

MERITO FOUNDATION

TOP ACCOMPLISHMENTS
of 2023



Multicultural Education for Resource Issues Threatening Oceans



DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT



As we approach the close of this year, we reflect on our achievements with great satisfaction and we are thrilled to declare that 2023 was an outstanding year for the MERITO Foundation. Anticipating the promise of 2024, we eagerly look ahead, appreciative of the seeds we've planted, all made possible by you - our partners, supporters, and sponsors.

In the past year, we immersed nearly 4,000 students in ocean and climate education, engaged over 700 youths in environmental data collection, facilitated the transition of 100+ households in disadvantaged communities to clean and renewable energy, orchestrated an amazing World Oceans Day celebration in Ventura, we support a new project in Oxnard involving over 900 students in the revitalization of community parks, and continued our multi-year Outdoor Recreation and Environmental Education program for the youth and communities of the Avenue in Ventura. All of this, provided free of charge to those we serve, thanks to your support.

Together, we can equip current and future generations with the tools to combat pollution, advocate for the protection of species and habitats, and ensure the enjoyment of our rivers, beaches, and the Channel Islands.

With an ocean of gratitude,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Rocio", is positioned below the text "With an ocean of gratitude,".

ROCÍO LOZANO-KNOWLTON
Founder & Executive Director



TOP ACCOMPLISHMENTS OF 2023



#1. Immersive Environmental Education for 4,000 students grades 4th-12th

Through our “Ventura River Action Network (V-RAN),” “From the Avenue to the Channel Islands (ATCI)” programs, “Oxnard Beautification Project (OBP),” and a partnership with Will Rogers Elementary, we engaged nearly 4,000 students from Ventura County in immersive environmental education. Our curriculum covered a range of topics including climate, energy, ocean, and environmental science, delivered through in-class presentations, project-based learning, and hands-on outdoor activities. For elementary students, we facilitated class activities focused on the use of natural resources, comprehension of carbon dioxide's role in our atmosphere, and the importance and identification of plankton collected from local water sources.

Participants in OBP received instruction on litter abatement, the urban heat island effect—emphasizing heat retention in cities from industrialized architecture—methods to prevent urban runoff, and the principles of native plant and restoration ecology. Middle and high school students involved in V-RAN and ATCI participated in citizen-science and project-based activities, including habitat restoration in local California State Parks, water quality testing of nearby waterways, bird identification, collection and identification of microplastics, and understanding the significance of beach clean-ups and categorization of litter. By conducting waste, water, and energy audits at middle and high school campuses, students obtained the skills to gather baseline data for crafting their project proposals for the MERITO Foundation's 2023 EECCOA Challenge.



#2. Involved 716 Students in Scientific Research, Habitat Restoration, and Stewardship Activities

716 students from our Ventura River Action Network (V-RAN) and From the Avenue to the Channel Islands (ATCI) programs participated in a variety of citizen science research and data collection projects this year. With the support of the MERITO Academy curriculum in their classrooms, the students participated in data collection and scientific investigation out in the field. The majority of our Citizen Science projects targeted the Ventura River Watershed where, throughout the year, groups of students tested Water Quality, and monitored Macro-invertebrates and Microplastics. One of our goals with citizen science was to teach the students about the removal of the Matilija Dam and its current and future impacts on the watershed. The data being collected by students will give us insight into the health of the Ventura River Watershed before and after the removal of the Matilija Dam. Students enrolled in our V-RAN program are supported by the UC Davis Center for Community Citizen Science and NOAA B-Wet in collaboration with multiple research and conservation organizations that have worked for many years to protect the Ventura River watershed.

MERITO also had a partnership with Patagonia this year to help host their Monthly Sea Ramble bike ride and beach clean-up. Community members rode from the Ventura Patagonia Store to Marina Park where they participated in a NOAA Marine debris beach clean-up. The trash collected from the beach cleanup was identified, categorized, sorted into separate groups of debris, and recorded.





#3. Outdoor Recreation & Environmental Education Program

In an exciting year for the MERITO Foundation, our from the Avenue to the Channel Islands (ATCI) program offered numerous outdoor recreation opportunities to students in the Ventura Unified School District (VUSD). Funded by California State Parks, the program's goal is to broaden outdoor access, particularly in underserved communities. De Anza Middle School students participated in diverse outdoor activities tailored to their grade levels, combining these experiences with environmental education.

Sixth-grade students focused on watershed science, exploring the components of our local Ventura River watershed and understanding its crucial role for both humans and wildlife. To bridge this with outdoor recreation, they engaged in a 'bike ride to nature' from their school on Ventura Avenue, and ending at the Ventura River Estuary. There, they engaged in environmental education activities to connect their learning with the outdoor environment. Through a similar trip, students also had the opportunity to get onto a surfboard and learn to surf!

