

COASTAL CONSIDERATIONS:

IMPROVING NGO ENGAGEMENT WITH COASTAL COMMUNITIES OF COLOR

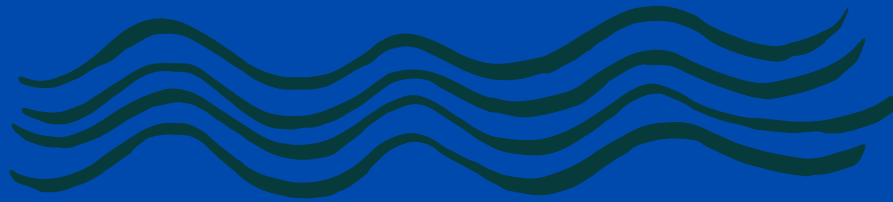


TABLE OF CONTENTS

1	Introduction
3	Methology
4	What Issues do Coastal Communities of Color Face?
8	NGO Engagement
15	Best Practices
19	Conclusion

INTRODUCTION

The coastal areas of the United States include some of the most densely populated and diverse regions in the nation. Bounded by land and sea, the coasts offer opportunities for growth and development. While all coastal communities face challenges posed by climate change, those from frontline and historically excluded groups face additional environmental, social, and health hazards.

Green 2.0 sought to understand the state of engagement by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) with coastal communities of color. Green 2.0 held a convening with representatives of allied organizations in early 2021. However, it soon became apparent that little literature exists on the subject, at least in a form designed to be digested and acted upon by organizations. This report is an initial attempt to fill that gap by offering a) a summary of the challenges faced by coastal communities of color, b) a review of activities NGOs undertake to help communities meet these challenges, and c) a set of proposed best practices that NGOs can use to improve their work.

While developing this report, it became clear that while NGOs have a critical role in supporting coastal communities of color before climate and non-climate crises hit, they often fail to build substantial relationships with these communities. In an attempt to provide some concrete examples, the report focuses its suggested best practices for engagement with coastal communities of color in the states of California, Florida, and Louisiana. These are locations where frontline coastal communities face environmental and climate challenges rooted in similar geographical features but differ due to their unique cultural backgrounds.

INTRODUCTION

During a review of NGO work and interviews with NGO staff, we learned about many effective strategies while also identifying challenges such as the vital need to implement practices rooted in diversity, equity, justice, and inclusion (DEIJ).

For this report, a coastal community is defined as one that lives near the coast and/or utilizes coastal resources and the ocean for its livelihood in a manner shaped by cultural heritage or economic need. While acknowledging the varying legal and cultural-based notions of “coastal community,” we propose the above definition as broadly inclusive of the cultural and historical connections that more place-based definitions omit.

METHODOLOGY

Green 2.0 adopted a qualitative approach, conducting a literature analysis paired with interviews with 17 environmental NGO personnel from both senior leadership and programmatic staff between June 2021-September 2021. In addition, we conducted an in-depth review of the programmatic work, and coastal community engagement strategies of 25 national and regional organizations within the states of California, Florida, and Louisiana. While these NGOs varied in size and programmatic focus within the environmental field, all engaged in some way with coastal communities of color.

