Estuary Summit

Pivots from Science to People

Estuary Summit Pivots from Science to People

Estuary News Group Reports

"Make the unseen more visible in your work," urged Amanda Bohl, opening speaker for the largely cameras-off audience of 600 virtually assembled for the 2021 State of the San Francisco Estuary Summit this October.

The Delta Stewardship Council staffer's remarks at the 15th biennial conference, usually a two-day, science and policy-heavy networking event but this year an eight-hour Zoom summit, referred to how many things we all work on or people we work with everyday remain invisible. Some of these often unseen yet important things brought up over the course of the day: the indigenous lands upon which so many efforts to restore the Estuary or "manage" its resources take place; the people in local communities left out of government decision-making about water supply or land use; the long legacy of environmental racism and injustice cutting off many urban neighborhoods from open space...

"Environmental protection or economic advancement is never compromised by the parallel pursuit of equity, in fact it is lifted up when we do those things in tandem," added second speaker Therese McMillan, executive director of the Metropolitan Transportation Commission and Association of Bay Area Governments. "Community engagement is an essential first step."

As the leader of two regional agencies, McMillan took a moment to point to progress on *Plan Bay Area 2050*. Leaping through final approval hoops this fall, the Plan details how regional government, stakeholders and communities hope to balance housing, transportation, and environment in the long-term for the metropolitan Bay Area. For the first time, the plan also addresses sea-level rise, a mounting threat to miles of Bay shorelines that affects many cities and counties.

"The importance of working together on interjurisdictional problems will be key," McMillan said in her talk. As an example, she pointed to innovative work to elevate the North Bay's Highway 37, to protect it from current and future flooding, while still allowing wetlands and habitats to thrive. **ARO**

Adapting Climate Policy

The second session of the summit featured two pre-recorded videos. In the first, Congresswoman Jackie Speier, whose district covers most of the San Francisco peninsula, noted federal appropriations for the San Francisco Estuary have lagged behind comparable programs like Puget Sound and Lake Pontchartrain.

"I was extremely disappointed — no, I am indignant — to see that the San Francisco Bay is getting short-changed yet again," she said. Speier touted the $30 million for the Estuary she helped secure in the current budget bill that is still in negotiations, while acknowledging its fragility. "I have introduced the San Francisco Bay Restoration Act in every Congress since 2010," she said. "And I am hoping this will be the last time."

In the second video, California Department of Natural Resources Secretary Wade Crowfoot continued the budget thread. "In Governor Newsom's budget we have $10 billion allocated for climate resilience," he said, noting how far we've come since a year ago when the previous U.S. president debated the existence of climate change.

Crowfoot listed his agency's other priorities, including looking at how to meet the state's goal of conserving 30% of California's land and coastal waters by 2030, and how to streamline restoration project permitting. "One-third of restoration project budgets can be spent on planning and permitting," he said. "Non-controversial restoration projects can take up to ten years to begin." Crowfoot gave a shout-out to the San Francisco Bay Restoration Regulatory Integration Team, smiling as he stumbled over the acronym (BRRIT) but naming the group a "powerful model" for his initiative to speed up the implementation of restoration projects. **IP**

