



Tribal Water Needs Assessment Report for Ventura County

Prepared by Sacred Places Institute for Indigenous Peoples
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The importance of O' (Water)

Water has always played, and continues to play, multiple roles to Chumash peoples. The ocean, rivers and stream ways were often used as a means of travel. The Chumash and neighboring Nations used tule reed and plank canoes to paddle up and down freshwater and saltwater ways. Ceremonies of significance were also held in both salt and freshwater. Gathering of fish, clams, shells and other life, including basket weaving materials, was done by the water. Daily cleansing practices were also held near or in the water. Baskets were and are made near water by the material gathered near the water, and play many roles including water jugs. ***The lifeforce of water and the value of human relationship to water was taught at the stage of infancy and became a lifelong practice for Chumash peoples and neighboring Nations.***

Although our access to water has been severely restricted by settler colonialism we still carry many of these teachings, understandings and practices today. We recognize that the water has become polluted and contaminated by the industrialization that colonization has brought onto our sacred spaces.

It is important to us as Native peoples to heal and reconcile our relationship with all bodies of water on our ancestral homelands. The limited access we have to bodies of water has not limited our efforts to reconcile these relationships. Many Natives still practice reciprocity with our waters despite the challenges they face in the 21st Century.

The authors of this report acknowledge that the geographic area represented in this document (Ventura County) is the unceded ancestral lands and waters of the Chumash, Tataviam, and Tongva people, the original stewards of this land. We recognize that these Tribes are still present in the areas reflected in this Report. We honor their elders both past and present and the descendants who are citizens of these tribes for their exemplary respect for water; we honor their continued connection to and protection of one of the most beautiful and diverse landscapes in the world.

Team Member Involvement:

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Tribal Needs Assessment Methodology

A. Covid-19 Impacts on Tribal Communities

Sacred Places Institute recognizes that our work must be responsive to the needs of our communities and that Covid-19 has affected our tribal communities in profound ways that go beyond the pandemic challenges facing our society in general. Therefore, SPI had to become more agile and flexible in responding to the current crisis.

For tribal communities Covid-19 has exacerbated disparities that exist as a result of settler colonialism and the land dispossession and state-sponsored attempted genocide sanctioned first by the **Papal Bulls via the Doctrine of Discovery** and later via the U.S. legal system and the associated paradigm of Manifest Destiny.

The legacy of colonization continues to manifest in health inequities experienced by Native American people, who face some of the highest health disparities in the country, including those related to infant mortality, teen and young adult suicide, diabetes, liver disease, heart disease, other chronic conditions, and lower life expectancy. The COVID pandemic has deepened these disparities, especially given unreliable data concerning COVID infection and death rates within Native communities. On one hand, many of our community members do not want to report that they are American Indian / Alaska Native at testing sites due to past instances of prejudice and surveillance. On the other, “American Indians and Alaska Natives make up about 2% of the U.S. population but are often left out of national data analyses or marked as statistically insignificant,” a sign of continued attempted genocide against Indigenous peoples. Due to the loss of tribal Elders and leadership gaps within tribal governance bodies, COVID -19 has deeply impacted the spiritual, mental, and economic wellbeing of our community members.

As an organization with a deep commitment to water justice, it is often easy to commit to meetings, projects, and deadlines associated with large scale paradigm shifts we hope to see in California. However, the pandemic has demonstrated the importance of committing to supporting people, not merely the projects that we have come to associate with climate and water justice issues. Indeed, we at SPI strongly hold that macro scale differences can only occur if there is economic, spiritual, and mental wellbeing at the personal level. We have noticed that many of our community members were, and continue to be, overworked and overwhelmed, and Zoom-fatigue has been very apparent during meetings.

B. Online Survey Development

The Tribal Survey was designed to mirror and expand on the community needs assessment survey in order to more accurately capture and ultimately express the unique needs of tribal communities. It identified the emerging issues and concerns of the California Native American Nations with ancestral ties to Ventura County, the Chumash, Tataviam and Tongva Nations, as well as Native American and Indigenous populations living in the region. These issues include the needs and strengths of the Native American tribes, tribal and Indigenous communities they

serve and are a part of, barriers to culturally appropriate and tribally specific access needs related to water, and barriers to equitable access to the benefits of water, wastewater, and stormwater infrastructure. Finally, the Survey set out to identify tribal governance and decision-making processes and engagement strategies and future challenges and opportunities.

Survey questions were designed by local tribal water scholars including SPI staff and advisory board members. Survey designers also utilized the tribal water surveys developed for the Santa Ana Watershed and Greater Los Angeles County as well as a tribal water survey developed by California Indian Environmental Alliance for use in the Bay Area, occupied and unceded Ohlone homelands. SPI utilized the latter survey to inform our survey, as the Ohlone are also not federally acknowledged and thus there are some similarities between the experiences of tribal communities with ancestral homelands in both of these regions.

