

OCCIDENTAL ARTS  
& ECOLOGY CENTER



# ANNUAL UPDATE 2023

## STRATEGIES FOR CHANGE





The Occidental Arts & Ecology Center (OAEC) is an 80-acre demonstration, education, advocacy and community-organizing center in West Sonoma County, California.



Derived from the Greek root *oikos*, **Ecology** means the “study of home” and **Economy** is the “management of home,” rather than money as dominant culture leads us to believe. Without a deep knowledge of home, humans are uprooted and alienated from natural systems and one another. Mismanagement of our shared earth is the direct result, as is painfully evident in our current ecological, cultural and resource crises. Reorienting to the humble study and tending of home is at the core of the [Occidental Arts & Ecology Center’s](#) mission.

As a land-based nonprofit organization and community, we have had the opportunity and privilege of being rooted in this place for nearly 30 years. In all our programs and with thousands of partners and students each year, we are trying to answer the question: *How can we compose human systems that foster balance, justice, biodiversity and beauty?*

Each day, we are living out the answers, imperfectly of course, in how we design and manage nearly everything - from our shared food system and wildlands, to our program goals and governance structures. This has challenged us to practice deep listening and attunement to natural patterns and changes over time, and from these many years of observation OAEC has developed a clear method of inquiry and design towards more equitable and regenerative systems.

OAEC’s work is to passionately share our learnings, including our mistakes, and help others to create their own resilient solutions for managing land, economy and culture. We honor our home and the many beings that are a part of OAEC’s web of relations, including those who came before us and those who will come after. It is our joyful, inquisitive, dynamic relationship to place that continues to anchor and inspire our work in the world.

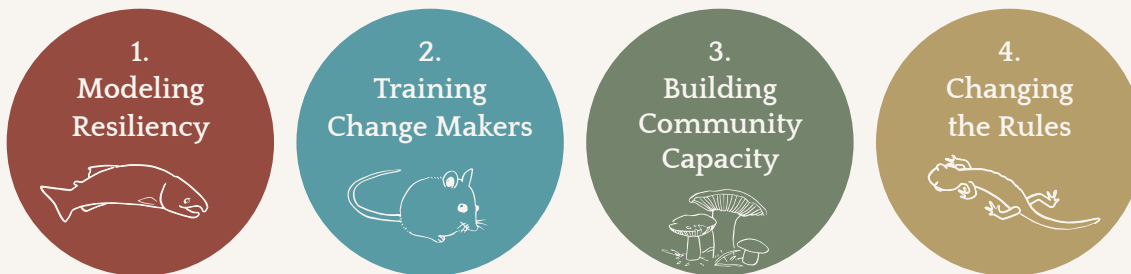




Our mission is to cultivate ecological literacy and build the capacity of communities to design resilient solutions to mounting ecological, social and economic challenges.

In our first years, OAEC ran all types of education and organizing programs for the public in addition to our advocacy work. Many will remember some of the dozens of courses we offered: *Woodshop for Women*, *Basins of Relations: Watershed Organizing*, *Painting in the Garden*, *Introduction to Natural Building*. As we grew and built out infrastructure to host larger groups, we strategically shifted our work to focus less on educating individuals and more on supporting social change leaders, organizations and networks. We often describe these groups as “whole communities,” meaning schools, public agencies, Tribes, faith congregations, social and environmental justice organizations, and movement alliances. This is the scale and constituency where we believe OAEC can have the greatest impact.

OAEC’s many programs and projects are guided by these [four strategies](#):



The consequential reality of “peak everything” and mass species extinction requires us all to embrace a cross-sectoral approach to organizing that is rooted in care for our one common home. OAEC is uniquely positioned to support groups in applying an ecological systems lens to their work and help build the connective tissue of integrated social movements. This is not to sideline the many single issues that motivate people to action, but rather to centralize biological and cultural diversity as necessary elements of a climate-resilient future.





