

NATURE AND HEALTH

EMERGING KNOWLEDGE INFORMS NEW POLICY DIRECTIONS

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Writing a new playbook: A regional coalition for healthy lands, people and communities



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There are over 100 agencies that steward and manage public lands in the San Francisco Bay Area in the ancestral territories of the Muwekma Ohlone, Miwok, Kashia, Pomo, Mishewal Wappo, Amah Mutsun, and Patwins tribes and bands. The public land managers—municipalities, park agencies, water districts, open space districts,

and state and national agencies—are dedicated to providing the 7.5 million human residents access to the 1.1 million acres under their agencies' stewardship. Each agency has its own governance, mandate, and funding sources. And each agency has plans and protocols to respond to an earthquake, fire, or flood.

Park users were encouraged to stay six feet apart from people not in their immediate household, as these two families are doing at Morgan Territory Regional Preserve, which is managed by the East Bay Regional Park District. | JOHN VU



> *“There was no playbook. Everyone was problem solving in real time in what felt like a vacuum and that made things very difficult.”*

But none of these 100 agencies had a guide for responding to the global pandemic that shut down public life in the Bay Area in March 2020. “The series of events that occurred starting in February and into early March caught a lot of people by surprise,” said Ana Ruiz, general manager of Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District. “There was no playbook. Everyone was problem solving in real time in what felt like a vacuum and that made things very difficult.” Most of the public land management agencies did not have the resources—personnel, training, or equipment—they needed to respond to the overwhelming rush on our public lands over the first weekend of shelter-in-place. And this directly impacted the general public’s ability to go outside in the coming weeks and months. Some parks closed in their entirety; in others, facilities such as bathrooms were closed. New rules were created for how and when and where to visit parks, and these rules often revealed and exacerbated existing inequities related to park access. The new and evolving situation left many Bay Area residents confused about what was safe to do and what parks they could visit.

All of the people working for public land management agencies are deeply motivated to connect people to the natural world. It’s why they get up in the morning and it’s why they work nights and weekends. They believe in the healing powers of nature because they’ve experienced it themselves, the science confirms it, and cultures around the world are based on it. But the COVID-19 pandemic forced park leaders into a balancing act that included evolving public health guidance, increased demand for parks, equitable park access, stretched resources, and staff safety.

I have the honor of leading TOGETHER Bay Area, a regional coalition of public agencies, nonprofits, and Indigenous tribes working for climate resilience and social equity. What my colleagues and I did in the spring of 2020 increased the

region’s capacity to adapt to the COVID-19 crisis, and this had a direct impact on the public’s ability to go outdoors—and will change how we respond to crises in the future. We convened forums for information sharing, coordinated a public education campaign, and advocated for funding and policies, all of which positioned our members to more effectively and efficiently respond to the crisis. As this article will describe, we were able to increase coordination, increase innovation, and support policy change.

We were compelled to rise to the occasion when millions of people wanted to go outdoors like never before. We just needed to figure out how to make it safe to do so.

Together we’re writing a new playbook.

A large and diverse coalition for lands, people, and communities

The story of TOGETHER Bay Area starts in 1990, when leaders of park agencies and land trusts banded together in order to achieve more than they could separately. Called the Bay Area Open Space Council (BAOSC), the organization grew to 60 members, helped form and fund the Bay Program of the California Coastal Conservancy, convened quarterly gatherings and annual conferences, led a regional conservation vision in the Conservation Lands Network, and incubated a trip-planning tool, Transit and Trails. BAOSC hit some strategic and operational turbulence in 2018. We took that opportunity to reimagine what is needed from a regional coalition in the 21st century. We also took the opportunity to bring new voices to the table with diversity of race, ethnicity, gender identity, age, geography, organizational role, and organization type. With a 16-member planning committee, input sessions attended by 125 people, an Advisory Council with 11 members, and a 6-member Board, we developed a new mission and vision, articulated our values, and clarified and focused our programs.