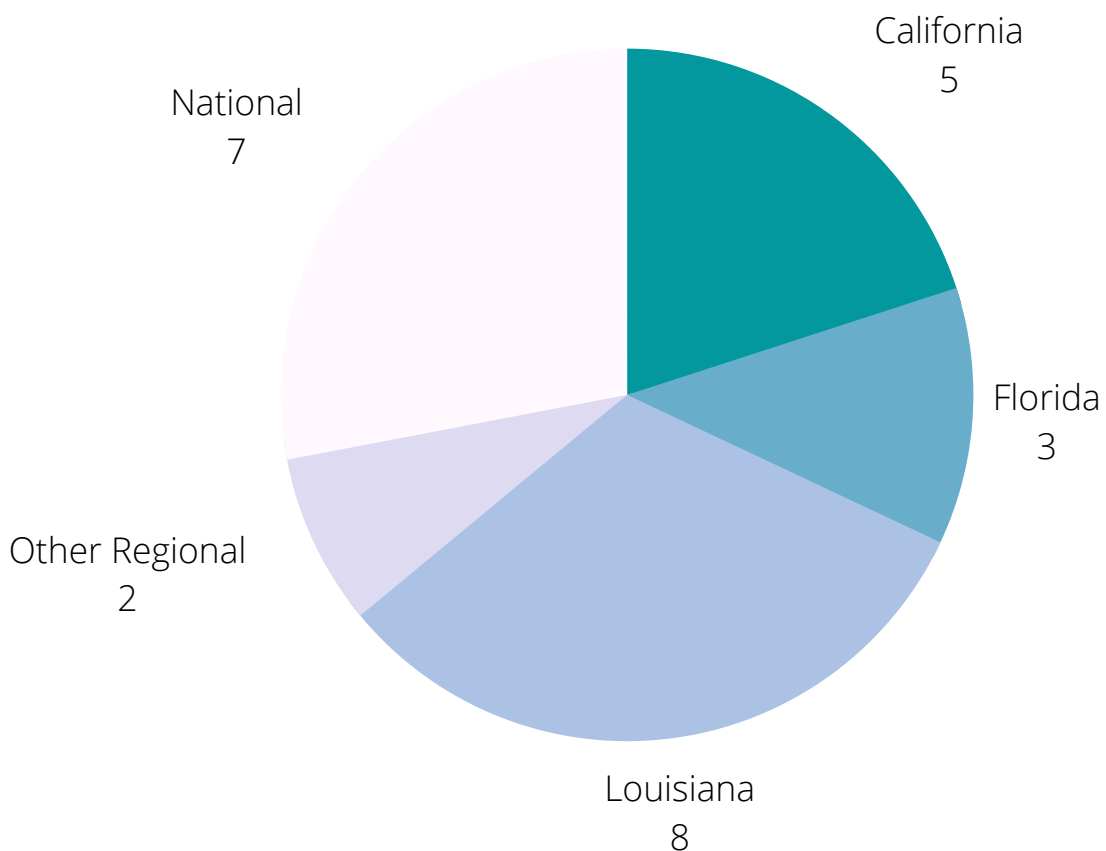


Figure [1]: Regional breakdown of organizations reviewed and consulted

WHAT ISSUES DO COASTAL COMMUNITIES OF COLOR FACE?

The first step to building positive working relationships between NGOs and coastal communities of color is understanding the issues the communities face—issues as complex as the communities themselves. Environmental, climatic, socio-economic, political, and health dimensions intersect, disproportionately impacting communities of color.^{1,2}

Environmental Factors



Social, Economic and Health Factors



Figure [y]: Factors that affect coastal communities [3-7]

WHAT ISSUES DO COASTAL COMMUNITIES OF COLOR FACE?

Rising seas, severe hurricanes, and storm surges due to climate change combined with poverty and poor housing caused by discriminatory policies such as redlining displace frontline communities.⁸ In addition, there has been a rise in climate gentrification by developers pushing out communities that are settled on safer higher ground.

One such community under threat is Little Haiti, a predominantly Black neighborhood in Miami, Florida. This area, previously neglected by outside investors, is now attracting developers looking to escape rising seas and who are pushing out the existing community that cannot compete with the rapid increase in housing prices.⁹

Another community is Orleans Parish in Louisiana, where one study found that areas at higher elevation became "significantly whiter, more educated, [and] higher income" post Hurricane Katrina.¹⁰ Frontline communities struggle with obtaining resources to recover from impacts caused by previous extreme events.

While ports and industries can make coasts into hotbeds of economic activity, this also means exposing communities of color to harmful air pollutants, including smog and nitrogen oxide. For example, the majority Hispanic/Latinx/o/a/e community of Wilmington, California, near the Port of Los Angeles, has suffered increased cancer and asthma rates.^{11,12} In New Orleans, Louisiana, dangerous chemicals from petrochemical plants along the Mississippi River leach into the soil and waterways of predominantly Black communities, leading to a cancer rate so extreme that the United Nations has called the government to end this case of environmental racism.^{13,14} Additionally, some of these communities also rely on these same industries causing harm for their livelihoods.

WHAT ISSUES DO COASTAL COMMUNITIES OF COLOR FACE?

