



2024 marks the 30th Anniversary of the Occidental Arts & Ecology Center!

Since our founding in 1994, OAEC has grown into a beloved resource for community groups and social movement organizations seeking to ground their work in ecological literacy, place-based knowledge and integrative design throughout the Bay Area and beyond.

This timeline brings to life just some of the big moments, partnerships, and milestones from the past thirty years: a flow and a spiral of action and impact that has shaped the story and legacy of OAEC.

It celebrates the many people, organizations, alliances and movements that have made our work possible and been a part of OAEC's journey. As we look back with gratitude, we also look ahead—toward these next decades of building resilience, fostering biocultural diversity and creating pathways for a thriving, sustainable planet for generations to come.





TIME IMMEMORIAL

Coast Miwok and Southern Pomo people, now recognized as the **Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria**, actively steward the Sonoma Coast for thousands of years and into the present.

1850-1950

European settlers arrive on the land that is now known as OAEC, changing the landscape dramatically through cattle grazing and agriculture. During the 1870's railroad era, ancient old-growth redwood trees are intensively logged.



In the 1880s, Italian homesteaders plant the Epargne pear tree that now stands in front of the kitchen.

1974-1990

Farallones Institute is built and runs a nonprofit center for teaching and research in appropriate technology and sustainable design.

1976

Farallones Institute builds a series of cabins, an experiment in passive solar design, now known as "**Solar Suburbia**," where community members still reside.



1974

The **Mother Garden** is established, inspired by the biointensive techniques of Alan Chadwick. For the next 50 years and beyond, it would serve as a cradle of biodiversity and a source of seeds, wisdom and inspiration for gardeners, farmers and horticulturalists alike.





1980

The Mother Garden is certified by California Certified Organic Farms (CCOF) and remains the **seventh oldest certified organic farm in the state.**

1978

The **pond** is dug in response to the mega drought of 1976-77 and is still the main water source for garden and landscaping irrigation.



1980

Garden Volunteer Days begin, a tradition that continues to this day. Since then, over 14,400 people have dug their hands into this soil!



1990-1993

The Marsh-Wott Legacy purchases the property and renames it the **Center for Seven Generations**, an organization dedicated to continuing the experimental nature of the site.

1994

The Occidental Arts & Ecology Center (OAEC) and Sowing Circle are founded. Seven friends with a shared vision of starting a land-based intentional community form Sowing Circle LLC and establish OAEC as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit. Together, the two organizations collectively care for the land, gardens and facilities.



1994

With the Sonoma Land Trust, OAEC co-writes the **first ever organic agricultural easement** in the U.S., protecting the Mother Garden in perpetuity.



1994

OAEC co-founds the **Program on Corporations, Law and Democracy** (POCLAD) and in the next decade, hosts over a dozen activist strategy convenings and workshops called “Rethinking Corporations, Rethinking Democracy.” POCLAD significantly influences our philosophy of reclaiming community self-governance from corporate rule.



1995

The **Mother Garden Biodiversity Program** gives birth to more “daughter gardens,” including at the Henry House AIDS Hospice and **Food For Thought Food Bank**. We also begin sharing our unique heirloom plant collection with the local community at our inaugural **Plant Sale Event** and by donating our seedlings to local land-based nonprofits and Bay Area community gardens.

1995

The **Wildlands Program** begins “shuck-n-huck” seed dispersal of the Yellow Mariposa Lily (*Calochortus luteus*), a culturally-important native species to California’s coastal prairies. This is part of our “mending the wild” approach to restore biodiversity to our 70-acre **Wildlands Preserve**, affectionately referred to as the “Grandmother Garden.”

A green line drawing of a fern frond with multiple leaflets.

1996

First **Permaculture Design Certification** (PDC) is taught, a course that continues to anchor our ecological literacy work and now has over 1,867 graduates and counting. Our campus remains the longest continuously running permaculture training center in the West and is considered one of the nation's best examples of a working permaculture site.

