

The Story of Us: Celebration & Regeneration

Water Equity & Climate Resilience Caucus

Convening Summary 2023



About the WECR Caucus Convening



Group photo taken at Lewis MacAdams Riverfront Park along the Los Angeles River.

From May 10 to May 12, 2023, 60 Water Equity & Climate Resilience (WECR) Caucus core members and allies gathered on unceded Tongva land in Los Angeles, California. This in-person convening — the first since the start of the pandemic — was an important time to reflect on how the Caucus has grown and evolved, with the goal of prioritizing frontline needs, voices, and solutions, and making space for our relationships with each other and with water. Participants represented 30 organizations and traveled from 14 states and Washington, D.C.

The convening objectives were to:

- Connect and deepen relationships between water and climate leaders.
- Build shared values, vision, and power through community.
- Celebrate our individual and collective stories to bring joy to our work.

Rooted in Place

This year's convening was co-hosted with [Sacred Places Institute for Indigenous Peoples](#) (SPI), an Indigenous-led, community-based organization located in the ancestral homelands of the Tongva People in Los Angeles. The Caucus is deeply grateful for the partnership with SPI to ground the convening

in place, invite participants to be in relationship with the Los Angeles River, and bring the convening to life.



*"If the rivers are not healthy, neither are its people."
Caucus members stand on the concrete banks of the LA River
during the site visit.*

Local experts and partners of SPI joined Caucus members for a reflective walk through the Lewis McAdams Riverfront Park to learn about the history of the Los Angeles River, the impacts of development on nature, and the displacement of Native peoples.

Following this site visit, SPI and [Friends of the LA River](#) (FOLAR) co-hosted a panel on river restoration and community health. Caucus participants learned about

current advocacy and restoration efforts, and Indigenous perspectives in protecting the LA River.

Panelists included:

- **Gabriella Lassos**, Orange County Indigenous Land Rematriation (OCILR) Program, IYEJ, Oceans Protectors, Sacred Places Institute for Indigenous Peoples (moderator)
- **Jess Rodriguez**, Director of Strategic Communications, Friends of the LA River (moderator)
- **Angela Mooney D'Arcy**, Founder/Executive Director, Sacred Places Institute for Indigenous Peoples
- **mark! Lopez**, East Yard Communities for Environmental Justice
- **Dennis Masaba**, Chief Operating Officer, Friends of the LA River
- **Danielle Stevenson**, Environmental Toxicology Graduate Student Researcher, University of California, Riverside
- **Chantel Dominguez**, Associate Director, Community Campaigns & Engagement, American Rivers



The Story of Self, Us and Now

The three days of the convening were organized around a [public narrative](#) arc: the Story of Self, Us, and Now. Narratives impact how we understand relationships with water, ourselves, each other. Narrative change means reimagining, then creating, communicating, and advancing new ways to interpret reality.



Day One: Story of Self

On the first day, Caucus members creatively explored their origin stories to better understand what brought each person to water and climate justice work. Participants reflected on their individual journeys, designed a book cover and chapter titles to represent their connections to water, and finally shared their creation within small groups. This activity was designed to ground the Caucus in shared humanity by bringing our whole selves and stories into our collective work.

Day Two: Story of Us

Our second morning built shared values by embracing play, creativity, and connection. Members paired off to co-create secret handshakes, WECR Superhero names (shout out to ‘Super Policy De-structor Buddy’ and ‘Big Heart Ben’), and inspirational proverbs. These exercises provided Caucus members opportunities to meet members (or folks they don’t regularly engage with) and share a unique experience.



Pablo Ortiz and Nayyirah Shariff create a secret handshake.

“We love rest and liberation for water and people.” -WECR Proverb

The full group then participated in an interactive exercise to “flow like water,” drawing inspiration from the different ways that water moves and sounds.



During the Story of Us session, Caucus members participated in a group activity to “flow like water” by making collective water sounds through motions like tapping fingers, clapping hands, and patting legs.

These morning activities demonstrated the value of bringing together our individual stories to connect and move collectively as a Caucus.

“Sound builds up, water and us powerful together, trickle down like streams, quiet together, individual drops become big and sit softly.”

