for planning and permitting staff to engage in deeper discussions with EJ staff on specific projects and planning efforts.

WHALE TAIL® Grants Program Equity Analysis for 2022/2023

The WHALE TAIL® Grants Program funds projects that connect people to the California Coast and its watersheds through education, stewardship, and outdoor experiences. For the last 25 years, the Coastal Commission's WHALE TAIL® Grants have supported experiential education and stewardship of the California coast and its watersheds, with an emphasis on equity, accessibility, and inclusion, engaging communities that have historically had few such opportunities due to systemic and geographic barriers.

For the past 2 years, the Public Education Team has presented an equity analysis of the grant program; the [Equity Analysis of WHALE TAIL® Grants for Fiscal Year 2022/2023 report](#) provided an overview of recent efforts to advance equity, accessibility, and inclusivity for the WHALE TAIL® Grants Program, with a focus on the 2022/23 grants round. In conjunction with these annual reports, staff has systematically reviewed the grant application and reporting processes and implemented a wide range of improvements over the lifespan of the grant cycle. This included outreach early in the application cycle and prior to the deadline, especially to those seeking funding who may not otherwise be aware of the Coastal Commission, through webinars, workshops, posting to government databases, and direct emails.



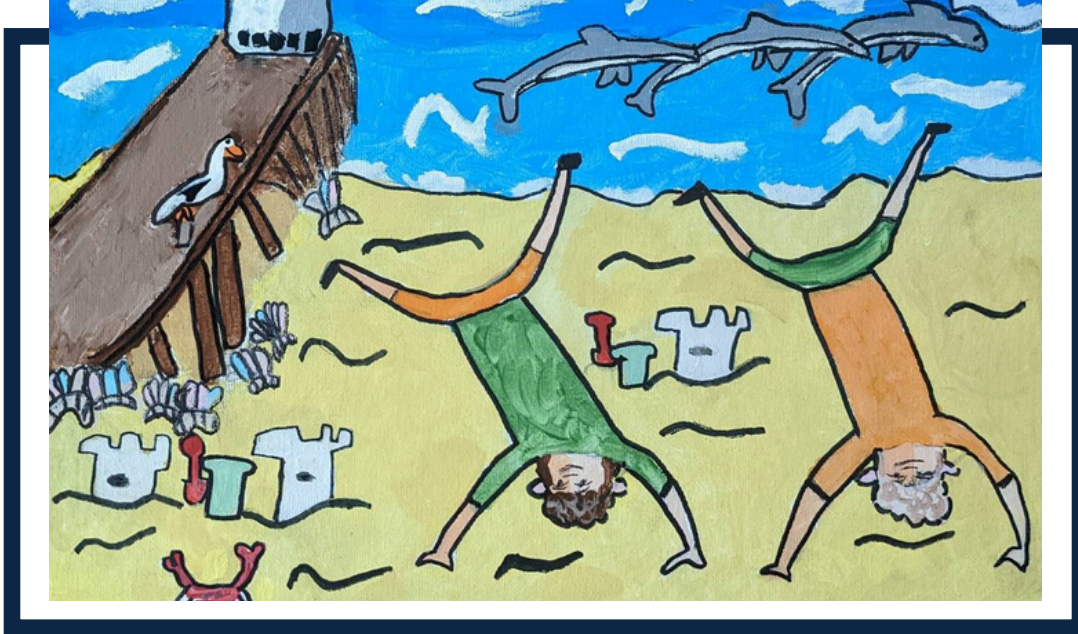
The Equity Analysis evaluates the impacts of several years of improvements to increase accessibility and inclusivity, address unnecessary burdens on applicants, achieve more equitable outcomes, and better align with program goals. These changes have supported the implementation of more equitable coastal and marine education programs and increased the grant program's reach and impact throughout California.

Above: A young person gets a high five after a surf lesson with Whale Tail grantee Paddle for Peace.
Below: : Exploring an urban waterway with Fernandeano Tataviam Band of Mission Indians



The equity analysis found, among other things, that out of 56 grant projects

- › 49 engage low-income communities;
- › 42 focus on youth programming;
- › 39 proposals focus on the inclusion of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC);
- › 22 support ESL (English as a second language) students and parents;
- › 13 engage inland communities;
- › 9 support newcomers and migrant communities;
- › 9 support a tribe or tribal entity or tribal programming;
- › 7 engage people who identify as having a disability;
- › 7 engage Designated Rural Regions;
- › 7 engage unhoused communities;
- › 7 engage youth in the foster system;
- › 3 engage the LGBTQ+ community.