This process culminated with a new strategic and business plan, approved in October 2019, which called for a laser focus on climate resilience and social equity. The new mission was to be the champion of and regional voice for the resilient lands that are integral to a thriving Bay Area and all people who live here. The vision is a Bay Area that is home to healthy lands, healthy people, and healthy communities where we address the impacts of climate change through collaboration. This new regional coalition works towards a just and equitable society where we live in a positive relationship with the land that sustains us now and will sustain future generations.

Recognizing that the impacts of climate change mean we need to steward lands everywhere—that street trees reduce the “heat island effect” and result in improved public health, and that well-managed agricultural lands help sequester

carbon—we expanded our scope to be inclusive of all lands: urban, rural, natural, and working. And this led us to change our name. We needed a name that reflects our value of inclusivity. On March 24, 2020—a week after shelter-in-place orders began—the Board voted to rename the organization TOGETHER Bay Area.

As of September 2020, TOGETHER Bay Area consists of 65 member organizations, 25% of which have joined since the shelter-in-place orders on March 16. Our members are Indigenous tribes such as the Amah Mutsun Land Trust and Muwekma Ohlone Tribe of the San Francisco Bay Area. Our members cover a range of nonprofits, including Mountain Bikers of Santa Cruz, Sonoma Land Trust, and YES! Nature to Neighborhoods. And our membership includes some of the over 100 public land management agencies in the region, including water agencies such as Marin Municipal Water

Wide trails, such as this one at Morgan Territory Regional Preserve, part of the East Bay Regional Park District, make social distancing easier. Several agencies now highlight wide trails on maps so that visitors can plan trips accordingly. | JOHN VU



> *“The world turned upside down and the lights were turned off in March. We had no experience with what was going on.”*

District, city and county park departments such as San Francisco Recreation and Park Department, and open space districts such as East Bay Regional Park District. Our members are small and large, urban and rural. They have different mandates, governance structures, and funding sources. It's their commonalities, though, that bring them together as a coalition. They all work for healthy lands, people, and communities. They all work for climate resilience and social equity. This coalition is an example of how diversity is our strength.

The plans for TOGETHER Bay Area were established in late 2019. But they took on new meaning when on March 16, 2020, six Bay Area counties announced shelter-in-place orders in response to the growing COVID-19 pandemic.

Confusion and stress and Zoom

The first few weeks of the shelter-in-place orders were stressful and confusing. Emails flooded our inboxes as schools closed, events were canceled, and everything in our pre-COVID life was paused.

“The world turned upside down and the lights were turned off in March,” said Bert Whitaker, director of Sonoma County Parks. “We had no experience with what was going on. The realities of politics, people, and science all collided.”

Marti Tedesco, marketing director at Peninsula Open Space Trust, said it this way: “There wasn't a manual. There wasn't anyone who could say ‘the last time this happened.’”

Information about the transmission of COVID-19 was spotty and seemed to change day to day. And while six of the nine Bay Area counties were united in their orders, there were still many questions about what was safe and unsafe to do. Bay Area residents—including TOGETHER Bay Area members—were home, isolated, and overwhelmed.

On March 18, Melanie Parker, associate director of Sonoma County Parks, reached out to us at

TOGETHER Bay Area and asked if we could convene a meeting with other public land managers. She was curious about how they were handling the crisis. We moved quickly to convene our first Zoom meeting, which was held on Friday, March 20 at 4pm with general managers and senior directors. The conversation was a relief for many on the call. Ana Ruiz said, “TOGETHER Bay Area brought together the different voices and agencies to have the opportunity to think strategically as a region on how to address the issues before us. We learned from each other.” This “Friday at Four” Zoom call was held weekly for three months with between 15 and 25 public land managers attending each week.