C. Engagement Strategies and Techniques

SPI utilized a variety of techniques to inform and engage tribal community members who live or work within the Ventura County region, or consider the areas within Ventura County boundaries to be ancestral homelands in our outreach and engagement efforts related to tribal water-related strengths and needs. In addition to the Tribal Survey, which was distributed digitally by SPI, via the 3 tribal listening sessions and completed by 21 individuals.

Tribal Perspectives: Findings

A. Defining Tribal Communities and Indigenous Populations—Tribal Communities and the Ventura County Region.

Ventura County in its entirety sits on the shared ancestral homelands of the Chumash, Tataviam and Tongva peoples. *Note before colonization Chumash, Tataviam and Tongva families often identified by the village names which their families were born into, still they are all family.* Prior to becoming Ventura county these Native nations did a phenomenal job at keeping their homelands pristine and livable, then, there was no such thing as “Disadvantaged Communities.”

All of the respondents shared that they identified as Native or Indigenous. Responders were all Chumash with some identifying as Chumash and Tataviam, as well as Chumash and Tongva. Of those who responded, roughly half identified as speaking on behalf of, or representing their communities, in some leadership capacity. Respondents included tribal council members, tribal chairpersons, tribal language preservationists, and heads of local tribal organizations.

Many individuals completed the survey on behalf of their Tribe, Tribal community, family as a head of household, or as an individual Tribal member. The majority of survey respondents shared that they did not identify as Tribal Elders. About half of the survey respondents identified as traditional cultural practitioners. 70% of survey respondents stated that they currently live on their ancestral homelands.

B. Tribal Community Priorities

Community Strengths & Needs

When asked what the Tribal community is most proud of, community responses were: To have a connection to the community which includes their tomol building and paddling especially the annual crossing to Limuw, how water brings community together which is healing to the spirit and community, of still having knowledge and connection to the spirit of the land and water, being water and ocean protectors, resilience of culture and tradition, and developing relationships with government agencies, organizations, universities and colleges to access land and water for cultural use.

Overwhelmingly Tribal community members prioritized their cultural and spiritual relationship to water as both a significant strength and need in terms of something needing to be protected, expanded, and even re-established in some instances. Some community members noted that their relationship to water consists of gathering aquatic plants, gathering aquatic animals, holding ceremony with water, making sure to leave offerings to the water, participating in Tribal community gatherings around water, participating in the launching of the traditional tomols and tule boats, recognizing the water as a living relative that has stories tied to the Chumash, Tataviam and Tongva people, understanding that we are connected to the water and that it has become scarce so we must do our best to protect water, acknowledging that people have become disconnected from water and are reclaiming their connection, having daily practices to conserve water, and recognizing the need for education around water and taking it out of ownership of major manufactures and companies.

Community members agreed that water contains energy which sustains life and plays/ed a role in the creation of life on earth. They understand the water ways can and do provide a means of transportation. Community members recognized that water assists in providing meals. They also use water in daily cleansing rituals. Some community members recognized that water shapes the land around us and acknowledged that water supports their community and culture.

In terms of additional strengths identified by project participants, through the virtual surveys, community members shared what successes are good examples of what is possible for their tribal communities: Working on language revitalization, preventing luxury home development return the sacred rocks back to Morro Bay, having somewhere to keep two of our tomols, working with Organizations and Universities to access land and water for cultural usage, were all examples shared about times the community has come together in support of water and to engage in ceremony in sacred places.

Half of respondents indicated that safe, affordable water for drinking, washing, and cooking is accessible to all members of the community. 100% of respondents expressed issues with waste water infrastructure, Half of the respondents agreed that the community is impacted by storm water quality issues or flooding. When asked if other water access needs in the community were met, such as water for ceremonial purposes or for recreation, half of the respondents said no.

When asked if there are any regulatory/compliance issues that impact the community 100% answered with uncertainty. 100% were unsure of what opportunities there are to overcome any barriers involving the Ventura water issues. 100% of respondents agreed that the Tribal community ancestrally tied to the area should be involved in any efforts to overcome barriers. No additional needs in regards to access to safe water were identified by the tribal community.

When asked what strategies could create space for engagement, respondents answered: Land trusts, Indigenous leaders being included in planning efforts, respect and recognition of our people, giving power to implement cultural values back to federal and state tribes. They also shared that local and state officials should have an understanding and be taught about California's brutal history towards Indigenous peoples. Having Chumash representatives on the water and resource department board and in decision making positions. Holding listening sessions without prioritizing recognized representatives and including cultural organizations like mine, and independents. Respondents also mentioned, having local pow wows open to the whole community, education in schools about indigenous peoples and California's genocide on indigenous peoples in the 1700's and 1800's. One respondent shared "Ongoing efforts to bring tribes together on all levels to keep the voices of our ancestors alive, we need to draw on the cultural knowledge to be connected as the people of this land, we can continue the work to repair what's been done, with the understanding we can't go back in time and lastly, as a community we can slowly repair the things we can change one day at a time."