## STRATEGY: MODELING RESILIENCY

*OAEC serves as a demonstration site, modeling dozens of practical community-scale solutions to the sustainable management of resources like water, food and soil, as well as organizational and social technologies to more effectively self-govern and manage economy.*

### Land-Based Community

Nearly all of us crave community - with our families, extended kin, or the many nuanced forms of “chosen family.” Meanwhile, the possibility of purchasing a home in much of the country is far out of reach for the majority of working families. For a rapidly broadening demographic, the idea of intentional community or co-housing is more

appealing and necessary than ever. Yet most of us are quite out of practice in the “art of communal living,” including developing common values (and ways to co-exist with differing values), participatory self-governance, complex group decision-making, conflict resolution, and financial models for cooperatively managing resources and the myriad needs that emerge.

Amidst all of the strategic work that happens here, one of the most inspiring aspects of our project is the consensus-based intentional community, Sowing Circle, that has co-stewarded and resided on this land beside OAEC since their mutual founding in 1994. When visitors come to OAEC, they are not showing up to a hotel or conference center. They come as honored guests in our home, including all of the

often messy but mostly beautiful, authentic details of a rich home life. OAEC models an awareness and ethic of “ecos” because our work IS knowing and caring for home and those in it. By bravely sharing our home lives and internal processes through tours, workshops and our Resilient Community Design collaborations, we hope to inspire and serve other groups undertaking the same endeavor.

“Our aim is to create a restorative version of the best of what our ancestors enjoyed while also pioneering something contemporary, unique and capable of addressing the challenges of today’s world.”

– ADAM WOLPERT, SOWING CIRCLE MEMBER AND OAEC CO-FOUNDER





## Where's the Art in "Arts & Ecology"?

While our programming in the formal arts has waned in recent years (with the notable exception of our popular [Chautauqua](#) performances), we centralize beauty and attempt to weave thoughtfulness and artistry throughout everything we do on the site and in the world. We believe creative expression is a core aspect of resilient culture and that beauty is an indicator of health, balance and care. Nowhere is the intersection of arts and ecology more evident than in our gardens and kitchen!



“OAEC is a holistically beautiful space. The love tenderly given to the land is easily experienced by all who visit. Its beauty truly goes beyond its wondrous sights, views and amenities - it really gets to the relationships one can build with the world and others.”

- MOVEMENT BUILDING RETREAT GUEST



## Demonstration Site

On the 80 acres that OAEC stewards, we are working to restore biodiversity and the keystone processes of water, carbon and life. We trial innovative restoration techniques, conduct participatory research, and share best practices with others through all aspects of the land-based center. A walk through OAEC reveals a suite of strategies for [harvesting rainwater](#), seed-saving, erosion control, wildfire mitigation, planned grazing (*pictured above*) and more.

One of the jewels of the Demonstration Site is the Mother Garden - the focal point and inextricable reason-for-being for so many of OAEC's programs. The garden provides beautiful, quiet places for retreat groups to meet, a living classroom for our ecological literacy trainings, and space to cultivate seed for our [Mother Garden Biodiversity Program](#) and [Nursery](#). The Nursery, the public face of the garden, allows us to share plants, knowledge and seeds with our local community and beyond. And of course the garden provides a wealth of food, glorious food! From the laundry-to-landscape greywater system to the flower arrangements, nearly all of our operations reflect OAEC's integrative approach, thanks to our amazing staff who keep it all running!





## STRATEGY: TRAINING CHANGE MAKERS

*Making the transition to a just and sustainable economy requires that more people become ecologically-literate change makers. OAEC's education and advocacy programs help train, support and inspire individuals and social movement leaders to apply an ecological lens to their social change work.*



### Resilient Community Design

We use [Resilient Community Design](#), OAEC's adaptation of the permaculture design methodology, to support people in realizing their own thriving, ecologically-restorative homes, neighborhoods and communities. Our step-by-step participatory process joins ecological principles and practices with a group's own knowledge and vision of place, resulting in a design map that addresses their particular cultural, ecological and economic needs.