Two weeks later we convened our first weekly meeting with nonprofit executive directors to have a similar conversation as their public agency partners. For both of these regular meetings, the agendas were pretty simple: introduce yourself, share a challenge you're facing, and share a question for the group. The conversations were rich. Sometimes the mood was heavy with stress and anguish. But every time the exchanges were collegial, inquisitive, and supportive. “People speak very candidly and openly at TOGETHER Bay Area meetings,” said Bert Whitaker. “There's an equalization at the table. Everyone has a voice. And this means we could learn quickly from each other's situations and experiences.”

Zoom made it easy to convene people across the region. Within a matter of days, as we all started working from home, convening meetings of any kind via videoconference became the norm. TOGETHER Bay Area was able to pull together senior leaders on short notice in ways that were nearly impossible to do pre-COVID. We invited our members and partners; we encouraged attendees to invite their colleagues. Scheduling in-person meetings means contending with notorious Bay Area traffic, juggling personal and professional events, and competing with other priorities at work. With Zoom, we were able to host people

> *“The calls on Friday afternoons were so helpful to me. Sometimes it was clear that folks on the call were in the trenches. It was really hard.”*

calling in from Santa Rosa, San Francisco, San Jose, and Santa Cruz without the traffic, headache, costs, or carbon emissions.

A frequent attendee of the Fridays at Four meetings, Nicholas Calderon started his new role of director of San Mateo County Parks on November 28, 2019. The shelter-in-place orders arrived three months later. He said, “Meeting my peers around the region through TOGETHER Bay Area was invaluable. The calls on Friday afternoons were so helpful to me. Sometimes it was clear that folks on the call were in the trenches. It was really hard. We want to keep parks open but how can we do it safely? I’d see my colleagues on those calls and think, ‘okay, I’m not the only one. I can make it through this because everyone else is going through it too.’”

TOGETHER Bay Area was the central hub within a week of the shelter-in-place orders starting because of the complex challenges we were facing, the normalization of Zoom, and our ability to mobilize quickly.

Public education campaign

The weather was beautiful the weekend of March 21–22, 2020. The sun was shining and the temperature was relatively warm for early spring in the Bay Area. After a week of staying inside, socially isolated in our homes, Bay Area residents flooded the region’s parks, trails, and beaches. Parking lots were packed with cars, trailheads were crowded, and facilities such as bathrooms were overrun. Few people wore masks. Groups of friends gathered en masse.

I suspect that never before had so many people wanted to go outside. For example, Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District’s Rancho San Antonio Preserve saw an 119% increase in park visitors from May 2019 to May 2020. Every Bay Area public land management agency can share numbers such as these and tell stories about full parking lots, overflowing trashcans, and toilet

paper being stolen out of bathrooms. Because of the increased risks of community transmission of COVID, and an overwhelmed system that was under-resourced to respond to such demand, some agencies decided to close their parks. Others kept theirs open. Rules varied from park to park, county to county. TOGETHER Bay Area members and partners needed to take quick action to keep park visitors and staff safe.

Our members’ communications teams led the way. With their leadership, we developed a communications toolkit. The toolkit included messages such as “maintain social distance” and “wear a mask,” pictures of COVID-safe park usage, and of course a hash tag, #LoveYourParks6ftApart.

Some TOGETHER Bay Area members, such as the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy, created social media posts like this and shared them in our regional communications toolkit for members and partners to use.

| GOLDEN GATE NATIONAL PARKS CONSERVANCY



> *“They infused a lot of humanity and humor into the process, which means people came back and wanted to participate.”*

TOGETHER Bay Area convened regular meetings with communications professionals at non-profits, public affairs managers at park agencies, and commercial partners, such as Weekend Sherpa and REI. Like the conversations with non-profit leaders and public land managers, we typically followed a simple agenda of introductions, challenges attendees were facing, and questions for the group. As the situation evolved and we fostered relationships across the region, the communications group realized that we needed more than a toolkit.