The Estuary Blueprint

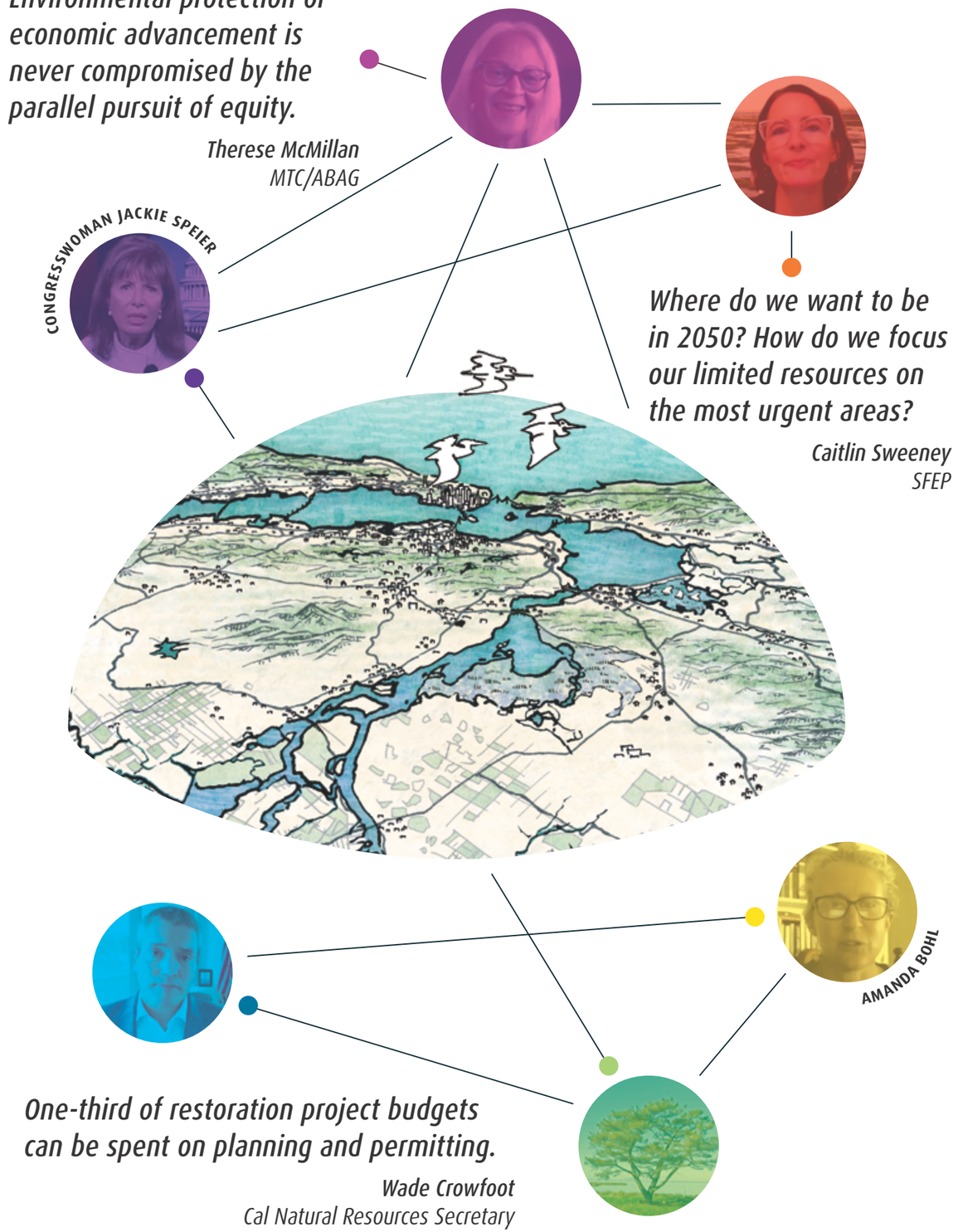
While the State of the Estuary conference and report may be the centerpiece of regular reporting to the public for the San Francisco Estuary Partnership, the *Estuary Blueprint* is its playbook. The playbook is getting an overhaul this year, and third speaker Caitlin Sweeney talked about how the Blueprint's themes offered a roadmap for the rest of the sessions in the day-long summit.

Sweeney is the director of the Partnership, which hosted the summit. The Blueprint is the latest iteration of the Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan that the Partnership, a federal-state program, is required to update every five years.

Like the summit, said Sweeney, the Blueprint aims to bring diverse voices together and actively support new partnerships. Also like the summit, the Blueprint crosses geographies and communities, identifies and elevates the highest priority actions, and spotlights the nexus of social and ecological resilience.