Seventh-grade students focused on marine science, engaged in the exploration and monitoring of the rocky intertidal habitat, and helped restore the dunes of a local CA State Park. Their outdoor recreation extends to an exciting 2-night, 3-day camping expedition on Santa Cruz Island, one of the Channel Islands. While camping on the remote island, students go on trail hikes, navigate the fascinating sea caves by kayak, and snorkel in the kelp forests, all while learning about island ecology.

Eighth-grade students concentrate on marine protection, participating in citizen science trips along the Ventura River to emphasize the crucial connection between the river and the ocean. As part of their outdoor recreation, these students enjoyed sailing expeditions aboard the "Mystic Whaler," a majestic 110-ft long schooner!

#4. Youth Education & Engagement in Community Park Rehabilitation in the City of Oxnard

In 2023, the Oxnard Beautification Project (OBP) involved over 900 students and 17 educators from twelve (12) different Title I schools in Oxnard, Hueneme, and El Rio in the rehabilitation and revitalization of eleven (11) community parks in the city of Oxnard. The participating students personally assessed the current conditions of their designated community park through litter collection and sorting, mapping using measuring wheels and long tapes, and an extensive wildlife assessment.

The students used their park assessments to create a baseline of current conditions and used that to provide input on the native plants that will be installed in native plant pollinator gardens and other general improvements they'd like to see at the park. Their input was shared with the City of Oxnard Public Works managers and the landscape architecture firm responsible for bringing the changes to life. Through the MERITO Academy, the students received ocean environmental education to help them make well-informed decisions about their parks and better understand the link between our actions (littering), their consequences (urban runoff), and what we can do to prevent further damage.

The students will be authoring community outreach projects that will inform and persuade their communities on the importance of keeping our parks and public spaces clean.





#5. Building Educator Capacity Through Professional Development Sessions

Through in-person, online, and field sessions, we provided 190 formal and informal educators with resources such as curricula, training in storytelling for impact, and practices in environmental data collection to bring the ocean to their classrooms.

Two professional development workshops were held aboard the NOAA R/V 'the Shearwater', and at Santa Cruz Island for educators from our three programs, Oxnard Beautification Project (OBP), Ventura River Action Network (V-RAN), & Avenue to the Channel Islands (ATCI), and the after-school programs of Ventura County Office of Education's (VCOE) STEAM Hub Region 8: San Luis Obispo, Santa Barbara, Ventura, and Kern Counties. Aboard the research vessel, educators took part in water quality testing, plankton tow and identification, and even tried their hand at operating an ROV through Santa Cruz Island's seagrass meadows. At Santa Cruz Island, the educators did an interpretive hike lead by MERITO board members and Channel Islands Naturalists, Cliff Rodrigues and Andrea Mills, and snorkeled in the island's lush kelp forest.



#6. Greening Schools and Homes (EECCOA Challenge)

On May 22, 2023 students from Ventura Unified School District (VUSD) participated in the 8th annual Energy Efficiency to Mitigate Climate Change and Ocean Acidification (EECCOA) challenge. Student teams from VUSD, grades 7th- 12th, competed for top places in four categories - Energy Efficiency, Water Conservation, Waste Reduction, or an outreach campaign to remove the Matilija Dam. Out of 84 submissions and 220 semi-finalists, 16 teams of 48 students were chosen to compete in front of our live panel of judges. The panel of judges, composed of STEM, business, and education professionals, voluntarily reviewed and ranked all student project proposals to identify those projects that met the basic criteria and that were the most cost-effective at reducing their school's environmental footprint for each tier (waste, water, or energy). The top 16 student teams from VUSD schools were awarded in-kind prizes and cash prizes totaling \$4,650 awarded to students for their wonderful ideas and stellar projects. This program would not have been possible without our event sponsors; UC Davis Center for Community and Citizen Science, NOAA B-WET, Ventura Water, and Clean Power Alliance. Thank you to everyone who participated and contributed to a successful 8th EECCOA challenge.





#7. Community Engagement and Outreach

The MERITO Foundation staff and board had many opportunities to connect, inform, learn from, and engage with over 5,000 community members throughout Ventura and Santa Barbara Counties and other cities of California during outreach events, forums, public presentations, conferences, and community needs assessments.

Community engagement highlights in 2023 include the 'Seek the Creek' (Procura el Arroyo) forum held in February 2023 at the Bell Arts Factory. The MERITO Foundation supported Ojai Valley Land Conservancy's (OVLC) efforts to capture the insights of the Spanish-speaking community of the Avenue in Ventura to envision a healthy and accessible Ventura River Watershed. Our role was to gather the community and introduce the goals of OVLC and SALT consultants to serve as liaisons and translators for an organic conversation of what the community would like to have and see to more often and comfortably access the river.