1996

OAEC co-founds the **No-Spray Action Network**, stopping the indiscriminate spraying of pesticides for the glassy-winged sharpshooter in Sonoma County.





1996

OAEC partners with Harmony Union School in Occidental to create a school garden, launching the [School Garden Teacher Training Program](#), which would continue through 2019. Over the course of this 23-year program, 300+ school gardens are established in California and nationally, and 1,200+ teachers are trained.

In our first 10 years, OAEC offers dozens of **public courses** in horticulture, ecological restoration, and the arts: Woodshop for Women, Winter Organic Gardening, Seedsaving, and Herbalism, just to name a few.

1996

First Landscape Painting course. While OAEC's formal **Arts Program** would eventually give way to other programming, we continue to centralize beauty and weave artistry throughout everything we do on the site and in the world.

1997

OAEC hosts the first [Seed Exchange](#) at the Ecological Farming Conference and later expands to the Bioneers Conference and West County Seed Exchange in an effort to safeguard seed sovereignty against corporate consolidation. Our vast seed bank would grow over the years to include thousands of varieties.

1999

GE-Free Sonoma County is co-founded by OAEC and gathers a record number of ballot signatures to keep genetically modified organisms out of Sonoma County. We would later co-found **Californians for GE-Free Agriculture**, our first fiscally sponsored project.

1999

Starting and Sustaining Intentional Communities course becomes one of OAEC's core offerings focused on group decision making, legal and financial structures for shared property, long-term planning, etc. This popular course would continue for more than 15 years and inspire dozens of other land-based projects and communities.

2000

OAEC helps initiate a multi-year effort co-led by OAEC to restore endangered coho salmon in the Salmon Creek Watershed begins. This would culminate in the **Bodega Valley Rainwater Catchment & Alternative Water Supply Program**, a first-of-its-kind collaborative to develop alternative water sources and storage towards increasing summer streamflow.

2000

First **prescribed burn** of our native coastal "Peppergrass Prairie," reflecting our longtime efforts to bring "good fire" back to the landscape as a keystone process for restoring biodiversity and resiliency. Several years later, OAEC co-founds our local West County Fire Safe Council.

2000

OAEC begins offering **Basins of Relations: Starting and Sustaining Community Watershed Groups** training, which would help to organize community groups from over 40 watersheds, many of which are still active today.

2003

OAEC hosts **Our Power Camp**, a seminal gathering that brings together national environmental justice networks, including the Indigenous Environmental Network, Ruckus Society and Communities for a Better Environment. This is a pivotal moment in establishing OAEC as a unique incubator and networking hub for social and environmental **Movement Building** in the Bay Area.

In the early 2000s, OAEC starts to make a deliberate strategy shift away from training individuals and towards **building the capacity of whole communities**, such as schools, faith groups, tribes, agencies, and other land-based organizations.



2003

The North Garden Theater is built and debuts the first [Chautauqua Revue](#), an homage to the late 19th century rural tradition of grassroots entertainment and education.

2004

The [WATER Institute](#) (Watershed Advocacy, Training, Education & Research) is officially established. Central to the program is our [Conservation Hydrology](#) philosophy and approach to watershed management. Over the decades, the WATER Institute shares these practical techniques through our [Demonstration Site](#) and many [DIY guides](#).

2007

OAEC co-founds [Movement Generation Justice & Ecology Project](#) (MG) and together host dozens of Just Transition Retreats in the years following. The seeds of many spinoff groups and networks, such as the Climate Justice Alliance and Creative Wildfire, sprout from these early gatherings. OAEC and MG would continue our deep partnership through collaborative offerings like the [Permaculture for the People](#) training series.

2007

Traditional Ecological Knowledge skill-share workshop with [Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria](#) (FIGR) is held at OAEC, followed by years of collaborative gardening, nutrition and land management workshops for FIGR youth and tribal citizens. FIGR would later invite us to co-create gardens at their headquarters and tribal trust lands.

