I was late to the meeting because the Pajaro River jumped its banks and washed out part of Highway 1 between Santa Cruz and Monterey (ancestral territory of the Amah Mutsun and Ohlone Costanoan Esselen Nation). I hurried through the brisk morning into the meeting room at the Monterey Fairgrounds and made my way to a seat. The place was packed with representatives from various state agencies, universities, non-governmental organizations, and Tribal governments. We were all there for one reason – to understand whether California’s Marine Protected Area (MPA) Network was living up to its founding objectives.

This was the culmination of the Decadal Management Review (DMR), a ten-year research and outreach effort across the 124-site network positioned to measure the ecological and social dynamics surrounding marine conservation in the state. Led by the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) and Ocean Protection Council (OPC), I expected the meeting would be dominated by the fishing community and the scientists charged with determining how the network is (or is not) promoting healthy marine ecosystems. The [work of these researchers](https://www.nceas.ucsb.edu/news/MPA-decadal-review) speaks for itself and was neither the focus of this meeting nor of my research as a LCRF fellow.

What I did not anticipate was the powerful presence of Native people and Tribal representatives in the room. The tone was set early and their overall message was clear – state agencies in California have room to improve the way they work with and for Tribes, Native-led organizations, and other Native interests in coastal California.

How this should look in practice is much less clear. Testimony delivered at the meeting began to unravel **two common misconceptions held by non-Native people**: 1) that all Native people want the same thing, and 2) that there is a shortage of resources to help guide respectful collaborations with Native people.

Despite different needs and capacities, pathways that strengthen Indigenous voices in coastal management often fall under the umbrella of “co-management.” While California state agencies have [their own definition](http://nrm.dfg.ca.gov/FileHandler.ashx?DocumentID=184474) of this, here is mine:

*Co-management is the embodiment of a consensual and collaborative relationship between Indigenous Peoples and settler state governments to share responsibility for the stewardship of coastal lands, waters, and wildlife. This stewardship recognizes the value in both Indigenous and Western ways of knowing and provides opportunity for Indigenous people to reclaim ancestral practices and authority to guide how humans interact with non-human communities.*

This definition is the culmination of months pouring over [examples of co-management in practice and Indigenous perspectives](https://coastal-sov-book.netlify.app/co_mgmt.html). Meant to serve as a guide to practitioners, this resource brings together stories from Alaska, Canada, Hawai’i, and the U.S. West Coast. It connects themes of co-management with the wider push to secure [food sovereignty](https://indigenousfoodsystems.org/food-sovereignty) – broadly understood as a campaign led by Indigenous people on multiple fronts to reclaim control over their food systems, enact their right to self-determination, and strengthen their inter-generational knowledge systems.

I argue that **meaningful** **co-management is inseparable from the pursuit of food sovereignty**. Without the connection to cultural practices and food ways, the co-management debate is drained of its deeper significance and potential to rebuild relationships between people and their environments. Three recurring themes emerged throughout the duration of this project:

**1. Co-management is an ethos or approach that can serve as a guide for actual agreements more tailored to the specific needs of people and place.**

Co-management reflects a spirit of cooperation that can shape more meaningful partnerships between Indigenous and settler communities. Not all Indigenous people want or have capacity to support a direct relationship with government agencies. This is also reflected by the fact that many coastal Indigenous groups do not have federal tribal recognition in the United States. There are many opportunities to engage unrecognized groups in this process while honoring obligations to sovereign Tribal governments. All of these pathways begin by establishing relationships with different communities and building trust.

**2. Building trust takes time that must be a priority from the earliest stages of a project.**

Outreach to Indigenous communities and governments should be pursued early and often throughout the duration of a project or study. Establishing consensus does not happen in one meeting and is rarely achieved over email. Recognizing that Indigenous people must balance demands on their time, persistent communication and a willingness to listen can form a foundation of goodwill. Incorporating flexibility into both project design and implementation can allow space for other forms of knowing and set a standard of mutual respect.

**3. Indigenous Knowledge is rarely held in equal esteem with Western science.**

While there is ample mention of honoring Indigenous Knowledge (or Traditional Ecological Knowledge) in coastal governance plans, it is rarely afforded a specific role in the management process. This implies that Indigenous Knowledge is considered of lesser value compared to insight offered by Western scientific methods. In a more practical sense, Indigenous knowledge holders and scientists are rarely compensated and frequently excluded from studies, grants, and research partnerships. Instead, Indigenous science and participation in consequential meetings like the DMR are often supported by Indigenous-led philanthropic organizations with limited resources. Referencing [Indigenous-led guidance documents](https://www.mpacollaborative.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Best-Practices-for-Tribal-Engagement_2022.pdf) for engagement can head off some of these pitfalls early in the implementation of a collaborative project and create room for more lasting partnerships.

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It was August of 2020 and we were collectively beginning to emerge from the isolation of the pandemic. I needed to reacquaint myself with the redwoods and clear out of Oakland for a few days. The term “redwood curtain” is something you can feel when driving north on the 101. Our journey was shrouded by these giants, culminating in the cathedral-like heights of Redwood National Park. We set up camp on Yurok land near the mouth of the Klamath River, home to one of California’s most storied salmon runs.

A legacy of mismanagement in the form of water diversions, dam construction, and deforestation has led to fewer and fewer salmon returning home each year. There are no supermarkets within 30 miles of the Yurok Reservation, and the near loss of this essential food source has led the community to rely on less nutritious and culturally relevant food available at the gas station convenience store next to the casino.

Despite frequent attempts, my favorite smoked salmon shop remained shuttered during our visit. Last time, I was told the most recent batch of fish came from Alaska while the Klamath moved steadily to the coast hardly a mile from where we stood. The area is officially considered a [food desert](https://www.voanews.com/a/7037728.html). It is hard to fathom a desert existing in a land so rich with water and wildlife, where some of largest trees on the planet line the cliffs presiding over an endless sea.

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Neither co-management nor food sovereignty are abstract concepts. Both serve to address problems like the one facing Native communities on the Klamath. Co-management is not a cure-all, and we are a long way off from building reciprocal relationships with Native people in California. What we non-Native folk can do is listen and learn. This guide provides a baseline to begin understanding the issues facing Native and non-Native coastal communities throughout the Pacific Coast. It highlights examples of remarkable resilience and resourcefulness that will be needed to address the challenges of climate change. For many practitioners, I hope this guide will serve as a good place to start to imagine a new reality of coastal governance rooted in better stewardship of both our relationships with each other and the natural world.

*Conner Smith is a recent graduate of the UCSB Bren School of Environmental Science and Management. He is researching this topic as a Fellow funded under the* [*Leadership for Climate Resilient Fisheries Fellowship*](https://www.bing.com/search?q=leadership+for+cliamte+resilient+fisheries+fellowship&cvid=43bf15a3b159431da4e6994d2c5cf307&aqs=edge..69i57j69i59l3j69i64.7674j0j4&FORM=ANAB01&PC=U531) *from the Sustainable Ocean Alliance and Environmental Defense Fund. You can reach him at* [*connersmith@ucsb.edu*](mailto:connersmith@ucsb.edu)*. Follow* [*this link*](https://coastal-sov-book.netlify.app/) *to access the living reading list. Fact sheets and summary findings are included in this post and should be freely shared.*