"The Blueprint offers both a collaborative regional vision and an actionable strategy," Sweeney said. "It walks a line between aspirational and feasible."

She concluded her opening remarks with questions she asked participants to keep in mind throughout the conference, among them: "Where do we want to be in 2050? How do we focus our limited resources on the most urgent areas? And how do we hold ourselves and each other accountable for the future?" **ARO**



Rematriation, Revitalization of Native American Infrastructure

As the federal government debates how to address the nation's aging public works, the October Estuary Summit brought refreshing perspectives from two prominent Native American leaders on ways of thinking about infrastructure.

Corrina Gould, chair and spokesperson for the Confederated Villages of Lisjan and co-director of the Sogorea Te' Land Trust, and Valentin Lopez, chair of the Amah Mutsun Tribal Band and president of the Amah Mutsun Land Trust, shared their insights. They stressed that only when we prioritize the abundant natural resources provided by the land, rather than roads and the electric grid, will we end the pattern of seeking to control and dominate the world around us. By centering native communities in environmental restoration efforts, we can repair both our human connections and those with the land.

Gould opened her session by commenting on the remarkable nature of the summit bringing people together to focus on the health of the San Francisco Estuary. "It's amazing that we're here talking about our traditional homelands, the estuaries: the lungs of this part of the world," she said.

Gould discussed initiatives led by the Sogorea Te' Land Trust, an urban, indigenous, women-led land trust working to return land to indigenous people. In the Sobrante Park neighborhood of East Oakland, the group is restoring a small parcel of land, the first to be returned to the Ohlone people. Planting Justice, a local nonprofit working to create permaculture gardens and provide work opportunities to formerly incarcerated people, has partnered with the Sogorea Te' Land Trust to facilitate this land transfer.

"We have created a space that is not just for indigenous people but for people from all walks of life, to come and begin to feel what it is like to be part of land again," Gould said. This includes the planting of native plants for medicinal use and the weaving of tule reeds into community structures.

Valentin Lopez, chairman of the Amah Mutsun Tribal Band and president of the Amah Mutsun Land Trust, spoke of the key differences between western and indigenous priorities. Native American cultures know that infrastructure encompasses the mountains, rivers, oceans, plants, and wildlife, he said. "We don't need to create infrastructure, we need to restore infrastructure given to us by the Creator."

This includes cultural burning, which was used across California for thousands of years as a tool for land management. Scientists are studying the benefits of these low-intensity, controlled burns, which support native species and help prevent the raging, destructive wildfires we increasingly see.

Lopez also emphasized the importance of thinking about the long-term consequences and benefits of our actions. "Whenever we implement anything new we ask ourselves if it will still be good seven generations from now," he said.

As a final parting call to action, Lopez asked that members of the audience "recognize that all restoration efforts must be indigenous-led." He continued: "Every morning when you wake up, you're putting your feet on ground stolen from Native Americans, and we ask you every day to think about how you benefit from that, and how you can help the tribes restore their culture." ED

Reconnecting Mill Creek to its Watershed

Removal of Mill Creek Dam renews the watershed. Photos Ian Bornarth, courtesy Sempervirens Fund

For thousands of years, Coho salmon and steelhead returned to spawn in the cold waters of Mill Creek, part of the San Vicente watershed in the mountains above Santa Cruz. This ended when a mining and logging company dammed the creek in the early 20th century. Now, an ambitious conservation initiative has succeeded in removing the dam, bringing people together across local land trusts, Native American groups, regional agencies, and researchers from multiple universities. Valentin Lopez, chairman of the Amah Mutsun Tribal Band, spoke about the dam removal in his session of the Estuary Summit.

The San Vicente Redwoods is a large stretch of forest sitting above the coastal town of Davenport. Following its 2011 purchase by a coalition including the Sempervirens Fund, Peninsula Open Space Trust, Save the Redwoods League, and Land Trust of Santa Cruz County, efforts have been underway to restore both the forest and the creek. The watershed is considered unique for its accessibility to migratory fish in the Pacific and an underlying karst limestone cave system which produces a high flow of cold water.