“TOGETHER Bay Area brought together siloed outdoor organizations with a common goal and helped us work together to save time and share knowledge during the beginnings of the COVID-19 pandemic,” said Katy Poniatowski, marketing and communications manager for Mountain Bikers of Santa Cruz. “The group for communications professionals was laser-focused on identifying common issues across geographies and working together on solutions. It was extremely valuable to have time set aside to work on this issue, and to work on it as a team.”

On May 13, 2020, we launched BayAreaOutdoors.org, a simple website that provides help on how and where to go outdoors safely, and short videos that could be used anywhere in the region. TOGETHER Bay Area members and partners—both small and large organizations with varying levels of communications staff and budget—promoted BayAreaOutdoors.org in their e-newsletters and on their social media channels. The website received media attention, including from the *San Francisco Chronicle*. The Marin County Emergency Office incorporated BayAreaOutdoors.org into its resources, reaching thousands of people. To date, this collective effort resulted in over 31,000 people visiting the website, over 300,000 views of the videos, and many more seeing and engaging with the content on social media. The website and corresponding outreach helped people

access nature while staying healthy and slowing down the spread of COVID.

“The framework that TOGETHER Bay Area created was critical. They scheduled the meetings, created the space, set the agenda,” said Marti Tedesco. “Plus they infused a lot of humanity and humor into the process, which means people came back and wanted to participate. It wouldn’t have happened without that.”

With our regional focus, we were able to support our members’ need to communicate clearly and consistently as possible with the public about safe park usage during COVID.

Connecting to policymakers

TOGETHER Bay Area’s advocacy program was ready to go with the first meeting of our policy committee on March 18, 2020, via Zoom. The committee consists of members who, with TOGETHER Bay Area staff, work together to advocate for funding and policies that support the entire membership’s programs and projects. Very quickly, this group started sharing information with each other about what was happening within their organizations and what they were learning from policymakers in Sacramento. A key figure here was Shelana deSilva, TOGETHER Bay Area’s political director.

“I noticed TOGETHER Bay Area was functioning with both muscle and brain,” said Matt Sagues, government affairs manager at Marin Municipal Water District. “Our muscle is the collective power of all of our agencies. The brain is in the thought leadership and the nuggets of information we’d hear from Shelana. There was a fluid sharing of information so that we could adapt to in the moment.”

With deSilva’s leadership, the policy committee realized we needed to make the case to state government leadership for an integrated approach



**Bay Area Lands,
People, and
Economy:
A Snapshot Report of
Green Stimulus
Opportunities**

TOGETHER Bay Area
May 5, 2020

TOGETHER Bay Area released its *Bay Area Lands, People, and Economy* report in May 2020, and has been leveraging it to make the case for an integrated approach to COVID, climate change, social inequities, and economic slowdown.

| TOGETHER BAY AREA

to the multiple crises the region was facing: COVID-19, economic downturn, social inequities, and climate change. We quickly developed a survey of our members, and on May 9, 2020, we released *Bay Area Lands, People, and Economy: A Snapshot Report of Opportunities for Green Stimulus*.

Shelana deSilva said, “We saw how communities were being impacted by COVID and job loss. We never forgot that fire season was coming. Sea levels continue to rise. We thought about our members’ programs and projects and how essential they are, and how they are designed to address some of the worst climate threats we face, or to provide access to nature during shelter-in-place. We need to focus on the vulnerable communities—from COVID and climate change and economy—and we could create solutions. So we surveyed our members and the results were eye-opening.”

The report reveals that, with an appropriate amount of investment from the state, our members could create at least 10,500 new jobs on more than 620 projects throughout the 10 counties that would

in turn directly or indirectly serve all 7.7 million residents.

We used the report to elevate the need for an integrated approach to the crises we face. This report was distributed to the Bay Area members of the state legislature as well as the governor’s administration. Shelana de Silva presented the report to organizations and networks across the state. And policy committee members used the report in their outreach to elected officials.