“The OAEC training has built a foundation for ‘earth care, people care, and fair share’ that will influence the way I live for the rest of my life. I’m thankful for the aspects of justice that intersected the topics at every level. I’m ending the course feeling enabled and ready to engage my life differently and look through life with a new and healthier optic.”

– JON, 2023 [PERMACULTURE GRADUATE](#)

### Collaboration with Community Action Marin

OAEC has partnered with Community Action Marin (CAM) on a program called “Apetito de Cambio” (Appetite for Change) focused on climate-resilient food production in urban areas. This year, OAEC and CAM transformed two plots at Old Gallinas Children’s Center into demonstration and teaching gardens that are now producing veggies, fruit, herbs and flowers for the school kitchen. Next year, OAEC staff will facilitate a cohort of parent leaders from CAM’s Marin County network through our hybrid Spanish-language agroecology course. The curriculum dives into conceptual frameworks and practical techniques of bio-intensive agriculture to grow abundant and nutritious food. Beyond food production, this program is about strengthening people’s right to access healthy, culturally-appropriate food and urban green spaces.





## Dr. Rajendra Singh “Reviving Rivers” Workshop

This spring, we were honored to host world-famous water conservationist Dr. Rajendra Singh for a weekend of skill-sharing on how to revitalize landscapes through community-driven, decentralized water retention. The weekend included a screening of the award winning film *Reviving Rivers* followed by a panel discussion with Dr. Singh, OAEC’s Brock Dolman, Zachary Weiss of Elemental Ecosystems, and Ethan Hirsch-Tauber of The Water Folk. Using OAEC’s Conservation Hydrology Demonstration Site as a classroom, workshop participants discovered practical solutions for watershed recovery, groundwater recharge and reforestation that have been implemented around the world with great success.



## California Process-Based Restoration Network

Last year, OAEC’s [WATER Institute](#) joined forces with a team of other natural resource professionals, agencies and organizations to launch the [California Process-based Restoration \(Cal PBR\) Network](#). In contrast to form-based restoration, which often requires high costs and fossil fuel inputs, process-based restoration uses simple, low-cost techniques like adding woody debris that mimic beaver dams to riverscapes. PBR harnesses the system’s natural energy to do most of the restoration “work.”



The goals of the Cal PBR Network are to provide a collaborative voice in support of these process-based restoration approaches to restore degraded ecosystems and build California’s resiliency to drought, wildfire and climate change. It’s been amazing to see how quickly this open-source network has become a lively hub of information exchange, cross-discipline dialogue and collaboration!

This year, the Network co-convened two very successful trainings geared toward practitioners interested in gaining hands-on experience and honing

their technical expertise at a watershed scale. In the fall, OAEC’s Kate Lundquist and Brock Dolman served as instructors for Cal PBR’s “Build Like a Beaver” workshop in Yellow Creek in Plumas County, which focused on PBR design, permitting and implementation. Thanks to the generosity of an anonymous donor, OAEC was also able to provide funding for Tribal members to participate in the workshop.







## STRATEGY: BUILDING COMMUNITY CAPACITY

OAEC strives to achieve a “multiplier effect” by building the capacity of communities, organizations, networks and other land-based projects to become more effective agents of social and ecological change.

### Movement Building Retreat Program

This year, we welcomed dozens of new and returning social movement organizations and networks to OAEC for their strategic planning, training and [organizational retreats](#). We seek to create a beautiful container for connection through nourishing, organic meals from OAEC’s renowned gardens and kitchen, indoor and outdoor meeting spaces, lovely guest rooms and spa facilities. Retreat groups regularly tell us that doing their work at OAEC has a transformational effect on participants personally and on their organizational work collectively. We prioritize organizations and networks working at the intersections of racial, social, environmental and economic justice organizing, many of which we have deep, decades-long relationships with. Our [Movement Building Retreat Fund](#) enables us to offer a reduced, affordable rate for our small-but-mighty partners who otherwise could not come to OAEC.