Frontline communities of color that rely on coastal resources for their food and livelihood also feel the impact of climate change, including rising sea levels and temperatures that have had a direct impact on marine biodiversity and the habitat fishing and tourism industries.

In coastal California, many low-income and people of color work in the agricultural, tourism, and domestic sectors, all of which are particularly vulnerable to climate change.^{15,16} Increasing droughts are also affecting the salmon population, so tribes cannot obtain the fish that are an essential part of both their diet and an integral part of their spiritual and cultural traditions.

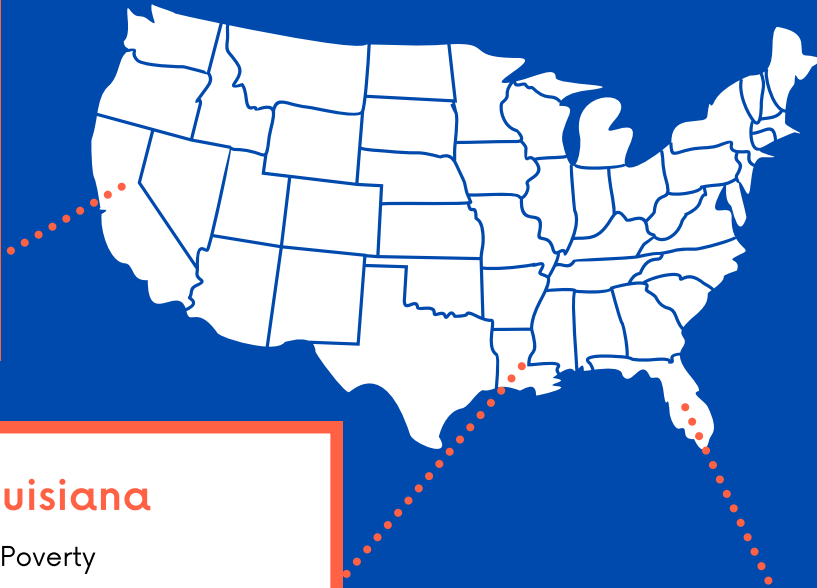
“Communities don’t want to live near a chemical plant but feel they have no option. NGOs cannot go into a community asking them to quit their jobs to advocate against these industries without any alternatives. That’s just setting up both sides for failure.”

- Attorney, Regional NGO, Louisiana

NGO practitioners interviewed by Green 2.0 shared the top 5 challenges faced by coastal communities of color in their states:

California

- Sea level rise
- Air pollution
- Water scarcity
- Lack of housing
- Climate gentrification



Louisiana

- Poverty
- Petrochemical industry
- Flooding
- Hurricanes
- Job Security

Florida

- Sea level rise
- Flooding
- Hurricanes
- Climate gentrification
- Energy costs

NGO ENGAGEMENT

Although environmental NGOs have engaged with coastal communities for years, mainstream environmental groups have often prioritized the physical environment and neglected the integral role of people. Fortunately, there has been a recent shift, as more NGOs recognize the importance of community engagement – a recognition that many communities and staff of color fought for – and which will hopefully result in a more inclusive and holistic approach. Traditional environmental groups are slowly catching up with environmental justice groups, which have pioneered intersectional work.

“If working with the community is not a part of an organization’s programmatic work then they are falling short.” – Community Organizer, Regional NGO, Florida



HOW DO NGOS ENGAGE LOCAL COMMUNITIES?

Our research found that NGOs interact with and provide support to communities in many ways. The NGOs interviewed engaged in communities in the following ways:

Building Technical Capacity

NGOs help community members build technical skills through projects such as green jobs training in wetland restoration, hosting workshops on how to read flood maps, or seminars on implementing successful organizing campaigns. They also help build capacity through trainings on grant writing, which can often be an overwhelming task for smaller organizations.

Increasing Knowledge and Understanding

NGOs provide resources on topics of interest to a given community through educational awareness campaigns, webinars, or workshops. These resources include engaging in research within the community, which can help communities make more informed decisions on issues that impact them.

“My organization helped put together a workshop to train the local community on how to read flood maps with specific examples in their community. Having that increased skill helps them advocate for themselves.” - Community Organizer, Regional NGO, Florida

HOW DO NGOS ENGAGE LOCAL COMMUNITIES?

