

Tides of Belonging

Advancing AAPI Engagement in MPA Conservation

Executive Summary

www.mpacollaborative.org

California's coast and ocean are stewarded by communities with deep, diverse, and enduring relationships to marine environments. Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) communities are among these stewards, yet their cultural knowledge, civic power, and leadership remain persistently underrepresented in ocean conservation and Marine Protected Area (MPA) governance. This underrepresentation persists despite the scale and significance of AAPI constituencies and geographies: AAPI populations are among the fastest-growing in the United States—approximately 7 to 7.5 percent of the population, or about 23 to 24 million people—and U.S. Pacific territories include some of the world's largest MPAs, even as Pacific Islander communities face disproportionate exposure to habitat pollution and climate-related risks.

This report is the result of a collective effort by the Marine Protected Area Collaborative Network (MPACN)'s AAPI Pathways Working Group and Affinity Group members, drawing on their lived experiences, cultural insights, and leadership across the state. It also integrates findings from a survey with MPACN members, community-based research, and the Pathway Project scholarship to offer a robust foundation for change.

Developed for collaboratives and members of the MPACN and allied organizations (agency, nonprofit, academic, etc.), this report offers a roadmap for moving from intent to impact. It explains why AAPI engagement matters, what barriers limit participation, recommended actions to take, and how MPACN collaboratives and members can build authentic, sustained relationships rooted in trust, reciprocity, and shared leadership. Throughout, it aligns with MPACN's mission to empower diverse communities to engage in stewardship for a healthy ocean and resilient future.

I. Understanding AAPI Connections to Ocean & Coast

Goal

Illuminate the diversity and significance of cultural, spiritual, historical, and contemporary connections AAPI communities have with marine and coastal environments.

Why This Matters

Engagement efforts often fail when they assume a singular cultural relationship to the ocean. For many AAPI communities, relationships to marine environments are shaped by ancestry, migration, colonization, labor, and survival. Understanding these layered connections is foundational to respectful engagement.

Cultural Ties and Historical Context

Many AAPI communities include those whose cultures are inseparable from ocean navigation, fishing, and stewardship, as well as immigrant and refugee communities whose experiences may include subsistence fishing, shoreline gathering, coastal labor, or displacement due to war and climate impacts. It is important to understand that the term AAPI itself refers to a diverse range of communities rather than a single, homogenous group. The descriptions below are not mutually exclusive, as there is considerable overlap among communities. For example, small-scale fishing is common across all groups.



Pacific Islander Communities:

Many Pacific Islanders have [managed ocean territories](#) for thousands of years and view humanity as part of the natural world. They have their own approach to conservation goals and often see exclusion from policymaking as part of historical systemic exploitation. This exploitation is rooted in a history of U.S. maritime expansion and acquisition of territories such as Guam (1898), American Samoa (1900), and the Northern Mariana Islands (1947), alongside the annexation of Hawaii (1898). Despite their millennia of expertise and experience protecting the coastal seas, these groups often face challenges to their land and sovereign rights. In California, the coast represents both [healing and harm](#), as these communities continue to navigate the cultural disruption caused by European colonization and the claiming of Pacific lands in the 19th and 20th centuries.



Southeast Asian Refugee and Immigrant Communities:

For Vietnamese, Cambodian, Laotian, Thai, and Hmong communities on the West Coast, small-scale fishing is vital for economic livelihoods, food security, and the preservation of cultural traditions. Many refugees from these groups revitalized local maritime economies in areas like Long Beach and Monterey Bay where they have historically relied on both commercial boat operations and pier fishing to sustain their families. Environmental degradation, oil spills, and climate change directly affect their ability to sustain these practices, impacting both economic stability and cultural continuity. For these communities, ocean conservation is not an abstract environmental issue, but a practical and urgent matter tied to justice, resilience, and long-term well-being.



East Asian Communities:

For those of Chinese, Korean, and Japanese descent, coastal ecosystems are central to food traditions involving seafood, seaweed, and long-standing preservation practices. Declining fish populations, warming waters, and pollution affect access to culturally important foods and the ability to sustain these traditions across generations. Conservationists can engage these communities by linking ecosystem health to food heritage and local traditions through partnerships with chefs and community leaders. Ocean protection can be more relevant by highlighting it as a means to preserve valued cuisines and cultural heritage, making environmental efforts more personal and impactful.



Filipino and South Asian Communities:

The ocean plays a central role in culture and daily life for many Filipinos in the AAPI diaspora representing the global community of people living outside their ancestral homelands. These communities have deep maritime roots shaped by seafaring, fishing, and coastal village traditions, while similarly, South Asian communities from countries like Bangladesh, India, and Sri Lanka bring experiences shaped by cyclones, sea-level rise, and changes to coastal ecosystems. These histories give these communities a strong awareness of climate risks, migration challenges, and the importance of resilience. Recognizing these shared experiences allows conservationists to focus on climate resilience and disaster preparedness.