2007

KOWS 107.3FM community radio station is established as a fiscally sponsored project and its transmitter is mounted at OAEC, remaining here until 2013.

Starting in 2007, with the goal of hosting larger groups of social change leaders and organizations, OAEC embarks on a 15+ year **master planning process and capital campaign** to renovate and construct new facilities.



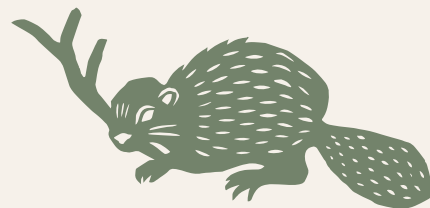
2009

OAEC's participation in statewide organizing and advocacy to **legalize graywater** results in new California graywater standards codes, later adopted by Sonoma County. Members of this coalition would come together in 2014 to launch the **Decentralized Water Policy Council**, which would evolve into the Localizing California Waters Conference.



2010

In response to the devastating decline of coho salmon returning to the Russian River Watershed to spawn, the WATER Institute co-founds the **Russian River Coho Water Resources Partnership** to improve streamflow and water supply in five tributaries critical to their recovery. Over the initiative's ten-year lifespan, significant strides are made that help to successfully restore a viable coho population.



2009

Our **Bring Back the Beaver Campaign** is officially launched to advance beaver and process-based restoration as tools to restore climate-resilient, biodiverse watersheds. Met with widespread resistance in the early years, we first set out to correct the misconceptions that beaver (*Castor canadensis*) are not good for fish and not native to California, co-authoring two **peer-reviewed papers** in 2012 and 2013 that prove otherwise.

2009

OAEC co-founds the **California Climate & Agriculture Network** (CalCAN), a statewide coalition that advances state and federal policy to catalyze the powerful climate solutions offered by sustainable and organic agriculture. CalCAN would remain a fiscally sponsored project of OAEC until 2018, and we continue to serve as a coalition member today.

2010

Grounded in the belief that every community has the right to self-determination, **Resilient Community Design** (RCD) emerges as a framework to describe the methodology we use to facilitate groups in designing their own thriving communities and land-based systems. The RCD Program partners with Casa Grande High School and St. Stephen's Church, and later expands to help guide other organizations through participatory land-planning processes.





2012

After a decade of forestry work to improve wildlife habitat, a breeding pair of **Northern Spotted Owls**, a threatened species, takes residence at OAEC and returns season after season to nest and raise their young.

2014

The RCD Program works with [SOIL Haiti](#) on a design of their ecological sanitation campus. As the RCD model gathers momentum, OAEC is invited to work with other international groups, including the [V-World Farm](#) in Congo and the [Miskitu women's food security project](#) with Environmental Law Alliance Worldwide in Nicaragua. OAEC goes on to raise over \$1 million for Indigenous communities in Nicaragua.

2015

The award-winning [OAEC Cookbook: Fresh-from-the-Garden Recipes for Gatherings Large and Small](#) is published. Our kitchen is the hearth for residents and retreat guests and serves as a showcase for the garden's delicious produce.

2012

The upper plant nursery is built and plant sale events morph into open nursery weekends. As the popularity and availability of heirloom vegetables rise, the [Mother Garden Nursery](#) shifts its focus away from annuals and towards perennial food crops, culinary and medicinal herbs, pollinator and habitat plants in response to climate change.



Over the past 30 years, we estimate that the dinner bell hanging from the oak tree in front of the kitchen has been rung over 80,000 times!



2015

OAEC and Sowing Circle's [Wildlands Preserve Stewardship Plan](#) is published, documenting the rich history of land management and OAEC's strategies to restore "regenerative disturbance" processes and reintegrate the water, carbon, fire and life cycles. The plan draws upon twenty years of citizen science and observation, such as tracking neotropical migrant bird arrival dates, wildflower species and rain data.

While OAEC's third-growth redwood trees may only be 85+ years old, their still-intact root systems underground have existed for millenia.