Cartwheels with Dolphins by Paulo Roman Askari Grade 2, Foothill Ranch

Building a Culture of Inclusivity within the Commission

The California Coastal Commission has also continued to embed justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion (JEDI) principles into core operations within the agency. In February of 2023, approximately 145 Commission staff members attended a 3-day training at Asilomar State Beach Conference Grounds in Pacific Grove. The event was facilitated by NOAA coordinators Rebecca Lunde and Sarah van der Schalie, with a plenary opening by Executive Director Huckelbridge who provided a vision and strategic goals for the agency and its leadership. During the plenary, the EJ Unit led the agency in a JEDI exercise and training, focusing on belonging and inclusivity at the Commission. The EJ Unit has furthered the training through an internal JEDI Quarterly Meeting Series. These quarterly meetings coordinate efforts to incorporate the principles of justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion into hiring, training and other internal processes.

Training programs related to social justice and racial equity were also expanded throughout the year, with supervisors and managers participating in specific diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) training. The EJ Unit supported additional JEDI-focused events at the district-level, including those hosted by the Ventura and South Coast district offices.

These comprehensive, all-staff approaches to the integration of JEDI into the Commission's work have helped the agency move towards its goal of a more inclusive and just workplace and achieving its JEDI goals.



The Seals by Jocelyn Li Kindergarten, Alhambra

Language Accessibility

The Commission continues to improve hearing and language accessibility in public meetings to better serve non-English speaking communities, especially Spanish speakers. Since 2022, the Commission has offered live interpretation services during hearings when requested, and in 2023, it expanded these efforts. Staff developed contracts for simultaneous translation, coordinated with relevant organizations, and refined virtual hearing procedures, ensuring that non-English speakers could more easily participate. These efforts have led to an increase in Spanish-speaking participants contributing to public comments during Commission hearings, with at least one Spanish speaker contributing to public comment at almost every hearing, affirming the effectiveness of these initiatives.

The Commission has also begun to request permit applicants and land managers provide multi-lingual public access signage whenever possible. Bilingual staff have translated and disseminated a variety of documents, including FAQs, post-hearing briefs, and informational materials, as well as continuing to review translated agendas, staff reports, and executive summaries.

Through these actions, the agency has seen increased engagement from communities statewide, with more individuals utilizing translation services and participating in hearings, contributing to more equitable community engagement.

Tribal Collaboration



Star at Sunset, Pfeiffer Beach, by Pankaj Bhargava

California Native American Tribes have lived in, on, and with every part of California's landscapes since time immemorial. Despite genocidal atrocities committed by colonizers and perpetuated by government policies, coastal Tribes are still on the landscape and still practicing their cultural traditions. To help raise awareness of the rich history and contributions of California Native American cultures, and foster respectful engagement with Tribes today, the Commission created a deeply informative [Tribal Consultation Story Map](#) that features the voices of California Tribal leaders in their own words. It provides an overview of the Commission's Tribal Consultation Policy as well as advances in state law and examples of how Tribal consultation leads to better project outcomes.