[Research](#) from the California Ocean Protection Council emphasizes that inclusive ocean stewardship requires recognizing cultural knowledge systems alongside Western science. [Studies by the Monterey Bay Aquarium Research Institute](#) and others further demonstrate that human-ocean relationships are culturally mediated and central to conservation outcomes.

Practice Guidance

To foster deeper connections, conservation groups must acknowledge that California's coast has been a site of both opportunity and exclusion. Inclusive coastal policies must recognize complex histories—including surveillance and language-based discrimination—to truly honor the ways AAPI communities navigate and rely on the shore.

Additionally, understanding the background when establishing the conservation guidelines is critical. Research suggests that a lack of connection to these histories can lead to a reliance on stereotypes or the complete invisibility of AAPI communities in policymaking. Recognizing this, both the California Ocean Protection Council and the Monterey Bay Aquarium Research Institute emphasize that inclusive stewardship requires valuing cultural knowledge systems alongside Western science, as human-ocean relationships are culturally mediated and central to successful conservation.

Sample language:

"We acknowledge the diversity within AAPI communities. In this initiative, we focus on [specific communities or regions] due to existing relationships and geographic relevance, while recognizing this does not represent all AAPI experiences."

Case example

The Pacific Islander Community Partnership (PICP) was awarded a [\\$49,700 Pacific Islander Community Partnership through the Whale Tale Grant](#) from California Coastal Commission to support a 6-month initiative focused on helping Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander (NHPI) youth explore climate justice, sea-level rise, and ocean conservation. Whale Tail Grants help support community-led projects that connect people to the California coast through education, stewardship, and outdoor experiences.

The program allowed NHPI youth to blend modern environmental science with ancestral indigenous practices through hands-on workshops, coastal visits, and traditional seafaring.



Seafaring and Navigation:

NHPI youth explored their unique cultural heritage of Polynesian voyaging to boost their confidence as a descendant of some of the world's greatest navigators and guardians of the ocean, rather than seeing themselves only as victims of climate change.



Cultural Connection:

The program uses the "sea of islands" philosophy, introduced by Tongan-Fijian scholar Epeli Hau'ofa and is the framework to many Pacific Islander grassroots organizations, to teach youth that the ocean is a connector of people rather than a barrier.



Hands-on Conservation:

To foster life-long ocean stewardship, activities included coastal site visits, beach clean-ups, and workshops on marine biology and conservation policy. The initiative culminated in a student-led summit where participants presented climate justice solutions to their peers and community leaders, helping NHPI youth practice ocean conservation.

Why This Mattered

Instead of feeling invisible, this grant empowered a specific group within the AAPI community whose cultural identity has been at risk and eroded by the lack of environmental representation. By focusing on their heritage of voyaging, the program validates their cultural identity as a tool for modern ocean conservation

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II. Benefits of Engaging AAPI Communities

Why AAPI Engagement Strengthens Conservation

Authentic engagement with AAPI communities advances equity while strengthening organizational sustainability, public trust, and conservation impact. To maximize the environmental initiatives, organizations should focus on four core pillars with AAPI groups: strategic funding, inclusive volunteerism, targeted advocacy, and the integration of traditional knowledge.



Key Benefit Areas

1 Funding and Resource Development

As public funding and private philanthropy increasingly prioritize equity and community benefit, organizations that demonstrate inclusive engagement will attract vital support.

- **State Alignment:** California’s climate investments, such as [Proposition 4](#), emphasize habitat restoration and community protection by prioritizing projects that involve diverse local stakeholders.
- **Corporate and Donor Networks:** AAPI communities represent a massive, growing network of donors and professionals. Potential strategies include co-branded products with AAPI-owned businesses or youth scholarships that align conservation goals with cultural values of stewardship.
- **High-Empathy Grantmaking:** Foundations like the [Packard Foundation](#) and the [AAPI Civic Engagement Fund](#) seek “high-empathy” partners such as organizations that are deeply embedded within the communities they serve, rather than those merely working “for” them.

2 Volunteerism and Stewardship Capacity

Culturally relevant programs unlock multigenerational volunteer participation. Offering family-centered events with language access and food traditions transforms one-time volunteers into long-term stewards of ocean conservation.

- **Multigenerational Impact:** Engaging entire families in data collection—from toddlers to seniors—builds a broader base for biodiversity monitoring and scientific contribution.
- **Heritage-Based Training:** Integrating traditional sanctuary management practices into volunteer training ensures that conservation objectives resonate with the heritage of the region’s original stewards, encouraging broader participation and program sustainability.

3 Advocacy and Civic Power

AAPI communities are a rising force in environmental politics as voters, donors, and policy stakeholders.