But the dam couldn't come down because it supported a pipe bringing water to the town of Davenport. Circumstances changed after the 2020 CZU fire moved through the area, "burning the pipe like a wick, melting it right off the dam," says Matt Shaffer, communications officer with the Sempervirens Fund. The replacement pipeline was moved to a new location, and the groups got the green light to take the dam down.

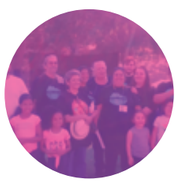
"We're very glad to have worked on [the dam removal] with other partners," said Valentin Lopez of the Amah Mutsun Land Trust. The Amah Mutsun Tribal Band are the descendants of Mutsun and Awaswas-speaking peoples who occupied much of the current Monterey Bay region. Ongoing restoration, monitoring, and research is needed to restore the watershed's historical role in the ecosystem. "The creek here is spring-fed and we're going to be restoring [salmon] habitat and the spawning beds. This has to happen at many, many other dams," said Lopez.

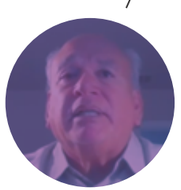
In the same Estuary Summit session, Corrina Gould, chair and spokesperson for the Confederated Villages of Lisjan, spoke of the importance of rebuilding the relationship between salmon and native people.

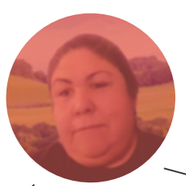
"We as California people have prayers for the salmon, we remember them as relatives that come to feed and take care of us," she said. "We have a responsibility to ... welcome them home. We can't do that work because of the culverted rivers and dammed creeks. We have this responsibility, because those salmon don't have a voice, but we as human beings are supposed to make sure that relationship stays strong. What can we do? We can open up those streams and those waterways." ED

We don't need to create infrastructure, we need to restore infrastructure given to us by the Creator.

Valentin Lopez
Amah Mutsun Tribal Band







ALEXANDER TAVIZON

We as California people have prayers for the salmon, we remember them as relatives that come to feed and take care of us.

Corrina Gould
Confederated Villages of Lisjan

REMATRIATE:
to restore a people to their rightful place in sacred relationship with their ancestral land.

Intersectional Partnerships

Leading off the Estuary Summit's afternoon panel on generating innovative, intersectional partnerships to build climate resilience and climate justice, Melissa Jones, executive director of the Bay Area Regional Health Inequities Initiative, outlined seven best practices for community engagement. These were developed by a local coalition of public health administrators working to eliminate health inequities that Jones directs, under the rubric "Farther Together."

With a view to new federal and state funding streams, Jones advocated prioritizing community-supported resilience efforts and valuing local knowledge and expertise. She quoted Roxana Franco of Nuestra Casa: "Don't hire consultants and then ask us to do the work for free." There's room for improvement on the public side, Jones observed: "A lot of Bay Area jurisdictions aren't using any equity frame at all in competing for federal money. The best tool so far is from Harris County, Texas."

Wetland ecologist Anthony Khalil, from Bayview Hunters Point Community Advocates and Bayview Community Co-op, invoked "three fierce and relentless environmental heroes"—Kenya's Wangari Maathai, Honduran indigenous leader Berta Caceres, and Bayview activist Marie Harrison—as he linked his personal experience with neighborhood youth in a Candlestick Point restoration project to regional and national currents.

"The crucible of 2020 revealed many social and environmental inequities," Khalil said, analogizing the impact of the pandemic to impacts of history and climate change; for the latter, there's no vaccine, no one-shot solution. "In the pandemic, we're asking the most vulnerable folks to shoulder the heaviest load and carry the most water," he added.

Khalil praised the Bay Conservation and Development Commission's recent Bay Plan equity and social justice amendment as a hopeful sign of transformative cultural change within the region's agencies, and shared a quote that sums up his philosophy: "If peace is made on common ground, equity is made on public land."