50% of respondents indicated that other water access needs such as for ceremonial purposes or for recreation were not being met. An additional 50% of respondents indicated that they did not know if these needs were being met.

C. Barriers to Tribal Involvement

Barriers to engaging tribal communities include a lack of support, lack of time and resources, lack of communication within tribal groups as well as between community members and the government, a disinterest in the subject overall, a lack of water appreciation and difficulties in getting people educated about and involved in these types of planning efforts. Respondents shared that lack of communication between tribal groups, lack of communication between community members and the government, disinterest in the subject, and an overall lack of support are all barriers that limit engagement within the community.

When asked about what the community knew about Ventura IRWM and what relationships were upheld, 95% of the Native community admitted to have no knowledge of the Ventura IRWM nor have they had engagement in the IRWM planning process. Because of this, many are unaware of the resources like grants and other forms of financial support that are offered to the community. When it comes to participation in public meetings many of the community members lack access to transportation, electronic devices or both. Some said that virtual platforms have been a better option to attend meetings and request they be held in the evenings when most people are out of work or school.

Factors Limiting Cultural Access

In regards to the question what factors limit access to culture in your tribal community there were 21 virtual survey respondents. 13 chose access to our ancestral land that is now privatized including fenced and barbed wired, 15 people agreed that governmental agencies play a role in limiting access, 15 people shared that gaps in knowledge limited their access to culture, access to money limited access to culture for 15 people, 12 people said extraction, mining and other means of corporate greed limit access, 14 people described channelization and damming of waterways as limiting access, 1 respondent expressed that the increase in the cost to live in the country has led them to move away from their ancestral homelands, another shared that the privatization of public lands is also limiting their access to the land and water.

Some community members identified lack of federal recognition as standing in their way to have the respect of the local/state/federal government when it comes to government involvement and inclusion to addressing and dealing with environmental concerns. When asked if local/state/federal representatives had reached out to their communities in regards to water planning, 55% of respondents said no, 40% said they were unsure and 5% said yes. Environmental concerns included air pollution, contaminated land and water, water damming and infrastructure, fire issues, lack of caring for and tending to the land, sea level rise, plastic pollution, oil, gas and other extractions.

In our in person meetings some opportunities shared by our respondents to overcome these barriers included; engaging community members in these issues, coming together and standing up for the earth, protecting the sacred, people giving up their seats for Native leaders or willing to share space and paid positions, educating non North American Native people, and implementing further surveys. Requests to do better with the houseless community and food security have also been asked by the Native community.

When asked who needs to be involved in the effort to overcome these barriers, answers included: Tribal and Non-Tribal Community members, and representatives from Tribes ancestrally tied to the area.

Recommendations and Next Steps

Tribal nations are sovereign governments with whom settler colonial state and local institutions must regard as such via government-to-government consultation. Additionally, tribal community members are experts on their own communities, and their expertise must be recognized and elevated to be equal to that of the water managers. Water managers can develop projects and programs that meet tribal community needs and gain tribal community support by learning about the history of California Native American tribes, especially with respect to water and forced removal in Ventura County, and listening to and engaging the voices present in these communities with respect, intent, understanding, and compassion.

Supporting Cultural Access

There needs to be a concerted effort to work on policy related to opening up spaces for tribal community members that currently cannot be accessed. Regarding stewardship, consider creating capacity building partnerships with local tribes and Indigenous-led organizations to support land and water remediation and rehabilitation.

Due to lack of access to privatized and county/state owned lands added with the need to work to attempt to survive, Native communities have not been able to continue cultural maintenance such as burning and working with the land. Due to this inability to uphold relationships with the homelands, fire is now a major concern. Native communities deserve to regain their relations with the land. Due to the need to pay rent, the Native community should have grants or a means to pay for their contribution to maintain the land.

Virtual respondents shared some of the ways and ideas that cultural access projects can be supported. Some responses shared include:

- Building of an environmentally friendly Tomol House in Ventura;
- Sponsorships;
- Helping educate obstructors and local governing bodies on the significance of areas we are trying to preserve and request access to;
- Working with Tribes and counties to establish policies that promote cultural awareness and access;
- Assistance in gaining permits for overnight ocean ceremonies and gatherings;
- Creating change on a county/state/fed policy level;
- Group trips to hard to access areas.

Support Tribal Governance in Watershed Management Planning

IRWM and other water-planning related capacity building dollars should support local tribes and Indigenous-led CBOs to develop tribal and Indigenous-community-driven programs around water issues identified as important to these communities by the communities themselves. Financial and other resources should also be directed toward supporting tribal leadership development so that tribal community members can more effectively advance their tribes' water interests in water planning efforts taking place within their ancestral homelands and waters.