- **Grassroots to Advocacy:** Engagement strengthens support for MPAs, climate resilience, and coastal access.
- **The Risk of Inaction:** Failing to include AAPI voices in these discussions risks reinforcing historical exclusion and weakening long-term public support for conservation. Involving these groups ensures environmental movements are seen as inclusive rather than exclusionary.

4 Knowledge and Innovation

AAPI communities contribute intergenerational traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) and adaptive practices shaped by climate vulnerability and migration. These perspectives enrich conservation strategies.

- **Traditional Systems:** Native Hawaiian loko i’a, or fishponds, are designed to raise fish and taro plants simultaneously. They serve as natural estuaries that nourish marine life while filtering sediment to protect offshore coral reefs. Similarly, Southeast Asian practices like intercropping or planting different crops together to improve soil health and using lunar phases for planting, offer sustainable alternatives to industrial chemicals, such as synthetic fertilizers, pesticides and herbicides.
- **Social Resilience:** The Filipino tradition of bayanihan, or collective labor, fosters the social resilience needed when infrastructure is destroyed or too expensive to repair after a climate disaster. Instead of relying on expensive machinery (fossil-fuel dependent) to achieve a shared goal, communal labor (free/resilient) gets the job done while adapting to climate-driven weather patterns.
- **Circular Economy Mindset:** Many AAPI immigrants carry a legacy of resourcefulness stemming from a frugality mindset shaped by histories of migration and postwar recovery—practices like composting, gardening, and repurposing materials—that align perfectly with modern circular economy and carbon reduction goals.



Your action—or inaction—shapes who feels welcome in conservation. Engagement is itself a form of stewardship



III. Barriers to Meaningful AAPI Engagement

Goal

Identify structural and interpersonal barriers that hinder authentic engagement and provide actionable alternatives.

Understanding Common Barriers in the Landscape of Exclusion

Low engagement is often caused by systemic failures, rather than a lack of interest from the community.

Environmental justice research consistently demonstrates that these obstacles are structural, not cultural deficits.

Current barriers include:

- **Resource Gaps:** Many community organizations often lack the budget, staff, and linguistically appropriate materials needed to reach diverse populations effectively.
- **Accessibility Issues:** Many AAPI are working families who experience limitations to accessing and engaging with coastal or conservation sites, with issues such as facing significant "time poverty", the high costs and lack of reliable transportation, and obtaining necessary beach equipment.
- **Psychological Barriers:** Historical over-policing or unwelcoming environments at coastal sites that create a sense of non-belonging.
- **Institutional Mistrust:** Past experiences with being included only for appearance (tokenization) or taking information without giving back (extractive engagement) have led to community skepticism.

Therefore, meaningful engagement requires shifting the focus from "fixing" the community to fixing the systems that exclude them.



Practice Guidance: Strategies for Inclusion

Organizations should audit internal systems—budgets, timelines, leadership incentives—to ensure engagement is resourced and accountable. An example is the 'community vetted translation' model led by the MPACN, which uses a recognized compliance and equity model to manage Marine Protected Areas. By employing linguistic groups to review professional translations, the organization makes sure messaging is culturally relevant and resonant. Upon seeing this success of this model, state agency partners also followed suit and started adopting these practices.

1 Bridge the Linguistic and Cultural Divide: Generic outreach often fails to resonate. Conservationists should move beyond simple translation towards cultural alignment.

- **Localized Communication:** Translate complex scientific reports and coastal regulations—such as fishing restrictions—into the primary languages of local AAPI subsistence fishers to prevent unintentional violations or fines.
- **Reframe Conservation:** Many AAPI cultures view the ocean as a "communal pantry." Rather than focusing solely on "no-take zones," frame conservation as "protecting ancestral food sources" and "maintaining traditional livelihoods" that connect more deeply with AAPI values.

2 Decentralize Power and Management: To counter experiences of exclusion, organizations should place the management of coastal resources directly into community hands.

- **Community-Based Management:** In Hawaii, the [Ha'ena Community-Based Subsistence Fishing Area](#) allows local groups to set rules based on TEK. This fosters self-regulation based on shared values.
- **Empowered Intermediaries:** Many agencies hire community liaisons to act as intermediaries. This helps make enforcement feel like a collaborative conversation rather than a confrontation.

3 Shift from Tokenization to Power Sharing: Move beyond extractive engagement by giving AAPI members a vote in resource allocation.

- **Collaborative Grantmaking:** Utilize community boards to decide project funding so that resources go toward local needs like community piers or beach transportation.
- **Technical Representation:** Recruit AAPI scientists and traditional knowledge holders to meaningful and productive opportunities, not just 'check-box' review panels seeking to get an expert's approval on a product. Ideally these opportunities start at the beginning of the process, so experts may co-create the product, have decision-making power, and/or directly influence final decisions. For example, ensure that their expertise—not just their identity—directly informs the actual boundaries of protected areas.

4 Address "Time Poverty" and Economic Barriers: Directly addressing cost and time constraints to facilitate the participation of working families through flexible scheduling and financial support.

