

Greater Los Angeles County WaterTalks: Engaging Tribal Expertise / Re-riting Water History

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Background

The WaterTalks Strength and Needs Assessment (2020-21) indicated that tribal communities are not connected to water management systems or networks in the LA/Ventura IRWM Regions. The Assessment also showed a notable lack of awareness of regional tribes among water providers and other institutions, with virtually none of the agency staff interviewed being able to identify the appropriate tribal ancestral lands within their colonized jurisdictions.

Initial sketches were created early in 2022 to focus on two aspects of this challenge: 1) Engaging Tribal Expertise and 2) Re-riting Water History. The first was imagined as designing a process and platform to identify tribal resources for local agencies to engage for project development, and at the same time provide support for these tribal resources to protect privacy and tribal data, and understand their value in being engaged and charge for their time appropriately. The second project was imagined as a design guide for incorporating tribal knowledge into water project design, toward a paradigm shift in how water is regarded within the design process (as a living element rather than as a commodity). The Greater LA County Leadership Group of CBOs placed high priority on both of these projects in June of 2022.

Development

Conversations then began with local tribal members and organizations. Guidance was also sought from the CA Department of Water Resources Tribal Liaison, Anecita Agustinez. Through these conversations, it became clear that due to the intensity of historic harm that has been perpetrated on Los Angeles area tribes, the region was not in a place to understand or develop either of these concepts. Instead, additional resources were needed to help water providers and project designers understand the tribal communities better, and their role and responsibilities when it comes to authentic, meaningful and productive engagement.

Some such resources exist, such as *We Are Still Here: A Report on Past, Present, and Ongoing Harms Against Local Tribes* developed by the Los Angeles City/County Native American Indian Commission. Drawing from these, the design team determined that it was best to combine the resources of both projects into one, and create a “framework” to guide the user in how to create an engagement program.

The result is ***Nurturing Connections: Authentically engaging tribes is our responsibility as we live on the unceded lands of Tribal Nations***, a framework that centers California Native American Tribal engagement, with a focus in Los Angeles County, that is intersectional, fluid and rooted in justice that does not perpetuate harm. The goal of this framework is to provide a resource for community groups, agencies and individuals to learn from tribal voices and introduce guiding concepts to help further understanding around engaging with tribes and tribal members with water projects. These concepts and resources can be applied to building relationships for continued tribal environmental justice and equity projects.

A very unique aspect of ***Nurturing Connections*** is that is authored and designed exclusively by a group of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Color) individuals who collectively have over a decade of experience in social, environmental and water justice. The authors intentionally avoided creating an ‘instruction manual’ type framework, as each tribe and tribal member are different. The authors believe that the best way to engage with tribes is to be active and continuous in one's efforts. There is no one-size-fits-all approach, therefore the framework is meant to be a companion alongside one’s long-term commitment to engaging tribes authentically.

In addition, the WaterTalks program provided online Tribal Allyship training, giving participants an introduction to the need for and complexities involved in engagement and support of local tribes and tribal organizations. Nearly 300 people from agencies and NGOs participated in this 2-hour workshop in 2022-23.

Finally, both TreePeople and its consultant Sacred Places for Indigenous Peoples have committed to continued work on ***Nurturing Connections***; it will be added to the WaterTalks website for easy access, and further development of the framework (an in-depth training program for local agencies) is included as part of a proposal to the US EPA Environmental and Climate Justice Community Change Grants Program, being submitted in April 2024.

Project Deliverables:

- *Nurturing Connections* (PDF slide version)
- Community Engagement and Collaborative Governance Plan (from EPA proposal; pp 6-7)



Greater Los Angeles County
Integrated Regional Water Management
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