

Students Taking Action on Science & Policy and Communicating to Public Audiences



Testifying at a Public Meeting

Tension filled the quiet meeting room, where bodies were tightly held, faces grimly purposeful, and smiles mostly absent. It was clear that the meeting was significant, the participants highly motivated, and the stakes high.

Into this scene came a group of high school-aged students. Dressed in blue shirts emblazoned with “I love MPAs,” they had come to take part in the decision-making. They huddled for a moment with their teacher, gave each other a round of fist bumps, and quietly took seats along the left side of the room. The commissioners filed in, seating themselves on a raised dais in the manner of judges, and began hearing public testimony related to California’s proposed establishment of Marine Protected Areas.

Outbursts were occasionally heard, but the chairperson quickly restored order with a stern look and an admonition. The morning wore on and the audience was growing irritable when the students’ turn to speak arrived.

As Jaime strode to the speaker’s table, pride could be seen in his walk but grumbling could be heard from the audience. Just as he began to speak, a shouted “sit down kid” rose into the atmosphere. With poise and grace, Jaime replied, “Sir, I love this coast and ocean. I am here to speak my mind. No one tells me what to think. My voice matters.” The mood in the room soared as the 16 year old spoke. It was clear that the future is in good hands. It was equally clear that public speaking skills matter enormously.

California King Tides

During a recent “king tide” event when San Francisco Bay rose over Marin’s bike paths, streets, and into the manicured gardens of a nearby hotel, most people continued about their morning tasks. Drivers only rarely slowed to look at the water swelling up out of storm drains and across Tam Junction, an intersection in Mill Valley. One driver, distracted by his cell phone and not expecting flooded streets, hydroplaned across the intersection and lost control of his vehicle. Other drivers made eye contact, communicated their intentions with signals, and collaborated to make safe progress. They were partners with a shared purpose, if only for a moment, in managing the rising tide.



Like the distracted driver, many California coastal residents are not paying attention to climate change. This century will see increased coastal flooding, loss of road access to communities, and damage to homes and wastewater treatment systems. Accelerated beach erosion will harm habitats and buildings unless steps are taken to protect, accommodate, or move development inland.

Fortunately, students at Terra Linda High paid attention as they worked to gather scientific data in the field, interview stakeholders, gather visual evidence, and communicate their findings to public audiences. Teacher Jesse Madsen and his students sought out a partnership with Youth Exploring Sea Level Rise Science (YESS), an initiative focused on supporting students as they seek public audiences for science communications products. YESS and Mr. Madsen’s class then worked with the County of Marin and USC-Sea Grant to move from concepts to civic communication. After collecting and analyzing data on sea level rise, the students created multiple communications products including a Spanish language video about coastal vulnerability in San Rafael, an environmental justice briefing for nearby San Mateo County, and posters for community events.

Watch the video students produced in partnership with the County of Marin and the Community Media Center of Marin in English at <https://youtu.be/LxPefmccFq4> and Spanish at https://youtu.be/cpHo-3_VSuE