These are just some of the incredible groups we hosted in 2023:

- Native Movement
- Climate Justice Alliance
- San Francisco Jobs with Justice
- Chisholm Legacy Project
- Indigenous Environmental Network
- National Housing Law Project
- Catalyst Project
- New Breath Foundation (*pictured above*)
- Just Transition Alliance
- Asian Pacific Environmental Network



## Rewilding California Network Convening

Since 2020, OAEC, the Center for Biological Diversity and the Rewilding Institute have co-convened a new Rewilding California Network. The Network includes conservation biologists and representatives from nonprofits and California Tribes who are leading cutting-edge rewilding efforts across the state - from returning keystone species, to securing conservation habitat. Through online and in-person gatherings, Rewilding California serves to connect these incredible projects across geographies, spark innovation, and build a more cohesive and collaborative rewilding movement.



## Fiscal Sponsorship Program

One of OAEC's "sweet spots" that has grown in recent years is our [Fiscal Sponsorship Program](#). Fiscal sponsorship gives an administrative home to social change projects that don't have or need their own 501(c)(3) status by providing organizational, accounting, tax, HR, strategy and fundraising support. OAEC is honored to play this important role to incubate nascent social movement projects already on their way to doing impactful work at the intersection of justice and ecology.

We're proud to shout out our fiscally-sponsored projects here!

- [Peak Plastic Foundation](#)
- [People Over Plastic](#)
- [Leap Lab](#)
- [Fenceline Watch](#)
- [Celebrating Womxn's Leadership in Food](#)
- [Tribal Eco-Restoration Alliance](#)



"Tribal Eco-Restoration Alliance (TERA) is an intertribal project in the Eastern Pomo, Southeastern Pomo, Lake Miwok, and Wappo territories of Lake County CA. We're building capacity for the Tribal community to steward our ancestral lands, creating livelihoods and career paths, and implementing ecocultural stewardship work including 'Good Fire'. It's a complex project that would have been very difficult to pull off without OAEC, a fiscal sponsor behind the scenes to help get us started, and we're proud to announce that we will be forming our own 501(c)(3) in 2024!"

- LINDSAY DAILEY, TERA EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR







## STRATEGY: CHANGING THE RULES

*We work to legalize and require sustainable economy, and to make illegal and dis-incentivize activities that subvert it. Partnering with advocacy alliances, we seek to change policy where we are most likely to succeed on issues that are ripe for change.*

### Beaver Campaign “Change the Rules” Success Story!

After nearly two decades of education, demonstration and organizing through our [Bring Back the Beaver Campaign](#), OAEC is celebrating major statewide wins on beaver! Last year following our remarkably successful advocacy campaign leading over 100 conservation, agricultural, business, nonprofit and Tribal partners, the California Department of Fish & Wildlife (CDFW) launched a new Beaver Restoration Program. This is the first state-led initiative to restore beaver since 1950 and represents an unprecedented step to conserve and reintroduce this climate-beneficial keystone species.

In response to the Regulation Change Petition that OAEC and our partners at the Environmental Protection Information Center and the Center for Biological Diversity filed in 2019, CDFW has also recently enacted a [new depredation policy](#) that will help protect countless beaver where they are already thriving. In cases where landowners

are struggling with beaver problems like flooding or tree cutting, they will now be required to carry out coexistence measures, which provide alternatives to killing “nuisance” beaver. While there are many effective, low-cost coexistence strategies (pond levelers, tree wrap, Beaver Back Saver, etc.), California lacks adequate workforce expertise and financial capacity to assist landowners and implement these solutions at scale. To fill this gap, OAEC achieved another big win with the dedication of \$2 million dollars of CDFW funding to support these key needs across the state!