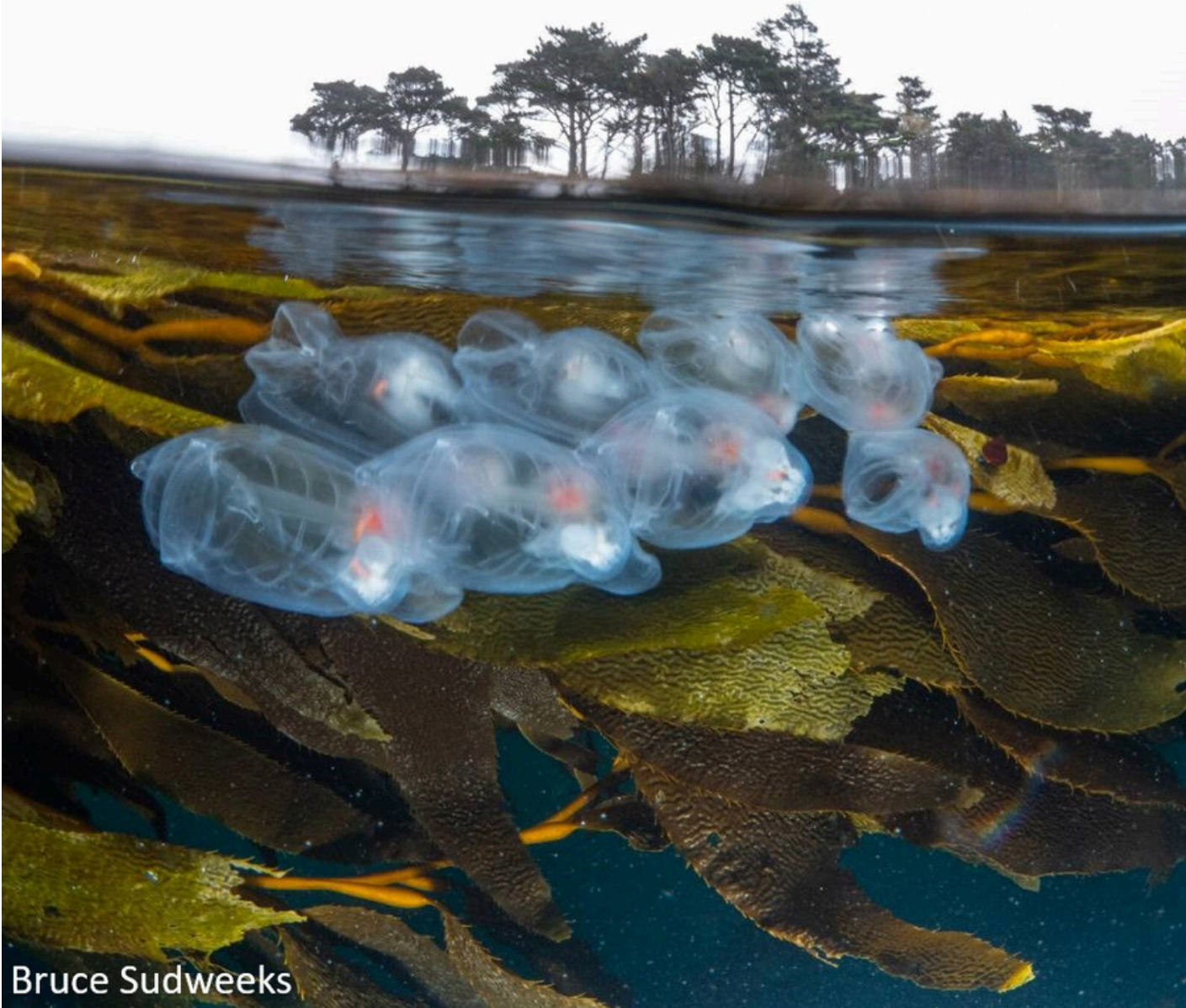


Tribal Nations Summit 2023

In February, Dr. Huckelbridge and Deputy Director Noaki Schwartz attended the California Tribal Nations Summit in Sacramento, organized by the California Natural Resources Agency. The all-day event supports the fulfillment of the Governor's promise to tribal leaders to hold high-level, decisionmaker-to-decisionmaker meetings between tribal and state leaders. The event brought together California tribal leaders and Administration officials to discuss a range of issues important to tribal leaders, with an emphasis on ways to work together to strengthen government-to-government relationships with tribes throughout the state. The event was co-hosted by the Governor's Office and the California Tribal Chairpersons Association and provided a productive venue to foster and build productive working relationships for future engagement.

Land Rematriation

Coastal Commission Enforcement staff brought an action against a property owner on the Bolsa Chica mesa that resulted in the transfer of the property, which is sacred to the Juaneno and Gabrieleno tribes, to the ATLC. In a significant victory for the "Land Back" movement, the Tongva and Acjachemen Tribes celebrated the return of 6.2 acres of coastal ancestral land overlooking the Bolsa Chica wetlands in Orange County. The land had been the site of an ancient village and holds deep cultural significance, as well as sensitive native habitat. The landowner had allowed extreme grading and land contouring on the site to create a competitive course for mountain bike competitions, without any permits or Tribal consultations. With a significant Coastal Act enforcement action and administrative penalties looming, the landowners complied with enforcement staff's direction to transfer the land to a tribal group. Acjachemen Tongva Land Conservancy accepted the property and is working with staff on a plan to restore the land and preserve it for ceremonies and traditional cultural practices.



Bruce Sudweeks

Two Worlds

Twin-sailed Salps in Point Lobos State Park, Carmel
Bruce Sudweeks



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Equity, and Tribal Year in Review**