Joining the summit session from his office at the Bay Area Air Quality Management District, senior policy advisor David Ralston made it clear he'd rather be outside getting his hands dirty. "The most meaningful work agency folks can do is roll up their sleeves, plant some trees, get on the ground," he said. "That's the kind of work that motivates me personally.

In his presentation "Where the Wetlands Meet the Flatlands," Ralston showcased pilot projects in East Oakland aimed at restitching the urban fabric by creating or restoring vital connections between disadvantaged communities and the green infrastructure of creeks and shorelines.

Ralston also explored intersections between air and water, agencies and communities, struggling neighborhoods and abused natural waterways. "The Bay Area Regional Collaborative and the Resilient by Design Challenge (RBD) started my agency's involvement with water and communities," he recalled. "Living green infrastructure needs air and water quality to survive."

We're at a transformative moment, Ralston observed, with an opportunity to redo our infrastructure and break the barriers separating human ecology from the natural environment. Building greenly while avoiding gentrification and the market logic of development will be a challenge.

Three such initiatives are underway in the area around San Leandro Bay, the locale of RBD's Estuary Commons project. "The I-880 corridor from High Street to 98th Avenue contains the worst-off disadvantaged communities in the Bay Area in terms of health outcomes," he said. "They are also subject to sea-level rise and groundwater inundation."

Former wetlands are now filled with gray infrastructure. Hidden urban creeks, like San Leandro/Lisjan Creek, offer a pathway to reconnection: "People will say, 'We don't know about this creek; we don't have access.' But their grandparents may have fished or played in the creek."

Merritt College students, the Indigenous-woman-led Sogorea Te' Land Trust, and others are working to reclaim the creek as a sanctuary. However, the vision of a riparian greenway trail is threatened by plans for a high-speed Capitol Corridor rail line through the neighborhood: "The railroad is refusing to allow a path to go underneath to connect the schools and the neighborhood to the waterfront. If we can't get people to the waterfront, it's not doing us any good," said Ralston.

In East Oakland's Columbia Gardens neighborhood, Brookfield Elementary School sits next to the freeway, with a power transmission line over its playground. Groups like Higher Ground are planting a vegetation buffer along a 400-foot stretch of freeway to mitigate air and water pollution.

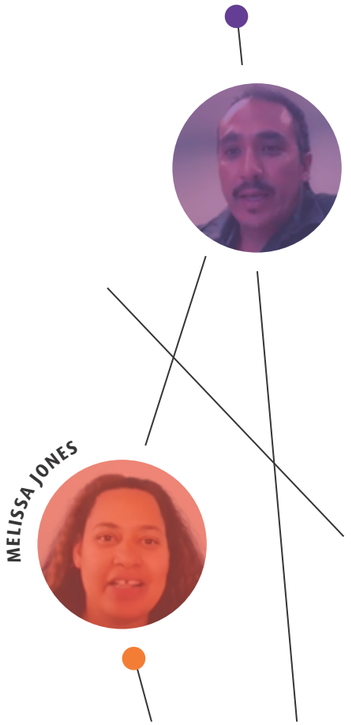
A third project envisions pedestrian and bike bridges over 880, providing access to the Martin Luther King Regional Shoreline. That, Ralston acknowledges, will be expensive: "We're trying for state and federal funds to make it happen." It will also require working with CalTrans, an agency that he says is "taking a new tack on realizing equity and trying to heal some of the trauma of those huge infrastructure projects."

Summing up, Ralston described a "confluence of opportunities" for equitable innovation: "Green, living infrastructure—it's about connecting the dots between people and the centers that make them alive."

He saluted another hero, the late community and environmental activist Whitney Dotson, "an inspired fighter" who helped save a Richmond marsh from industrial development. Dotson's lesson: "You have to stay on the ball." JE

If peace is made on common ground, equity is made on public land.

Anthony Khalil
Bayview Community Coop



Living green infrastructure needs air and water quality to survive.