This level of support and enthusiasm was nearly unimaginable when we began our beaver advocacy efforts in the early 2000s. However, there is still much to be done with our partners to guide this remarkable beaver moment in California to its best possible outcome. Some of our plans for the year ahead

include participating in two of the first beaver translocation pilots with CDFW and our tribal partners, the Maidu Summit Consortium and the Tule River Tribe, and advising on the development of CDFW’s new statewide Beaver Management Plan. We couldn’t be more proud to share the achievements we have accomplished thus far and leverage our success to create one of the most progressive beaver management plans in the country.





## Streamlining Upland Fire and Watershed Restoration

California is facing the reality of catastrophic wildfire due to the drought-stressed and overstocked condition of our forests. This has catalyzed a major effort to reduce excess fuels and thin forest stands, producing a significant amount of woody debris in the process. OAEC has launched a campaign to reframe this “slash” not as “trash,” but rather as a “beneficial biomass” that can help heal resilient watersheds.

Working with local crews like North Bay Jobs with Justice over the past two years, we have reclaimed over 250 tons of material from fuels reduction projects and installed restoration structures in over 992 feet of dehydrating, eroding gullies. Collaborating with local resource agencies, OAEC was able to pilot new permitting pathways as one of the first legal upland, process-based restoration applications in our area. We are now working with other partners like Shelterwood Collective, Sonoma County Regional Parks, Trout Unlimited and California Conservation Corps (pictured) to continue streamlining restoration permitting and implementing these innovative nature-based solutions at a wider scale.



## Compost Toilet Research Project

In 2014, we embarked on a research project to test three different commercial compost toilet models. While we are still hopeful about the water-saving and carbon-capturing potential of compost toilets, we did not go into this study with any preconceived notions about the efficacy of these particular systems - we were committed to conducting unbiased scientific research. OAEC partnered with the County of Sonoma and we were granted an Alternative Methods and Materials Permit to conduct the study.

In May of 2019, the systems were installed and by January 2020, we had gathered enough material to conduct our first test. Our levels of fecal coliform were well within Class B levels for biosolids, an acceptable minimum in many jurisdictions for application onto land in certain areas (buried or applied away from waterways and food-grade agriculture), but not the Class A levels or the NSF 41 standards required by our County permit.

Shortly after, the pandemic hit and our retreat program was shut down for two years. Because of drastically reduced use of the toilets and other extenuating circumstances, including staffing transitions at the County and here at OAEC, we needed to pause the project and shifted the toilets over to the back-up traditional septic system.

We are now letting the material rest in the holding tanks for a year and will proceed with secondary composting on our land in a protected area for up to two additional years, as per our permit.



As with any research project, often what emerges are not answers but actually more questions: Is it even possible to make Class A biosolids or NSF 41 standard compost in a sealed unit? Is the label “compost toilets” for these commercial systems somewhat of a misnomer - or are they more like collection tanks for material needing to be secondarily composted? Are the Class A standards set by the EPA, NSF and local governments unreasonably high considering the public health crisis of drought and climate change? In our quest to Change the Rules and legalize sustainability, OAEC continues to experiment with new things, learn from our mistakes, share our findings, and try again. Stay tuned for more updates on the unfolding eco-sanitation saga!







## Get Involved!

- Sign up for our Newsletters at [oaec.org/follow](https://www.oaec.org/follow) to receive updates and current news
- Follow us on social media!  [@the\\_oaec](https://www.instagram.com/the_oaec)  [facebook.com/theOAEC](https://www.facebook.com/theOAEC)
- Come out for Wednesday Garden Volunteer Day to get your hands in the soil and learn about our historic organic gardens. See [oaec.org/events/volunteer-days](https://www.oaec.org/events/volunteer-days) for more information.
- Visit our [Mother Garden Biodiversity Nursery](#), open seasonally from April-October on Saturdays and Sundays, 10am-5pm.
- Join us for a [public tour](#) on every first and third Sunday of the month at 1pm, from April-October.

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