In addition to the report, TOGETHER Bay Area has communicated regularly with elected officials, their staff, and state administration officials about the situation on the ground and what is needed to support our members’ work. We have convened briefings via Zoom, submitted letters, and sent emails and talked by phone in order to foster open lines of communications.

“What is powerful about TOGETHER Bay Area is that we don’t own land or steward properties or deliver drinking water or manage the wildlands-urban interface,” said Shelana deSilva. “We deeply understand the work that our members undertake. And we leverage it so that we can find support for our members while they’re facing challenges. We can help tell the story across the region. We have the capacity to do that because we’re not also managing a forest, for example.”

TOGETHER Bay Area’s unique position as a central hub positioned us to partner with elected officials and decisionmakers, and this was especially needed in a time of crisis.

Matt Sagues said, “TOGETHER Bay Area is now being considered as a organization whose position is important. People, including industry groups and legislators, are asking what position TOGETHER Bay Area is taking on issues. This coalition is now a voice for the Bay Area.”

**Building resilience through coordination,
innovation, and advocacy**

TOGETHER Bay Area’s efforts during the early months of COVID-19 resulted in more

> *“We are committed to keeping the parks open now because of what we learned, and how we know we are all connected within the region.”*

coordination between park agencies and nonprofits, which influenced decisionmaking and communications to the public about park use and safety. Our coalition increased innovation by serving as a conduit for information and ideas. And TOGETHER Bay Area worked with its diverse membership to advocate for the funding and policies needed to support healthy lands and people, centering equity so that we could work towards root problems. The result is a resilient, adaptive, and networked group of organizations that have the ability to more effectively support public health during crises such as COVID-19.

Increased coordination. Within days of the shelter-in-place order TOGETHER Bay Area members started using Zoom or other video conferencing platforms for meetings of all sizes. With the normalization of Zoom, we saw an increase in collaboration and coordination across the region. Some examples include:

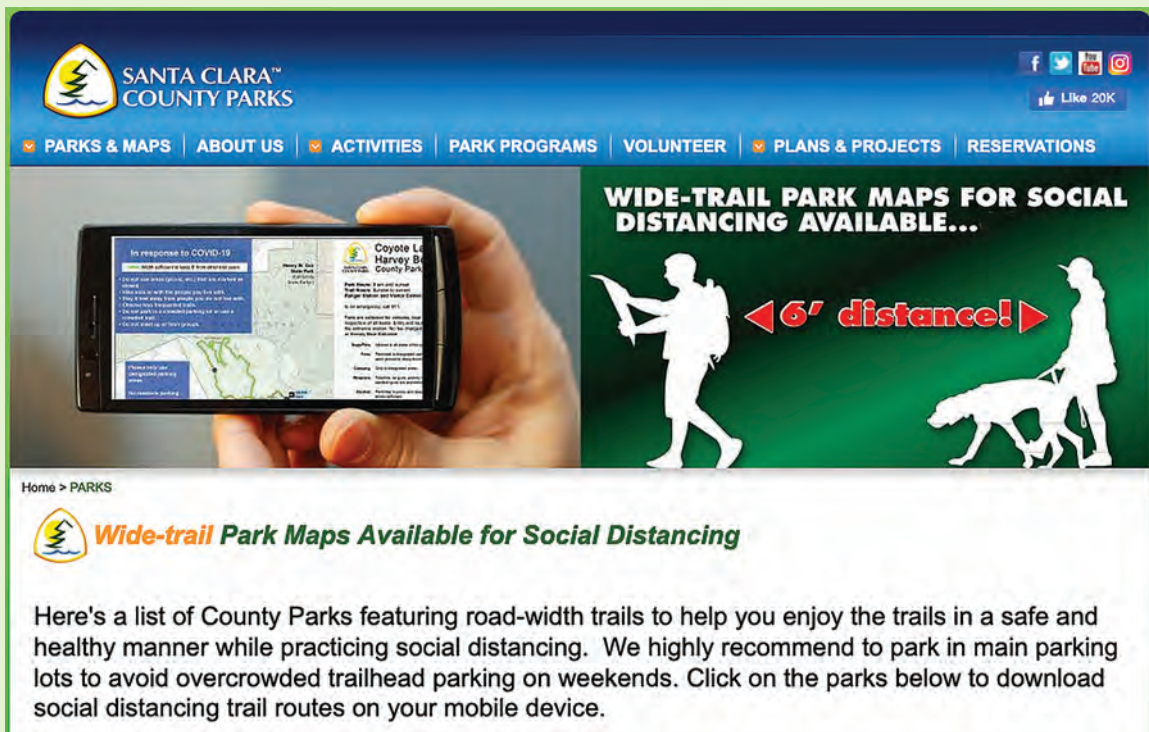
- *Coordination of decisions to close and open parks and public lands.* One of the lessons our members learned in the spring 2020 is just how interconnected our park systems are. When one system closed, the neighboring park system saw huge increases in visitors. Bert Whitaker at Sonoma County Parks said, “We used TOGETHER Bay Area to start aligning our approach to park management and park access. We are committed to keeping the parks open now because of what we learned, and how we know we are all connected within the region.”