Advocacy or Lobbying Work

NGOs engage with elected or appointed officials, building relationships to drive change around policies that impact communities. They support by letter writing, making phone calls, or meeting with elected officials and staff. The aim of this work is to discuss community needs and to apply pressure to the appropriate levers of government, with the ultimate end of eliciting systemic change through impactful law and policies. Further, NGOs often have lobbyists on staff who can dedicate their time specifically to advocating for change.

Offering Funding and Supporting Fundraising

Among the most fundamental ways that NGOs support communities is by increasing financial resources by directly injecting funds. Mechanisms for NGOs to provide funds include mutual aid funds and small grants. One example is Anthropocene Alliance, an NGO that works with over 100 frontline communities throughout the U.S. and distributes several small grants to its members (especially those without 501(c)(3) status).¹⁷

Organizing / Mobilizing Campaigns

Many NGOs use their skills to help communities mobilize for change around an issue of concern. This may include organizing marches, social media blasts, or door-to-door canvassing to share information or petitions. NGOs can use their existing platforms to help build support for these communities and leverage their public influence.

“Helping communities use their voice to change law and policy is one of the most impactful tools we have for change. It is their [community’s] right to hold their politicians accountable but sometimes the institution can be daunting to residents so we try to make the lift as easy as possible. [We] draft letters and gather contact information for [government] representatives.” - Executive Director, Regional NGO, Louisiana

HOW DO NGOS ENGAGE LOCAL COMMUNITIES?

Assembling Coalitions

NGOs form coalitions to build capacity through partnerships with other NGOs, state agencies, and communities and as a way to learn new best practices or connections that could help improve the community.

Organizational working groups can share knowledge around a specific topic, and coalitions can magnify existing financial and human resources by pooling them. The result is increased credibility and influence for the relevant advocacy and policy alliance.

Providing Direct Services or Resources

NGOs provide direct resources in the form of specialized expertise and skills that supplement a community's work. NGOs noted that they supported grant writing, provided pro bono legal services, and provided scientific research, NGOs also support frontline communities during times of emergencies like after extreme weather.

"There are some challenges. Working coalitions does require some finesse as members may not align on every issue so it is important that the core values are similar. Too many members may stall progress. Also, power is not always distributed equally; larger or richer organizations sometime dominate." - Program Director, National NGO

CHALLENGES

In a time of growing needs and shrinking resources, NGOs are being asked to do more with less, and all these forms of community engagement noted above carry their own challenges. However, the most significant challenge is the lack of communication and trust that can stem from a divide between organizational priorities and community needs.

Recognizing the following challenges and barriers to equitable and inclusive community engagement can help NGOs better serve coastal communities of color:

Lack of Trust

There is often a lack of trust between coastal communities of color and NGOs. This distrust stems from a community's past experiences with other NGOs engaging in extractive policies, top-down approaches, exploitation, and unfulfilled promises. This can lead to a lack of community buy-in. Without intentional relationship building by NGOs with communities, proposed initiatives will not be sustainable.

"Folks are wary of NGOs. I have had several members in the community share their experiences with me of working with other groups [NGOs] that came into their community for a short period of time, used the community's time and story and just up and left. I am still working to build back that trust." - Campaign Organizer, Regional NGO, Louisiana

"Honestly, there is trauma in the community from not only what affects them day to day but then feeling abandoned by organizations who say they were going to help." - Community Organizer, Regional NGO, Florida

Covid -19 Pandemic

A significant challenge to community engagement work identified by NGO practitioners was the Covid-19 pandemic. This affected programming that relied on on-the-ground work such as door-to-door canvassing and community workshops that had to be paused or scrapped altogether. NGOs have had to transition to virtual methods but face communication barriers as some of their community members do not have access to adequate technological tools. While it is true that a more virtual world has provided more access to some coastal communities, others that rely on a more hands-on approach have been left increasingly disconnected.

“The frontline communities we work with, especially BIPOC communities have been the worst hit by the pandemic. Many lost their jobs, family members and are unable to recover. We have been lucky to pivot to help these communities but not all organizations are able or willing to do the same.” Executive Director, Regional NGO, Louisiana

Lack of Capacity

Engaging with communities requires significant time, finances, and available personnel, which are respectively needed for relationship building, visiting communities on the ground, and volunteer support. At many NGOs a community project is just one part of an individual staff member’s work, with competing priorities, they do not focus all their attention only on supporting that community. Furthermore, many smaller organizations working on these issues are also affected by those same issues.