Outreach events included our presence during various community events such as book releases by authors of environmental-themed books at the Patagonia store, bringing an environmental message while mingling with local businesses during Ventura's Chamber of Commerce annual expo event in spring 2023. During the fall, we informed community members during the Environmental Defense Center's TGIFs, and Ventura County Public Works 'Walk in the Watershed' in the fall and at the REI store. But by far, the largest and most successful outreach event of the year was our 2nd World Ocean Day Festival on June 10, 2023, a partnership effort with Paso Pacifico and the Hokuloa Outrigger Canoe Association at Harbor Cover Ventura. This event occurred during the annual race that gathered thousands of southern California paddlers. There was music, Chris Mobley, Superintendent of the Channel Islands National Marine Sanctuary as keynote speaker, and many environmental-themed booths from partners that offered ocean-themed education and outreach to the public, including Ventura Water, Port of Hueneme, Sierra Club Ventura, Coastal Keepers, Surfrider Foundation, Ventura Audubon and others.

We were honored to be invited to present and learn at various conferences, including Port of Hueneme's World Ocean Day Symposium (June 2023), California Adaptation Forum in Pomona, CA (August 2023), and Patagonia's Tools for Grassroots Activists in Tahoe (September 2023). In addition to various in-person and virtual presentations to the Ventura River Watershed Council.



#8. Building Ocean Stewardship

Through the ATCI program, 30 6th-grade students from De Anza Middle School participated in a composting and gardening club on campus. Students learned about native plants, sustainable growing methods and proper ways to compost on campus.

Over 70 students from Driffill Elementary in Oxnard toured the Hōkūle'a, a traditional Polynesian voyaging canoe, at the Ventura Harbor. The students and their teachers currently participate in the OBP with a focus on litter abatement and climate change resilience. Learning about traditional Polynesian voyaging on board the Hōkūle'a from their amazing and knowledgeable crew complemented and amplified the student's learning. The students not only learned about the Hōkūle'a and her history, but also learned about plankton, rope-tying, and traditional wayfinding using the sun, moon, and stars. We are immensely grateful for the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and thank the amazing Hōkūle'a crew for welcoming us and for their continued effort in spreading awareness on the importance of protecting our oceans, caring for the earth, and creating a better tomorrow.





#9. Youth Environmental and Outdoor Leadership

Through our ATCI program, the MERITO Foundation maintains its commitment to empowering youth in leadership and career pathways by establishing elected Outdoor Recreation and Environmental Stewards (OES). Annually, the ATCI program selects 6-8 students recognized for their leadership qualities by their science teachers. These students commit to completing 50 hours of community service, participating in job shadowing with environmental professionals, and supporting the MERITO Foundation in leading field experiences and outreach events.

In August, the new cohort attended a 3-day/2-night Outdoor Youth Leadership (OYC) Training at Castaic Lake, led by the California State Parks Office of Community Involvement. During the training, stewards were equipped with outdoor camping skills, including tent setup, team-based cooking and cleaning, and safe handling of propane tanks. The trip also introduced students to essential leadership, communication, and problem-solving skills through interactive activities and team exercises.

In 2023, we had a total of 17 OES, with nine being part of our initial cohort engaged during the 2022-2023 school year. The first cohort participated in diverse experiences, from job shadowing with partners like Ventura Water, CA State Parks, and the Port of Hueneme to active involvement in events such as the 2023 EECCOA Challenge and assisting with island camping trips. Despite being in the initial phase of the 2023-2024 school year, our second cohort has already contributed to multiple outreach events and supported our November camping trip. They are set to participate in job shadowing opportunities with our partners in the coming year.



#10. Expanding Horizons (New Partnerships in 2023)

In 2023, we had the privilege of receiving support from new funders and partners. The Port of Hueneme sponsored our effort to bring the 2023 World Ocean's Day Festival to the Community of Ventura in partnership with Paso Pacifico. We received support and worked with Patagonia on various outreach events at their store in Ventura. Ojai Valley Land Conservancy contracted the MERITO Foundation to organize and gather 'The Seek the Creek Forum' in February 2023 for the Spanish-speaking community of the Avenue in the West side of Ventura to learn what the vision of that community regarding the future of the Ventura River, once the Matilija Dam is removed. REI Cooperative Action Fund also supported our efforts to further the capacity of formal and informal educators to integrate ocean, climate, and environmental literacy into their instruction, and we even had some of their staff participate in our annual education cruise.

One of the most exciting opportunities this year was listening to and learning from the Santa Paula community during a comprehensive needs assessment to identify gaps and needs for ocean and environmental education, youth citizen science, and outdoor recreation. We received input from 1,136 youths and nearly 200 adults to establish collaborations with Santa Paula High School, Santa Paula School District, The Nature Conservancy, 5 Gyres, and CalTrout. We are deeply grateful to our previous and new funders and partners, for without their support, we could not accomplish nearly as much.