- **Meet the Community Where They Are:** Instead of distant coastal offices, host engagement booths at night markets, temples, or community centers within the community.
- **Respect Community Time:** Acknowledge the "opportunity cost" of participation by providing honoraria and stipends for community experts and attendees. This ensures that contributing cultural knowledge is compensated as professional labor rather than requested as
- **Fund Access:** Utilize programs like the [California Coastal Commission's Whale Tail Grants](#) to fund bus transportation and equipment rentals. In order to further remove economic barriers to the coast for individual families living inland, gas cards or travel reimbursements can be helpful to help cover the high cost of fuel and vehicle wear.



Common Barriers that Lead to Low Engagement from AAPI

Resource Gaps

Real Life Example

A city sends out a survey by email to residents, some of whom are AAPI. It is written only in English, is not mobile-friendly, and nobody from the city has partnered with the AAPI community for translation or help filling it out.

Accessibility

Real Life Example

A state park hosts a meeting at 1:00 PM on a Tuesday for public comment on upcoming improvements. Due to the time and location, it excludes any working-class families who cannot take a half-day off or don't have a car to drive to the location.

Psychological

Real Life Example

A family from an inland town visits a beach neighborhood but sees heavy police presence or "Private Property" signs every 50 feet. Even though the beach is public, the vibe of the area signals to the family that they are being observed or don't belong there.

Mistrust (Tokenization)

Real Life Example

An organization invites an AAPI community leader to sit on a board but only asks them to speak when they need a "photo op" for a grant report. The leader's actual policy suggestions regarding coastal access are ignored.

IV. Establishing & Sustaining Authentic Partnerships

Goal

Support long-term, reciprocal partnerships with AAPI-led and AAPI-serving organizations.

Key Insights

To foster authentic partnerships, organizations must move away from temporary or superficial interactions. Our AAPI initiative survey data indicate that over **70% of organizations lack partnerships with AAPI-led groups**. Where partnerships exist, they are often short-term. Moving from transactional to authentic relationships requires a prioritization of shared authority and long-term investment.

Recommended Practices

Prioritize Listening Sessions Over Project Pitches:

Rather than determining research priorities in isolation, scientists should work with community members to identify the issues that impact local lives. For example, the California Ocean Protection Council has funded projects where community groups help define success metrics for MPAs. This helps track the health of culturally significant species alongside general biodiversity.



- **Implement Co-Design and Shared Responsibility:** The gold standard of power-sharing is co-designing goals, timelines, and success metrics. A landmark example is the [Chumash Heritage National Marine Sanctuary in California](#). Instead of the federal government developing a management plan in isolation, an Indigenous-led nomination serves as the foundation for a federal sanctuary governance structure, representing a major shift in how agencies and communities collaborate on ocean stewardship. This example can be modeled for AAPI communities.
- **Compensation for Cultural Expertise:** Authentic partners recognize that community time and traditional knowledge are professional assets. The American Planning Association and the [Asian Pacific Environmental Network \(APEN\)](#) compensates elders and community leaders when they share their knowledge for ecological insights to inform state-level climate adaptation.
- **Invest in Permanent Advisory Bodies:** Organizations should fund standing committees that exist beyond the lifecycle of a single project. The Marine Protected Area (MPA) Collaborative Network creates local hubs where AAPI fishers, Indigenous leaders, and officials meet regularly. These partnerships succeed because they focus on building trust over years, facilitating conflict resolution when challenges arise.

Sample outreach language:

"We are interested in exploring whether our missions align and would value learning about your priorities before proposing any collaboration."

V. Trust-Building & Representation in Decision-Making

Goal

Move beyond tokenism toward shared governance so that the AAPI communities transition from an advisory role to a functional seat at the table.

True trust is earned through long-term accountability and shared power rather than symbolic representation. Inclusion is meaningful only when a community has the agency to influence the result. To achieve this, organizations must implement structures that foster a genuine sense of ownership over conservation efforts.



Strategies for Shared Governance

Establish Advisory Roles with Real Authority:

Rather than consulting on a pre-finished plan, grant communities a formal role in the approval process.

- **Vetting Power:** Form community review boards with the authority to pause projects that interfere with local cultural practices or subsistence fishing rights.
- **Shared Grantmaking:** Include community representatives on committees that decide which local environmental projects receive funding, aligning financial support with community priorities.

Close Feedback Loops by Reporting Outcomes:

Trust is often eroded when communities provide input but never receive updates on its application. Closing the loop proves their time was valued.

- **Responsiveness Summaries:** After public forums, publish a document that explicitly lists community concerns and explains how the final plan was modified to address them.
- **Neighborhood “Report-Backs”:** Hosting meetings in the community’s own space—such as a temple or community center—to present data on the impact of their advice rather than asking for more input.

Transition to Co-Governance and Community Leadership:

Shift from “helping” a community to “sharing the wheel” with them.