Measuring Qualitative Outcomes

Tracking qualitative outcomes of community engagement is essential for NGOs to monitor progress and community satisfaction. Given that each community and its goals are different, a standardized monitoring framework has proven challenging. Some NGO practitioners admit that they do not track that information.

“Keeping track of the number of calls, workshops or visits with communities is easy but how do you measure if you’ve improved a relationship with that community member or the community in general? That part is trickier.” - Executive Director, Regional NGO, Louisiana

Lack of Internal Diversity, Equity or Inclusion

There is often an internal disconnect between NGOs and the communities they are trying to serve. Unsurprisingly, given the history of mainstream NGOs being overwhelmingly white, communities of color are generally underrepresented on staff. This can lead to lack of understanding of a community’s issues or perspectives. Many NGOs are disconnected from their own staff of color and have failed to support them adequately. Further, mainstream environmental NGOs are often slow to integrate DEIJ principles into their programmatic work and are often more focused on the physical environment.

“Who are we to go into the community asking them to work with us when we still need to work on ourselves.” - Executive Director, Regional NGO, Louisiana

“It’s sometimes a fight to make leadership understand why engaging with the community is important and the pushback is really unfortunate.” - Community Engagement Manager, Local NGO, Virginia

BEST PRACTICES

While developing this report, several best practices emerged from our research and experience for engaging with coastal communities of color. These practices are an initial guide for NGOs to engage in more equitable and inclusive interactions that foster trust and create sustainable impact on communities. To engage in more positive and productive work with coastal communities of color NGOs must:

- 1** Center communities in their work by listening to their needs.
 - 2** Prioritize building and maintaining relationships with the communities they wish to serve.
 - 3** Seek to understand the local, historical, and social contexts that shape interconnected community challenges.
 - 4** Center people in their work by letting communities lead and co-develop initiatives.
 - 5** Support young people of color by investing in their development.
 - 6** Implement DEIJ practices into their internal work culture and increase the diversity of staff.
 - 7** Work to increase access for coastal communities of color by removing barriers to engagement.
 - 8** Compensate the community for their time, expertise, and work.
-

BEST PRACTICES

Listen

The most vital step for NGOs is to listen to the community. Its members are the experts on the challenges they face, and there is no substitute for their insight. This listening process must be done before the planning and inception of any initiative, as it helps to create more relevant interventions and prevents waste of resources. NGOs can attend community meetings, interview community members (making sure to compensate for their time) or conduct open-ended surveys.

"I always start with a conversation. I have learned over the years that I only think I know what problems they [community member] face but they are the experts and by listening to my organization is better equipped to to help." - Community Organizer, Regional NGO, Florida

Prioritize Relationship Building

A long-term commitment to building trust in a community allows NGOs to understand the challenges better and develop enhanced ways to support. This includes being involved with the community on the ground, participating in community events outside of the NGO project work, and having continued check-ins to provide updates even when there is no active project. NGOs that conduct research within a community or ask them to share their experiences should also report back any findings and updates to that community.

Understand Historical and Local Context

The injustices faced by coastal communities of color are based in systems that perpetuate inequities. NGOs need to look at a community holistically, the policies, history, and culture that shape the community to address these injustices. They must seek to understand the traditions, challenges, and triumphs of that community so that they approach their work with critical context.

BEST PRACTICES

Compensate Communities Appropriately

Often community members are asked by NGOs to speak on panels, co-author op-eds, fill out surveys, use their stories to sway legislators or provide their expertise on projects. As experts in their own experience, community members possess valuable knowledge and should be compensated for their time. Paying people to participate shows that you value their time and ideas.

Center Community led and/or Co-developed Initiatives

NGOs should include community voices throughout their work. There is a lack of community involvement in policies and programs that directly affect -- and are intended to address the needs of -- coastal communities of color. These communities are asked to review plans after a program has been developed, if at all. By engaging with communities throughout the process, NGOs can design projects that reflect community needs and are more likely to be utilized by community members.