Another coastal county, San Mateo County, saw a huge influx of visitors. San Mateo County Parks Director Nicholas Calderon said, “We learned pretty quickly that the Bay Area is much smaller than we thought, and we learned that when we closed other systems would be hammered. We didn’t understand that as well as we do now. We are an ecosystem. We need to be coordinating. Now, before major holidays, we called our neighbors and other

park agencies and tell them what we were doing so that we’re all in the know. We all came together. In order to manage crowds and a safe opportunity, the park agencies needs to be on the same page. There’s a lot of coordination now and there wasn’t before.”

- *Coordination of policies, procedures, and protocols.* A top concern of our members was equipping and training their staff to be safe. Tim Ramirez, natural resources division manager at the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission, said, “We own and steward lands in three Bay Area counties and all three counties had different rules and restrictions. We asked our staff to prepare protocols for their areas taking into account county and state requirements. And we shared those protocols with anyone who was interested. We wanted to save our colleagues some time. TOGETHER Bay Area created a forum to share these protocols more broadly, and we heard from many of our peers that they were helpful.”
- *Coordination of public education messages and assets.* We created a Google Drive folder to share materials among our members and partners, which resulted in common messages being used across the region. For example, “A group associated with UCSF [University of California, San Francisco] adopted many of our volunteer guidelines and posters so they could roll out their own COVID response. That wouldn’t have been possible without TOGETHER,” said Katy Poniatowski of Mountain Bikers of Santa Cruz.

Marti Tedesco of Peninsula Open Space Trust adds: “It was important to have a diverse coalition. At our regular communications calls we had Weekend Sherpa and OuterSpatial and REI who were thinking differently and using the communications tools in different and sometimes more advanced ways. Communicating the messages from different voices and in different modalities was critical. It catalyzed a lot of conversations and built relationships that we’re still benefiting from today.”



Santa Clara County Parks is one of the public land management agencies that now provides maps of wide trails, making it easier to plan trips outside while social distancing. | SANTA CLARA COUNTY PARKS

Increased innovation. Without a playbook for the complex, multi-layered challenges we were facing, we saw an increase in the flow and adoption of ideas across the region. Examples include:

- *Ideas for safe public lands.* Sharing ideas such as one-way trails, Facebook live hikes, trailhead greeters, and ambassadors. Ana Ruiz shared: “There was a lot of borrowing of ideas. For example, the National Park Service had great graphics in all languages that we still use. Also, we borrowed an idea from our neighbors at Santa Clara County parks of indicating on our maps which trails are wide so that trail users can pass each other with at least six feet. That was really helpful.”
- *Ideas that leverage resources and create efficiency.* TOGETHER Bay Area members did not need to start from scratch as the COVID-19 crisis unfolded over the spring and summer of 2020. Marti Tedesco said, “We were able to be more efficient by sharing what was developed and leverage it. Small organizations without large communications teams could grab the assets and post to their social media channels. Why

should each organization in the Bay Area should create their own materials when we’re all trying to say the same thing?”