- **The Co-Management Model:** Utilize traditional resource management models, such as in Vanuatu, where government scientists and village [elders co-manage a reef](#). In this model, scientists provide data, while the elders establish seasonal rules for harvesting.
- **Stewardship Transfers:** Provide technical training and resources so that local AAPI-led groups can take over the long-term management of coastal restoration sites currently handled by national nonprofits.

Ladder of Participation



Accountability and Consistency

Trust is built through consistency and accountability, not symbolic inclusion, even when there is no active crisis or deadline.

- **Presence in Community Hubs:** Maintain regular representation at AAPI community centers and hubs through attendance at local events, meetings, and gatherings. This consistent local presence makes the organization a visible, accessible part of the everyday community landscape rather than a distant entity.
- **Public Accountability Dashboards:** Maintain a public-facing website to track progress on equity goals, such as the percentage of contracts awarded to AAPI-owned businesses or the volume of translated resources provided. This transparency holds the organization accountable to its promises.

VI. Values-Based Messaging & Engagement Strategies

Goal

Develop outreach that resonates with AAPI values and move away from “one-size-fits-all” communication outreach. Implement culturally specific outreach that resonates with AAPI values.

Effective Approaches

Tailored communication fosters a shared vision between environmental objectives and the unique needs of AAPI stakeholders. By framing the ocean as a source of health, nutrition, and heritage, organizations can move beyond generic slogans to connect with specific cultural drivers of AAPI communities.

Leverage Trusted Communication Channels: Reach AAPI communities where they already communicate to build immediate trust.

- **“Group Chat” Strategies:** Use platforms such as WeChat, KakaoTalk, Line, and WhatsApp to share short, visual updates. For many immigrant families, these apps are more trusted than email newsletters.
- **Ethnic Media Partnerships:** Collaborate with language-specific outlets—such as KTSF for Cantonese/Mandarin or Nguoi Viet for Vietnamese. An interview with a local AAPI fisher or elder on these platforms carries significantly more weight than an English-language government post.

Implement Tangible and Inclusive Visual Engagement: Incorporate bilingual signage and family-centered imagery to create an inviting environment.

- **Bilingual Regulations:** Install signs that use symbols and clear imagery alongside translated text. This reduces the barrier to entry for non-native English speakers and signals that the space is inclusive.
- **Multigenerational Events:** Host events that encourage the whole family to attend. Host activities that encourage the whole family to participate. For example, Ocean Connectors uses “knowledge exchanges” where students learn about migratory species and share that knowledge with parents and grandparents through art.
- **Cultural Storytelling:** Use community murals or traditional narratives, such as the Hawaiian Kumulipo, or [creation chat to transform abstract science into a shared cultural story](#).

Reframe Conservation Priorities: Connect ocean protection to health, food justice, and cultural preservation rather than purely ecological necessity.

- **The “Communal Pantry”:** Focus messaging on food safety and the ability to sustain traditional diets. Emphasizing that ocean conservation protects the ocean so future generations can safely eat the fish their grandparents caught is a highly resonant motivator.
- **Intergenerational Responsibility:** Align goals with the value of honoring ancestors. In Pacific Islander contexts, the concept of Kuleana, or sacred duty and responsibility, highlights a reciprocal relationship: the ocean cares for us (food, air, culture), so we must care for it in return.

Elevate Storytelling, Art, and Lived Experience: Empower community members with active roles that respect their expertise.

- **Low-Barrier Stewardship:** Programs like the [Sanctuary Ocean Count in Hawaii engage hundreds of volunteers to monitor humpback whales](#). These initiatives succeed by providing a simple, communal way for families to practice stewardship while enjoying the coast together.



Case example

A Lunar New Year (LNY)–themed marine outreach piece with the AAPI Pathways group drew new audiences and built learning between LNY culture and marine animals.

VII. Pathways to Career Inclusion & Leadership Development

Goal

Build a professional pipeline that moves beyond entry-level hiring to actively support the long-term growth and leadership of AAPI individuals in conservation.

This helps expand AAPI participation in conservation careers and leadership as well as address the leaky pipeline where diverse talent enters the field but often departs before reaching management. Organizations must shift from simple recruitment to comprehensive career support.



