

A Change of Course

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Executive Summary

Through the WRPI Disadvantaged Communities Center Community Water internship program, I connected with Orange County Coastkeeper. There, I completed my internship with knowledge in environmental justice, emphasizing on water-related issues and experience in community organizing and program facilitation. Covid-19 changed the course of direction to the project, but it led me to work with Orange County Environmental Justice (OCEJ), which I am very grateful for. With the guidance from my mentors, I assisted with OCEJ's Communities Organizing for Better Water project, held presentations on water and environmental justice, and created and facilitated a Water module for OCEJ's Environmental Justice Organizing Academy. From this, I learned about how environmental policy and injustices disproportionately affect disadvantaged communities, which mostly comprise of BIPOC. Through this internship, I have learned to embrace my identity as a woman of color. I have realized how critical it is to participate in community organizing to better the environment and society.

Project Objectives

When I started my internship with a non-profit organization called Orange County Coastkeeper, my supervisor, Ray Hiemstra, allowed me to explore the different areas of work I could do before choosing a specific topic. I helped with a beach clean-up, an oyster restoration project, MPA watch, stormwater collection preparation, and researched the Poseidon desalination plant. Amidst my exploration, social distancing and stay-at-home orders were implemented due to Covid-19, and I was no longer able to participate in these projects in person. I was unsure about my next steps, but Ray connected me with Enrique Valencia, the project director for OC Environmental Justice (OCEJ), a 501(c)4 multi-cultural, multi-ethnic environmental justice organization. This route allowed me to work safely from home on

something that was related to water. With their emphasis on environmental justice, I set to focus on disadvantaged communities and water-related issues and how they intertwine. My project objectives were to help with their Communities Organizing for Better Water project, hold an online zoom presentation on water and environmental justice for one of their membership meetings, and create a Water module for their Environmental Justice Organizing Academy.

Project Approach

At the beginning of my internship, I worked in the Orange County Coastkeeper office. Different projects were introduced to me to explore further. I trained for MPA Watch and helped check-in volunteers for a beach clean-up. I also participated in an oyster restoration preparation process and volunteer event, where I assisted checking in volunteers and transporting the oyster shells. In addition, I helped with packaging and labeling stormwater collection equipment and researched issues related to the Poseidon Desalination plant. Not yet aware of the severity of Covid-19, no one expected things to change.

When stay-at-home orders began, we respectfully did everything over video calls and emails. I virtually met Enrique Valencia and OCEJ's community organizer, Bay Nguyen. First, we focused on the Communities Organizing for Better Water project, which aimed to highlight issues of water quality and accessibility in Orange County. I recruited community members and facilitated a couple of meetings where we used PhotoVoice methods. PhotoVoice provided members the opportunity to show their perspectives and experiences regarding water quality and accessibility around them through their photos. While this was happening, I also worked on a presentation for OCEJ's April membership meeting with the help and guidance from Bay and Enrique. The presentation was about water-related environmental justice issues occurring on the federal and local level. After the presentation, the opportunity to be a facilitator and cohort

member of OCEJ's Environmental Justice Organizing Academy arose. With the direction and support from Bay and Enrique, I created a 3-hour module that focused on water and its relation to both colonialism and policy, and also included a section on local environmental justice efforts in Orange County.

Project Outcomes

My project allowed me to learn about Orange County residents' perspectives on water in their communities and learn about environmental justice with an emphasis on water-related issues. With the data collected from our PhotoVoice virtual discussions, I created a one-page report that explained our findings (see appendix 1). The report included what Communities Organizing for Better Water and PhotoVoice was, what Orange County community members' top concerns were when related to water, and a few recommended next steps. The Water and Environmental Justice presentation for OCEJ's April membership meeting (see appendix 2) touched on topics regarding water policy and the environmental justice movements' stance on water rights, what access to clean drinking water may look like in different communities, and where water comes from in Orange County. It generated insightful discussions. This presentation extended into the Water Module for OCEJ's Environmental Justice Organizing Academy, which will be presented at the beginning of August 2020 (see appendix 3). The cohort's goals include that they understand the deeper meaning of the relationship between water and life, understand how to monitor water quality-related matters with publicly available reports and tools, and know of environmental justice issues related to water that affect Orange County residents. The outcomes from my assignments have allowed me to gain experience in community organizing and building relationships with community members.

Conclusions

Although I entered my internship with an open mind, I did not expect it to focus on environmental justice. I am grateful things turned out the way they did. I learned a lot about how environmental policy and injustices affect disadvantaged communities, which are mostly BIPOC residents. I learned the importance of participating in local, state, and federal elections, about decolonization, and the human right to water. Although my internship is coming to an end, I have decided to become a member of OCEJ and continue to support environmental justice efforts that affect our communities and wildlife, like public access to the Santa Ana River. I positively changed because of what I learned here and the people who touched my life, and I strive to continue on this journey of growth.

Appendix

1. https://drive.google.com/file/d/1B53h1kiMQS_bUU6W16NYUF_AB77PCC4D/view?usp=sharing
2. <https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1QoTUIWLvh-BEE7ikmoaeErC0a5GhAmywAu395wPGpwE/edit?usp=sharing>
3. <https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1XHMkXb17M0l2EdxBxsVQP5D92aXOABGIyS6b7FwhLpk/edit?usp=sharing>