David Ralston
BAAQMD

Learning from Communities & Youth

As the climate crisis builds and the Bay Area prepares for the challenges ahead, adults look increasingly to young people as a passive font of hope rather than as engaged leaders, said Lil Milagro Henriquez, founder of Oakland-based Mycelium Youth Network. "Too many times we look to young people as inspiration, but then move them out of the way so the adults can get to work," she noted during the afternoon plenary at the Estuary Summit.

Part of the problem, Henriquez explained, is the disconnect between what youth know is going to happen and what adults explain to them, starting from what they are taught about the climate. "Teachers are simply teaching through the trauma" of what are often feelings of fear and hopelessness about climate, she says, "preparing [youth] for a world that doesn't exist anymore."

To combat this trend, Henriquez and the Mycelium Youth Network are engaging at the classroom level in the Bay Area. Mycelium's Climate Resilient Schools Initiative, currently operating at Mission High in San Francisco and MetWest High in Oakland, serves nearly 100 students. Students can apply to join a climate leadership council that, after weeks of meeting other climate leaders and assessing the needs of their community, will plan a project to bolster local climate and cultural resilience.

Henriquez asserted that direct community engagement can be "just enough, just in time," to combat the climate crisis, and her perspective was echoed by other presenters at the afternoon plenary, including Restore the Delta youth Climate Water Advocate Gloria Alonso Cruz.

Alonso Cruz self-describes as a "beginner" environmentalist, though the 21-year-old may be better considered an expert when it comes to witnessing environmental degradation. When her family immigrated from Mexico to southside Stockton seven years ago, her new neighborhood placed in the highest tier for environmental injustices in the state, including the worst exposure to pesticides, ozone, diesel exhaust, and particulate matter, according to a mapping tool from the California Environmental Protection Agency.

"My cultural background and my lived experiences, as well as my experience working with Restore the Delta, have enabled me to spot the challenges to achieving the livability we deserve in Southside Stockton," said Alonso Cruz, one of six college students trained as Climate Water Advocates by the local nonprofit. Over half a year, the young Stocktonians learned about a vast expanse of issues, from harmful algal blooms and fisheries to the fraught world of California water policy, and how to advocate about these issues within their communities.

Darius Waiters, another Climate Water Advocate and lifelong Delta lover, added that "A lot of the environmental racism and environmental justice obstacles are not due to a lack of evidence, or a lack of awareness... [but are] very much due to a lack of value our leaders are placing in the affected communities and the affected resources." Waiters also emphasized how entrenched structural barriers have prevented most of their peers from enjoying the Delta the way they did growing up.

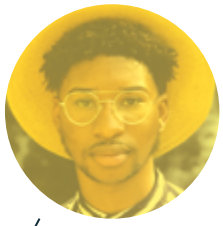
Fellow presenter Phoenix Armenta discussed work being done by the Oakland Shoreline Leadership Academy to engage frontline youth in their own backyards. The Academy "has shown us that young people can be equal partners in creating solutions to our environmental problems if we provide them with the education and resources needed to support their effort," said Armenta.

Academy curriculum consultant Marquita Price also weighed in to discuss her deeply rooted love for the Oakland shoreline, and her project to create a clean-powered transit loop to connect the shoreline to her home in East Oakland. "One thing I like about the academy is being able to connect with other shoreline lovers, of all ages and from other parts of Oakland, and to co-learn about our shore," said Price. "I grew up with the recreation side, and now we're learning about the history and natural side."

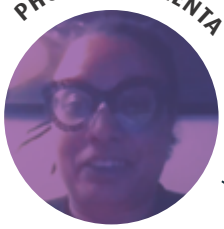
Henriquez and Armenta both touched on the exclusion faced by frontline communities of color when addressing climate change. The Academy participants are "the people

continued on next page

A lot of the environmental racism and environmental justice obstacles are not due to a lack of awareness... [but] to the lack of value our leaders place on the affected communities and the affected resources.