Support Youth

Since the next generation will face the brunt of the climate crisis, NGOs need to remove barriers and create pathways for those interested in the environmental field. This includes paid internships and educational programs with meaningful work. In addition, initiatives should prioritize those from historically excluded groups. Providing opportunities to young people allows them to learn skills and knowledge to help their communities and may encourage some to enter the field as a career.

“Our internship program used to be unpaid because we didn't have the funding and it was clear that was a huge barrier. We would only attract predominantly white and higher income students which was not the demographics of our community work. So, we did target fundraising efforts to address this problem and our cohorts have since been much more diverse and better represent the community.” - Campaign Organizer, Regional NGO, Florida

BEST PRACTICES

Implement Internal DEIJ Work

NGOs can foster better external relationships by first creating more diverse, equitable, and inclusive environments within their own organizations which should start with hiring more people of color and individuals from frontline communities into leadership positions, including the board. NGOs must also institutionalize DEIJ within their organizations by explicitly including these values in their missions and setting actionable goals and outcomes. Adopting DEIJ principles within organizational structures can create a strong foundation for developing programmatic work, including community engagement.

“Recently our board has adopted a measure that at least two of the board positions must be community members and they will be compensated for their time. It is important that they have a voice in our organization’s work at the highest level.” - Executive Director, Regional NGO, Louisiana

Create Routes to Access

It is important to reduce barriers to engagement, including physical distance. Whenever possible, NGOs should go to a community rather than ask the community to come to them. If this is not possible, NGOs should provide transportation. Providing a virtual option is another way to reduce barriers (one which is especially important during the Covid-19 pandemic), and the technological needs of a given community should be given full consideration. All media should also have increased accessibility functions, including additional languages, closed captions, and sign language interpreters.

CONCLUSION

At the beginning of this project, Green 2.0 convened a group of allied organizations working on coastal and ocean-related issues to discuss the current state of relevant DEI work. In addition to soliciting input into the focus of a prospective report, we hoped to gain insight into previous literature on how diversity factors into the work of such environmental groups. However, we soon learned that little such literature existed; this report should be viewed as a first step to addressing that gap.

NGOs have an integral role as environmental and climate injustices such as climate-driven gentrification, health impacts from air and water pollution, and loss of livelihood due to loss of marine biodiversity and habitat continue to impact coastal communities of color. They can support communities by building technical capacity, interjecting funding, and increasing networks to support mobilization and organizing efforts.

Such initiatives, however, must use a DEI lens to evaluate a given NGO's organizational structure and its community engagement strategies. Failing to do so can lead to further mistrust between NGOs and communities, misalignment between programs and a community's needs, and consequent lack of community buy-in. NGOs also face other internal challenges including lack of personnel capacity, funding shortcomings, and difficulties measuring progress.

Given that best practices emphasize understanding specific community needs, interventions should also be regionally aligned. While California, Louisiana, and Florida share similar challenges such as sea-level rise and air pollution, local differences demand a more nuanced approach rather than broad strokes. Understanding the historical context of communities through listening, relationship building, and allowing those most impacted to lead should precede any intervention.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Green 2.0 would like to thank Kalina Browne for leading this report during her time as a fellow. We would also like to thank our staff who worked at various stages to review and support this report including Andres Jimenez, Adriane Alicea, Andy Beahrs, Alyssa Garza, Hazel Choi, Juliana Ojeda, Raviya Ismail, and Shao Zhi Zhong for their contributions. We appreciate the support of the Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation, whose funding helped to make this report possible. Finally, special thanks to Dr. Sarah Cooley.

Finally, we would also like to extend our deep appreciation to all the NGO practitioners who shared their experiences and expertise, making this report possible.