- **Offer Paid Internships and Mentorships with Living-Wage Opportunities:** Unpaid positions are a primary barrier for AAPI students, particularly those from working-class or immigrant backgrounds.
 - **Action:** Transition all internships to paid roles at a living wage to prevent financial status from limiting ocean stewardship.
 - **Example:** Various [NOAA internships](#) specifically prioritize underrepresented students, providing the financial support and professional networking required to bridge the gap between college to career.
- **Host Youth-centered Events with Mentoring to Foster Belonging:** Youth must see themselves reflected in the field to envision a future in the field of conservation.
 - **Action:** Utilize mentors who are only a few years or levels ahead of the mentee to connect AAPI high school students with early-career professionals or college interns in ocean conservation.
 - **Example:** The [Pacific Islands Climate Adaptation Science Center \(PI-CASC\)](#) offers youth programs for students in K-12, and the [Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowship \(SURF\)](#) is a great example of this type of mentorship.
- **Challenge Stereotypes about Who Belongs in Conservation:** Hiring for diversity is just the first step; the workplace must invest in retention and supportive workplace cultures to retain that talent.
 - **Action:** Conduct “stay” interviews, as opposed to only “exit” interviews to proactively ask AAPI staff what they need to feel supported and identify barriers to promotion.
 - **Example:** The [California Ocean Protection Council has integrated Environmental Justice into its Equity Plan](#), which includes training staff to value TEK alongside Western academic degrees.
- **Cultivate AAPI Leadership Pathways:** Invest in professional development that specifically prepares AAPI staff for executive and board-level roles.
 - **Action:** Create formal leadership tracks and sponsorship programs that pair AAPI professionals with executive-level mentors.
 - **Example:** To implement a leadership pathways program, it is helpful to look at current AAPI leaders who serve on boards and executive teams of major California ocean organizations. There are AAPI leaders in conservation at the [Monterey Bay Aquarium Board of Trustees](#), [Ocean Conservancy Board of Directors](#), and various leaders at state-level agencies such as the [California Natural Resources Agency](#).

VIII. Evaluation, Data Justice, & Ethical Research

Goal

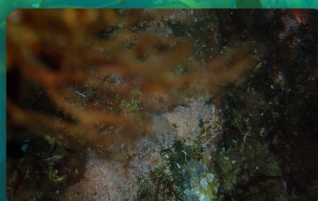
Implement data justice in ocean conservation by moving away from “extractive” research toward models where AAPI communities own and benefit from the data collected.

Best Practices for Data Justice

To achieve ethical accountability, organizations must verify that their data practices support, rather than marginalize AAPI populations. The following practices help move conservation from taking information to fostering a reciprocal relationship.

- **Prioritize Disaggregated Data Collection:** The AAPI umbrella covers over 50 distinct ethnic groups with vastly different coastal relationships. Aggregated data often masks specific vulnerabilities.
 - **The Impact:** Broad data might suggest AAPI fishers are thriving, but disaggregated data would reveal that Vietnamese American subsistence fishers are disproportionately exposed to toxins in a specific bay.
 - **Action:** Collect specific ethnicity data, for example, Hmong, Marshallese, and Filipino to verify that resource allocation reaches groups with the highest need.
- **Use Informed Consent and Reciprocity:** Research is not a one-way street where scientists take knowledge and leave.
 - **The Give-Back Policy:** Before initiating a study, ask the community: “What data or resources do you need that this project can provide?” If a university studies traditional sea-level rise adaptation in a Pacific Islander community, it should provide a tangible return, such as high-resolution flood maps or a community grant, to acknowledge the value of the shared expertise.
- **Share Findings with Communities:** Close the loop through transparent reporting. Trust is maintained when communities see how their input directly influences policy.
 - **Accessible Findings:** Budget for “Report-Back” phases where researchers return to community centers to present findings in the local language before a final report is published.
 - **Non-Academic Summaries:** Translate findings into infographics or short videos that community members can use for their own local advocacy.
- **Redefine Metrics of Success:** Measure trust, belonging, and leadership—not just attendance to gauge the depth of the relationship.
 - **Substantive Metrics:** Instead of reporting the number of AAPI members in attendance, track the percentage of community-led suggestions successfully adopted into the final conservation plan.
 - **Belonging Scales:** Be sure to include qualitative questions in evaluations, such as: “Do you feel your cultural knowledge was respected?” or “Do you feel you have any agency to influence this project’s outcome?”

Guidance from data justice and equity scholars underscores that ethical evaluation is foundational to long-term trust. Organizations must audit their research timelines to accommodate these deeper, more respectful engagement phases.



Conclusion

For ocean organizations and agencies, engaging AAPI communities is essential to achieving a just, resilient, and inclusive ocean future. By grounding engagement in cultural respect, shared power, and long-term partnership, marine conservation organizations can better reflect and serve the communities who care for California’s coast and ocean. This work is not ancillary—it is central to conservation success.

The future of ocean conservation in California depends on a fundamental shift in how we engage with AAPI communities. As this report has illustrated, AAPI groups are not a monolith; they represent a diverse tapestry of nations, histories, and knowledge systems—from the ancestral seafaring expertise of Pacific Islanders to the resilient subsistence practices of Southeast Asian refugees.

To move beyond the structural barriers of time poverty, linguistic exclusion, and tokenism, conservation organizations must commit to shared governance. This means moving from outreach to authentic partnership, where AAPI leaders have a functional seat at the technical table, community expertise is financially compensated, and data serves as a tool for justice rather than extraction.