Advocacy for funding and policy. With the COVID crisis affecting everyone and everything, our diverse coalition was well positioned to advocate for funding and policy. Some examples include:

- *Conduit of information to elected officials.* Shelana deSilva shared: “As we learned more about how state leaders were adapting their thinking around the budget and a potential climate resilience bond, we saw an opportunity to stand in partnership with them, to help create solutions that will keep all communities healthy during the pandemic, address climate risks, and help put people back to work. Our huge potential to contribute to these intractable problems was not visible. So we started gathering stories to highlight what was happening on the ground, our members’ needs, and the opportunities. We wanted to communicate clearly to leaders in Sacramento

> “All that TOGETHER Bay Area did goes beyond COVID.”

that our members’ work is essential. Our members were being creative and resilient, and they need supportive policies and investment to keep providing those essential services. It was a complex story that can be organized around our membership answering the most critical issues of the day.”

- *Strength and power in a diverse coalition.* Matt Sagues, Legislative and Grant Program Coordinator for Marin Municipal Water District, said that “TOGETHER Bay Area as a coalition is stronger than a network. We have a voice on issues. It is really exciting to see that TOGETHER Bay Area is having influence with policymakers.”

What’s needed

The crises of 2020 will not end on December 31, but instead will be part of our lives for years and decades to come. We need to prepare our human and natural systems for this fact. TOGETHER Bay Area has shown what is possible when a diverse coalition steps up to convene, connect, and catalyze action. “All that TOGETHER Bay Area did goes beyond COVID. TOGETHER provided opportunities to connect and collaborate that will stay with our organization for years,” said Katy Poniatowski.

Nicholas Calderon said, “When COVID is over, more people will be going outside. This is a really good thing. COVID catalyzed us to be better coordinated, and we will forever be more coordinated.” But the challenges we face in the 21st century are still significant, and we need more investment in the organizations and agencies working for lands, people, and communities to develop the solutions we need for resilience and equity. Specifically, we need to:

- Build and fund diverse coalitions working for land and people. Small and nimble organizations such as TOGETHER Bay Area support resilience in times of crisis by increasing coordination, innovation, and policy change.
- Invest in public lands as providers of essential services with dedicated funding to under-

resourced and vulnerable communities. Public land managers need more training, equipment and tools, interwoven into the emergency response networks. And they need to increase their capacity to serve Black, brown, indigenous and other people of color so that all people feel safe outdoors.

- Support collaboration between public land management agencies, nonprofits, and community-based organizations. Each type of organization has a role to play in the ecosystem of connecting people to nature.

Ana Ruiz sums it up like this: “I take to heart what Amah Mutsun Tribal Band Chairman Val Lopez says: ‘Whatever you do today affects the next seven generations.’ We’re laying the ground for the future. What TOGETHER Bay Area does really matters.” We can emerge from this crisis healthier and more equitable. Together we are writing the new playbook right now.

Sources

This article is based on interviews with:

- *Nicholas Calderon*, director, San Mateo County Parks
- *Shelana deSilva*, political director, TOGETHER Bay Area
- *Katy Poniatowski*, marketing director, Mountain Bikers of Santa Cruz
- *Tim Ramirez*, Natural Resources and Lands Management Division manager, San Francisco Public Utilities Commission
- *Ana Ruiz*, general manager, Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District
- *Matt Sagues*, government affairs officer, Marin Municipal Water District
- *Marti Tedesco*, marketing director, Peninsula Open Space Trust
- *Bert Whitaker*, director, Sonoma County Parks



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On the cover of this issue

Family exploring tidepools at Cabrillo National Monument, California. | [GEDAPIX](#)

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