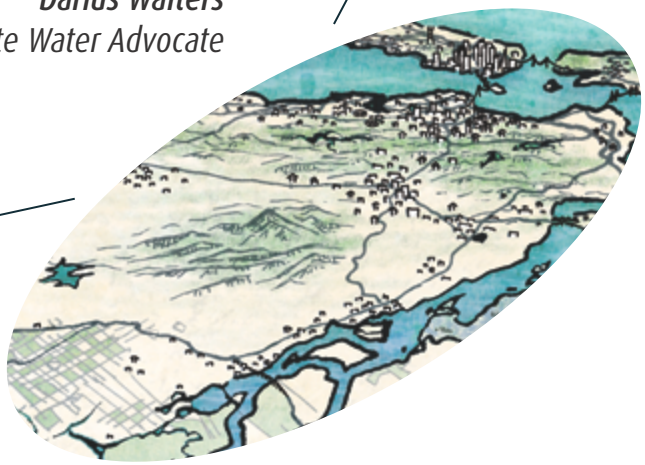


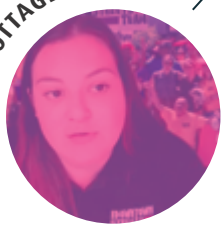
Darius Waiters
Climate Water Advocate

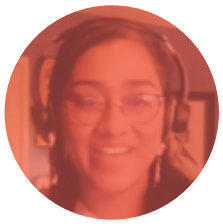

PHOENIX ARMENTA


MARQUITA PRICE


GLORIA ALONSO CRUZ




ROMIE NOTTAGE



When people feel they can do something, it helps lessen doomism.

Lil Milagro Henriquez
Mycelium

Team Tackles Homelessness

"Homelessness is an experience, not an identity," said Romie Nottage at the Summit's afternoon session. Her organization seeks to "provide a path to recover from homelessness" rather than treating homelessness as an end-state of being. The "teams" of Downtown Streets Team are unhoused volunteers that work beautification shifts (cleaning streets and alleyways, for example) for a basic needs stipend (food or transportation assistance) and access to case management. Since 2005, when the program began, team members have on average spent about six months before finding housing and stable employment. By working towards community beautification and building a roadmap to stable, housed living, Downtown Streets Team is "changing the way the unhoused are perceived in the public eye," says Nottage. **MHA**

most affected and least includedin the shoreline planning process," noted Armenta in their presentation.

Young people who are systematically excluded from planning their own future are more likely to feel overwhelmed by the climate crisis, said Lil Henriquez. However, through Mycelium's high school programs, she's seen the benefit that engagement can bring to young people's outlook on the future.

"Take the overwhelming thing and break it down into two to four immediately implementable actions to address adaptation or mitigation," she said, describing the approach the program teaches to participating youth. "When people feel they can do something, it helps lessen the anxiety and doomism."

Young people need to be included in planning our response to climate change, added Phoenix Armenta, reflecting on the essential role youth play in effecting meaningful change. "We can't just pile our hopes onto their shoulders and not give them the tools to make sense of what is happening in the world." **MHA** & **SG**

Closing Thought

At one late-in-the-day final breakout session of the summit, participant Deborah Moore, and environmental advocate, had this to say: "I've been to this conference many times, and this year was really different: it elevated the importance of ceremony, sacredness, and spirituality, emphasized for us the need to yield power, change decision-making, avoid exclusionary expertise. It gave all of us a sense of how if we slow down we can go farther with more people."

Contributing writers: *Ariel Okamoto, Isaac Pearlman, Elyse DeFranco, Joe Eaton, Michael Hunter Adamson & Sierra Garcia. Art: Veronica Chan (p.9), Afsoon Razavi (pp.10-16 summit networks).*

DEEPER DIVE

Summit Recordings

- Morning Session: https://bit.ly/3pwj8Jw
- Afternoon session https://bit.ly/2XDWnrn