By aligning conservation goals with community values—such as food security, health, and intergenerational legacy—we do more than just protect biodiversity. We strengthen our collective capacity for climate resilience and guarantee that California’s coast remains a site of healing, livelihood, and belonging for all. The path forward is built on consistency and accountability; when we invest in the people who rely on the ocean, we secure the future of the ocean itself.



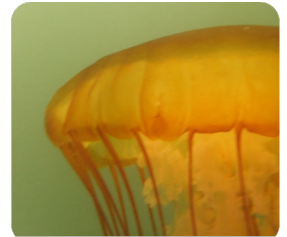
Below are a sample of AAPI organizations that operate across regions and are often strong partners for **policy, leadership pipelines, and statewide engagement.**

The following lists of sample organizations are meant to be a starting point. The lists are not meant to be an endorsement of these organizations or meant to be a definitive resource. MPACN members are strongly encouraged to research and explore their local communities and do outreach with organizations engaged in these spaces.

Any Organization Wishing to Increase AAPI Engagement and Collaboration Can Use This List

Recommended next steps for collaboratives:

1. Start with **listening to conversations.**
2. Ask what **ocean or coastal issues already matter** to the community
3. Offer **co-designed engagement**, not pre-packaged programs
4. Budget for **community partner** compensation
5. Build relationships **before funding deadlines**
6. Create a project implementation deadline



Statewide / Multi-Region (California)

These organizations operate across regions and are often strong partners for policy, leadership pipelines, and statewide engagement.

- [Asian Pacific Environmental Network \(APEN\)](#) Focus: Environmental justice, climate, power-building. Why relevant: Deep expertise in community-led environmental policy and organizing.
- [Asian Americans Advancing Justice](#) - California Affiliates Focus: Civil rights, language access, policy advocacy. Why relevant: Language justice, civic engagement, data disaggregation.
- [Asian Pacific American Civic Engagement](#) (APACE) Focus: Voter engagement, leadership development. Why relevant: Connecting ocean issues to civic power and public decision-making.
- [National CAPACD](#) (California members) Focus: Community development, anti-displacement. Why relevant: Coastal access, housing, and environmental displacement.

Northern California (North Coast, Bay Area)

These organizations operate across regions and are often strong partners for policy, leadership Strong concentration of AAPI environmental justice, youth, and civic groups.

- [Chinese Progressive Association](#) (CPA) Focus: Grassroots organizing, immigrant rights. Relevance: Trusted community partner; engagement with working-class coastal users.
- [Oakland Asian Cultural Center](#) Focus: Cultural preservation, community space. Relevance: Cultural programming and storytelling tied to land and water.
- [Filipino Advocates for Justice](#) Focus: Youth leadership, civic engagement. Relevance: Youth pathways and leadership development.
- [Hmong Innovating Politics](#) (HIP) Focus: Civic engagement, youth organizing. Relevance: Inland-coastal connections, refugee community leadership.

Central Coast (Monterey Bay, Santa Cruz, San Luis Obispo)

Fewer but highly strategic partners for place-based coastal engagement.

- [Monterey Bay Asian Cultural Association](#) Focus: Cultural education and events. Relevance: Entry point for culturally grounded ocean engagement.
- [Building Healthy Communities Monterey County](#) (AAPI partners) Focus: Health equity, community organizing. Relevance: Coastal access, environmental health framing.

Southern California (Santa Barbara, Ventura, Los Angeles, Orange County, San Diego)

Large, diverse AAPI populations with strong youth, arts, and justice movements.

- [Santa Barbara Asian American and Pacific Islander Solidarity Network](#) Focus: Cultural connection, community. Relevance: Community development, cultural preservation.
- [Korean American Federation of Los Angeles](#) Focus: Civic engagement, social services. Relevance: Voter education, policy engagement.
- [Thai Community Development Center](#) Focus: Environmental justice, labor, displacement. Relevance: Model for linking environmental, housing, and health justice.
- [Little Tokyo Service Center](#) Focus: Community development, cultural preservation. Relevance: Place-based stewardship and anti-displacement.
- [VietRISE](#) Focus: Worker justice, community organizing. Relevance: Labor, environmental health, coastal economies.

Pacific Islander-Led Organizations (Cross-Regional)

Especially critical for ocean and marine stewardship, given ancestral ocean relationships.

- [Empowering Pacific Islander Communities](#) (EPIC) Focus: Pacific Islander civic engagement, health, policy. Relevance: Ocean justice, climate resilience, cultural stewardship.
- [Pacific Islander Education and Retention](#) (PIER) Focus: Education, youth leadership. Relevance: Career pathway into conservation and policy.
- [Tongan Community Service Center](#) Focus: Cultural preservation, social services Relevance: Family-centered engagement, ocean culture.