We use **Beauty Way** to describe our housekeeping and site care culture, a term that pays homage to the ideal brought forward by Grace Spotted Eagle. Beauty Way is a mindful and radical way of caring for the physical space around us, and reflects the belief that natural beauty and order enhances the meaningful inner work that groups come here to do.



2017

OAEC becomes involved in supporting the global [Break Free From Plastic](#) (BFFP) movement, including facilitating global meetings and hosting retreats for BFFP and associated organizations like the Alliance for Mission-Based Recycling, FracTracker Alliance, GAIA, and Plastics Solutions Fund. [People Over Plastic](#) podcast and [Peak Plastic Foundation](#) both later become fiscally sponsored projects of OAEC

2018

OAEC works with the county to obtain a research permit for our **Compost Toilet Research Project**, trialing three different composting toilet systems in our new buildings as part of our redevelopment campaign. Sadly, soon after the systems become operational, the Covid shutdown and other extenuating circumstances force the research to a pause with inconclusive results.

2018

We celebrate the grand opening of our new [Meeting Hall](#), the capstone project of OAEC's successful 15-year redevelopment campaign to renovate and upgrade our group retreat facilities. This enables us to grow our [Retreat Program](#), drawing hundreds of social, environmental and economic justice groups and networks from the Bay Area and beyond.

2020

Our beloved [barn](#), originally built by the Farallones Institute using traditional mortise and tenon joinery, burns to the ground in an electrical fire. Miraculously, amongst the charred rubble, a filing cabinet containing the original 1970's blueprints survives! A new timber-frame barn rises from the ashes in 2023.

2020

OAEC, the Center for Biological Diversity and the Rewilding Institute co-convene the state's first [Rewilding California Network](#). Rewilding California brings together conservation biologists and representatives from organizations and California Native Tribes leading cutting-edge rewilding efforts across the state.

2021

[Fenceline Watch](#), [Counterstream Media](#) and [Tribal EcoRestoration Alliance](#) join our growing [Fiscally Sponsored Projects Program](#). OAEC is honored to offer legal and administrative support to grassroots and other social change projects around the country, allowing them to focus on impactful community-led initiatives without the burden of establishing their own 501(c)(3) status.

In 2020, the global **Covid-19 pandemic** forces us to shut-down all retreats, trainings and on-site activities. The Nursery shifts to online sales, our Permaculture Design Certification is adapted to an online format (now offered as a hybrid course), and our Fiscally Sponsored Projects Program expands as a new economic engine. These creative pivots help OAEC survive and thrive during the pandemic closure, alongside the steadfast support of our funders and government relief programs.



2021

OAEC receives two permits from regional and state agencies to formally trial innovative process-based restoration strategies onsite like gully stuffing to restore upland watershed function. This is a major milestone in our [Fuels to Flows Campaign](#), and our successful pilot project inspires many analogous projects across California.

2022

OAEC's WATER Institute joins forces with a team of other natural resource professionals to launch the [California Process-based Restoration \(Cal PBR\) Network](#). This open-source network promotes process-based (aka, beaver-based, ecological, low-tech, nature-based) restoration approaches.

2021

For the first time since 1976, winter rains do not refill OAEC's pond. This initiates drastic water-saving measures, including a shift from overhead watering to [drip irrigation](#) in the gardens and landscaping.

2021

As California grapples with increasing catastrophic wildfire and climate change impacts, the Wildlands Program expands our work to advance holistic forestry practices. OAEC is awarded over \$125,000 of state and federal funds to implement forest health and fuels reduction projects onsite through [workforce development](#) initiatives with entities like Conservation Corps North Bay, Sonoma State University, [North Bay Jobs with Justice and Resilience Works](#).

2023

Our [Beaver Campaign's decades of advocacy](#) and leadership helps to catalyze major wins at the state level. Among them, a new [Beaver Restoration Program](#) at the California Department of Fish and Wildlife is enacted, leading to the first two beaver translocations in nearly 75 years with our longtime tribal partners at the [Tule River Tribe](#) and the [Maidu Summit Consortium](#). Building on the momentum, OAEC is awarded a \$2 million grant from the Department to launch a new [Beaver Coexistence Training and Support Program](#).