Day Three: Story of Now

On the final day, small groups co-created stories about the power of the Caucus to refer back to and inspire in the years to come. These stories are rooted in the courage to imagine a new future and the sense of possibility in taking a pathway to action. While policy and politics offer a range of what is currently possible, stories free us from those limitations to imagine a new world, and embrace the transformation.

A Story of Now

*Once upon a time there was a group of extraordinary people.
And every day they spent the morning jumping in the river and playing.
Until one day one of them got sick.
And because of that the healing began.
And because of that it caused them to pause, and ask what was the source of the
sickness and healing?
Until finally they took action with one voice to help clean up the river.
And ever since then we have had a healthy river and healthy people.*

Making room for our relationships with water



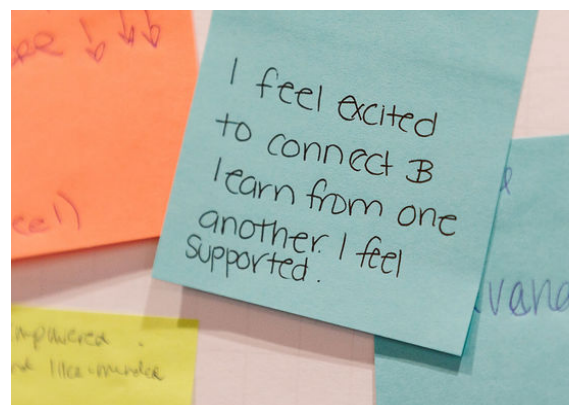
Over the past year, the WECR Narrative Change Workgroup has worked to bring communications, cultural, and spiritual connection to the Caucus's policy and advocacy work. Members of this workgroup helped shape the Story of Self, Us, and Now session frames, as well as developed opportunities to deepen our relationship with water through the Narrative Change Lab.



Throughout the convening, the Narrative Change Lab hosted activities to create space to play with water and relate to water differently, not as a commodity but as a relative. The activities included generating water sounds for a future track, native insect and plant tie dye, watershed mapping, and the water cup challenge. Each activity represented different connections with and insights from working with water. For instance, by using native insects and plants to tie dye, participants could see that: "We don't know what water will bring. Oftentimes, she surprises us with unexpected patterns, further creating the earth and reminding us that humans can not control her. Yet, with well intentions and reciprocity, we can have an impact on the outcome. And while she will always remember where to go, how to come back home, she reminds us to be fluid." (Narrative Change Lab Explainer, 2023).

Reflections

Throughout the convening, the Caucus re-affirmed that joy and creativity are necessary to sustain the movement, especially as it can feel challenging to ensure art, culture, and spirituality are interwoven with policy work. It is critical that the Caucus connects the national communications and federal policy advocacy with the work on the ground and that the Caucus makes space to reflect on our relationship with water.





In participants' own words...

"The best thing was experiencing the deep sense of community and solidarity being built in the Caucus."

"I feel joy and inspiration being connected to other water warriors."

"I learned that water moves in different ways and so do we but it is all beneficial."

"I learned to be creative as a way to give myself permission to think in new ways and to reimagine things I already think a lot about."

"The space that the Water Equity and Climate Resilience Caucus has provided Verde is the most beneficial thing we have done in the past couple years in terms of being connected to other organizations in this work. The Caucus has provided a space for Verde to engage in policy at the federal level... [it] has provided the capacity for us to not only know what is going on, but to engage and talk to our state's representatives and to provide input based on what our communities are going through." -Cheyenne Holliday, Verde, said in an interview at the convening.

What's next?

The convening reminded us that in person gatherings are important to build connection and power. Following this gathering, Caucus participants are exploring ways to make the convenings – and water and climate justice work broadly – more intergenerational and tapping into our collective stories and joy to help sustain movement over time. Stay posted for our next in person WECR Caucus Convening (tentatively, Spring 2024).

The Caucus will take the connection and momentum from the in-person conveying and carry it into policy and advocacy work in the year ahead. Members and allies are invited to stay engaged through quarterly national calls, workgroups, and listservs. [Learn more about the workgroups](#) and contact Lupe Garia (lupe@policylink.org), Associate, to be added to any of the workgroups.