AAPI Community Group Member Overview

The 2025-2026 AAPI Working Group and Affinity Group are made up of community members who bring lived experience, cultural knowledge, and deep connections to California's coastal and marine environments. Together, the group collaborates to shape the purpose, structure, and learnings that resulted in this report. The following bios reflect the diverse perspectives and shared commitment of individuals working collectively to advance equity, inclusion, and stewardship within marine protected areas.



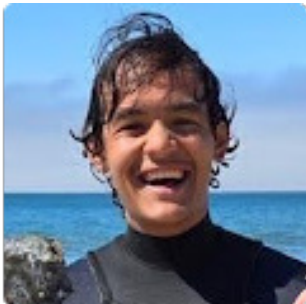
Michelle Chuang (*she/her/hers*)

As the lead and Coordinator of the Pathways Community Groups, Michelle leads the strategy, design, and implementation of community spaces that elevate the voices of historically marginalized people connected to California's coastal and marine ecosystems, and convenes these spaces. She works closely with Asian American Pacific Islander members to co-create inclusive structures, shared purpose, and collaborative pathways for engagement. Her work centers on fostering trust, collective leadership, and meaningful participation to advance equity and social justice in marine protected area stewardship.



Anh Diep (*they/them/any*)

Anh Diep currently serves as Tribal Funding Program Manager with the California Natural Resources Agency's Tribal Affairs Unit. Anh received their PhD in Quantitative Systems Biology from UC Merced where they researched immune responses to Valley fever. They were born in Vietnam and identifies as a queer, immigrant, first-generation scholar. Anh's major professional goals include advancing equitable policies to improve opportunities for all Californians, regardless of background.



Branden Clarin (*he/him/his*)

Branden Clarin was a recipient of the MPA Collaborative Network AAPI Marine Scholars Program, which led to joining the AAPI group. He graduated from Cal State University Monterey Bay in May 2025 with a B.S. in Marine Science. He is currently working at Central Coast Aquarium in Avila Beach as the Aquarium and Husbandry Assistant. Through school, he developed a passion for taking underwater photography of mainly nudibranch and juvenile rockfish. He enjoys going to Giants baseball games, hiking, and surfing.



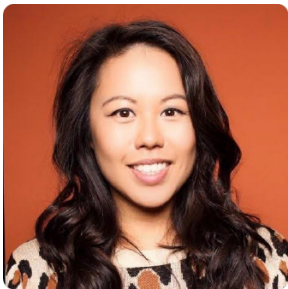
George Matsumoto (*he/him/his*)

George Matsumoto has been involved in education and outreach for his entire career serving on a number of local, regional, national, and international boards and committees. He is currently at the Monterey Bay Aquarium Research Institute and serves on the National Association of Marine Laboratories Community Engagement Committee as well as the National Marine Educators Association Traditional Environmental Knowledge Committee. Until the Committee was forced to cease operations, he was also co-chair of the National Academy of Sciences Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Committee focused on the Ocean community.



Lea Graham (*she/her/hers*)

Lea Graham first joined the AAPI Pathways group as a Policy & Civic Engagement summer intern with the MPA Collaborative Network. She recently graduated from Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo with a B.S. in Environmental Management and Protection, and will attend Lewis and Clark Law School in Portland, Oregon in the Fall. Her studies, combined with her love for our natural world and appreciation for her Filipino culture, sparked a deeply-rooted passion for environmental justice work. She plans to pursue a career in environmental law and policy for a non-profit after obtaining her J.D.



Sherry Ng (*she/her/hers*)

Sherry Ng is a Southern California-based marketing leader with 15+ years leading engagement for edtech and B2B SaaS organizations. A former K-12 educator with an M.A. in Education from USC, she approaches advocacy through a family-centered, intergenerational lens—prioritizing language inclusion, culturally responsive design, and school- and community-based partnerships. A mother of three and community advocate, she focuses on translating complex ideas into accessible content and experiences that build trust and broaden participation.



A-bel Gong (*they/them*)

A-bel Gong is a shark and climate researcher based in San Diego, California. A-bel serves as the San Diego Regional Climate Collaborative's Resilience Program Manager and sits on the Advisory Board of Minorities in Shark Sciences as the Events Committee Chair. They received their Bachelor's and their Master's of Science in Environmental & Ocean Sciences from the University of San Diego, focusing on shark and ray movement and migration. A-bel brings an intersectional lens through their knowledge of coastal and marine spaces, data analysis, and social justice.



Grace Young (*She/Hers*)

Grace Young is a California Sea Grant Fellow with the State of California Central Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board, where she advocates for water quality policy in protected areas. She earned her M.S. in Environmental Studies from California State University, Fullerton, and has spent several years working in coastal outreach and education, helping communities connect with ocean conservation efforts. She is an active member of the Asian Pacific Environmental Network Action, where she advances policies that protect the environment across California.

**We gratefully acknowledge the many community members who contributed to this work, including those who are not individually featured due to personal preference or submission timing.*



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