REFERENCES

- 1) Sarah Kaplan, "Climate change is also a racial justice problem," The Washington Post, June 29 (2020), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/climate-solutions/2020/06/29/climate-change-racism/>
- 2) Paul Sandifer and Geoffrey Scott, "Coastlines, Coastal Cities, and Climate Change: A Perspective on Urgent Research Needs in the United States," *Frontiers in Marine Science*. (2021): p.207. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fmars.2021.631986>
- 3) Nicholas Bogel-Burroughs and Katy Reckdah, "The Greatest Killer in New Orleans Wasn't the Hurricane. It Was the Heat." The New York Times. September (2021) <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/15/us/new-orleans-hurricane-ida-heat.html>
- 4) Cozzetto K, Chief K, Dittmer K, Brubaker M, Gough R, Souza K, Ettawageshik F, Wotkyns S, Opitz-Stapleton S, Duren S, Chavan P. "Climate change impacts on the water resources of American Indians and Alaska Natives in the US". In *Climate change and Indigenous peoples in the United States* (2013) (pp. 61-76). Springer, Cham. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10584-013-0852-y>
- 5) Hardy RD, Milligan RA, Heynen N. Racial coastal formation: The environmental injustice of colorblind adaptation planning for sea-level rise. *Geoforum*. (2017) Dec 1;87:62-72 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2017.10.005>
- 6) Martinich, J., Neumann, J., Ludwig, L. et al. Risks of sea level rise to disadvantaged communities in the United States. *Mitig Adapt Strateg Glob Change* 18, 169–185 (2013). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11027-011-9356-0>
- 7) De Koning, Koen, and Tatiana Filatova. "Repetitive floods intensify outmigration and climate gentrification in coastal cities." *Environmental research letters* 15, no. 3 (2020): 034008. <https://iopscience.iop.org/article/10.1088/1748-9326/ab6668>
- 8) Sarah Kaplan, "Climate change is also a racial justice problem," The Washington Post, June 29 (2020), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/climate-solutions/2020/06/29/climate-change-racism/>
- 9) Elizabeth Santiago, "Weathering the Storm: Climate Gentrification in Miami's Little Haiti" University of Michigan, School of Public Health. (2020) <https://sph.umich.edu/pursuit/2020posts/weathering-the-storm-climate-gentrification-in-miami.html>

REFERENCES

- 10) Aune KT, Gesch D, Smith GS. A spatial analysis of climate gentrification in Orleans Parish, Louisiana post-Hurricane Katrina. *Environmental research*. (2020) Jun 1;185:109384. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32240840/>
 - 11) Ann Johansson, "NRDC and Partners Sue L.A. to Protect Communities from Port Pollution" Natural Resources Defense Council. (2020) <https://www.nrdc.org/experts/gonzalo-e-rodriguez/nrdc-and-partners-sue-protect-communities-port-pollution>
 - 12) Courtney Gonzales and Jennifer Miller, "Fighting for Environmental Justice in the Diesel Death Zone," Center for Climate Change & Health <https://climatehealthconnect.org/stories/fighting-for-environmental-justice-in-the-diesel-death-zone/>
 - 13) Idna Castellón "Cancer Alley and the Fight Against Environmental Racism" 32 *Vill. Envtl. L.J.* 15 (2021). <https://digitalcommons.law.villanova.edu/elj/vol32/iss1/2/>
 - 14) "Environmental racism in Louisiana's 'Cancer Alley', must end, say UN human rights experts" United Nations, Mar 2 (2021) <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/03/1086172>
 - 15) Michelle Roos, "Climate Justice Summary Report. California's Fourth Climate Change Assessment". Publication number: SUM-CCCA4-2018-012. <https://resourceslegacyfund.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Climate-Justice-Report-4CCCA-v.4-00455673xA1C15.pdf>
 - 16) Laura Feinstein, Rapichan Phurisamban, Amanda Ford, Christine Tyler, Ayana Crawford "Drought and Equity in California" Pacific Institute Jan (2017) https://pacinst.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/PI_DroughtAndEquityInCA_Jan_2017.pdf
 - 17) Imagine Water Works Mutual Aid Response Network <https://www.imaginewaterworks.org/mutual-aid-response-network/>
 - 18) Anthropocene Alliance "About Us" <https://anthropocenealliance.org/about-us/>
 - 19) Stefanie Johnson, "Leaking Talent: How People of Color are Pushed Out of Environmental Organizations" *Green 2.0*. June (2019) https://diversegreen.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Green_2.0_Retention_Report.pdf
 - 20) "DEIJ in Action: A Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Justice Guide for the Chesapeake Bay Watershed" Chesapeake Bay Trust https://cbtrust.org/wp-content/uploads/CB-Watershed-DEIJ-Guide_May-2019.pdf
-