2024

OAEC and Sowing Circle residential community celebrate our **30th Anniversary**. We honor OAEC's unique contributions, express thanks to our many collaborators and dream into the next 30 years together!

2024

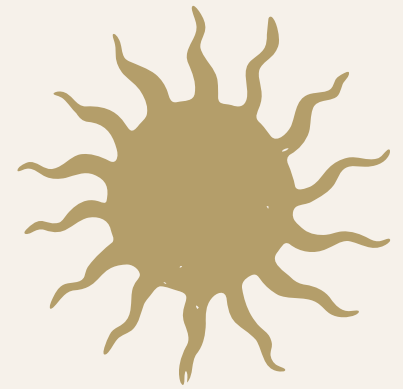
A 125 kW solar array and 540 kWh **battery microgrid system** is installed at our demonstration site, which will produce 100% of OAEC's electricity needs.

2024

Evolving out of our Resilient Community Design methodology, OAEC co-founds the **Alliance for Land-based Mutual Aid (ALMA)**. ALMA is a coalition of diverse Bay Area groups with the common vision of providing stewardship and governance resources to newly forming land-based communities.

2024

OAEC is chosen as **Nonprofit of the Year** for California's 2nd Senate District.



It would be impossible to name all who have contributed to the magic and success of OAEC, but we are going to try! We extend our deepest gratitude and appreciation to...

The land itself: the birds, water, animals, insects, soil, trees, plants, geology, fungi and microorganisms, for being the foundation of our inspiration and knowledge.

All who have come before and continue to mentor us into the future: the Coast Miwok and Southern Pomo first peoples who have tended this land since time immemorial and now, as the Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria, continue to help guide us toward right relationship with the land; and the elders of Farallones Institute who laid the groundwork in the 70's and 80's for the bustling center of regenerative thinking we now call OAEC.

Sowing Circle community: for courageously and lovingly spearheading this experiment in collective living, and for sharing your home and hard-learned lessons with all of us. Your dedication of vision, labor and heart has been a truly generous act of faith in the power of land-based communal living.

OAEC core and hourly staff, interns, Board of Directors: for tirelessly and joyfully tending to our beautiful, sometimes messy, always-evolving organization and infrastructure, including gracefully managing the wild "ego-system" of OAEC. We extend special appreciations to the more than 150 interns who each dedicated a year of their life to participating in this project, many of whom started both their careers and families here; and to the hundreds of hourly Kitchen and Beauty Way staff who have welcomed our guests with care by cooking meals, scrubbing toilets and collectively washing over a million dishes since our first workshop in 1995.

Volunteers: the thousands who've weeded, mulched, composted and literally massaged the garden beds by hand. The legacy of soil in the Mother Garden is a most valuable heirloom that will be left to future generations.

Collaborators and partner organizations: the hundreds of community-based organizations, schools, watershed groups, tribes, agencies, and social justice alliances that have gathered here (with many starting here!); dozens of our fiscally sponsored projects; hundreds of retreat groups; and thousands of activists, farmers, educators and others with whom we have deeply collaborated on policy campaigns and projects far too diverse to list.

Donors and foundations: from the thousands of individuals who give modestly to our dozens of sustaining donors who have given very generously year after year; to the more than one hundred foundations who have invested in making OAEC's work possible. We are humbled by the unwavering generosity of each of you.

Friends, neighbors, customers and visitors: for your friendship, probing questions, generous offerings and continued belief in our work. We are together an eco-system of relations, mutual aid, love and hope.

*Commemorative artwork and illustrations, original hand-cut paper, by Catherine Sieck.
Design by Diane Rigoli, Rigoli Creative.*

OCCIDENTAL ARTS & ECOLOGY CENTER



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