

## Case Study: Here Now Us

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### Introduction

In 2015, [Climate Access](#) worked with Marin County, FEMA Region IX, OWLIZED, Autodesk, NOAA, San Francisco Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve, Susanne Moser Research and Consulting, and Antioch University on an innovative climate engagement project called [Here. Now. Us.](#) The following case study demonstrates how a handful of evidence-based best practices in climate communication and engagement were used in this project to build support for climate policy at the local and regional level. These best practices include making the issue tangible, increasing risk perception, showcasing positive solutions, and using dialogue to break down ideological polarization.

### Project Goal

The goal of *Here. Now. Us.* was to identify regional best practices in adaptation planning in the face of sea level rise to ensure community resilience to climate change. The project placed two OWL units (a 360-degree audio-visual platform that enables users to respond to survey questions and leave audio comments) along Mill Valley-Sausalito Multi-Use Path to showcase sea level rise projections, and potential responses to those impacts. Participants were led through a series of 3D virtual reality landscapes, showing that very location during an extreme weather event in December 2014, under sea level rise projections, followed by visualizations of potential ways to respond, including by erecting a sea wall and a horizontal levee. Throughout the experience, participants were prompted to answer questions regarding their concern about climate impacts before and after the visualizations.

At the end of the project, Climate Access and our partners facilitated a community dialogue between residents and the county of Marin about the local impacts of sea level rise, focusing on identifying priorities and visualizing solutions related to sea level rise impacts. The ultimate goal was to generate community input, involvement and support for a process that will result in a community-driven action plan rooted in regional values and priorities.

Based on the survey results (see Outcomes), the project appeared to successfully engage the community, increasing concern about local sea level rise and also feelings of efficacy.

### Audiences and Action

The project focused on engaging residents, business owners and other stakeholders in Marin County around the impacts, vulnerabilities and possible solutions related to local sea level rise. A recent case study<sup>2</sup> on identifying and overcoming barriers to climate

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<sup>2</sup> Moser, Susanne C., and Julia A. Ekstrom. 2012. Identifying and Overcoming Barriers to Climate Change Adaptation in San Francisco Bay: Results from Case Studies. California Energy Commission. Publication number: CEC-500-2012-034.

adaptation in the San Francisco Bay Area revealed insufficient public interest and concern about sea level rise. The *Here. Now. Us.* team theorized that experiential 3D visualization, along with a participatory dialogue process, would increase public engagement with climate change impacts and support for resilient solutions. The project relied on increasing individual risk perception urgency levels and perceived control over positive solutions to encourage stakeholder engagement in the Marin County climate adaptation planning process.

## Outcomes

- 3,705 user sessions<sup>1</sup> occurred at the OWLS between June 9 and September 21, 2015. Of these user sessions, 1,121 users answered all five questions;
- Over 75% of the users indicated they were concerned about the impacts of climate change on their community after viewing scenarios of sea level rise in Marin County, compared to their answers at the beginning of the experience;
- Surveys found that users who initially expressed no concern about sea level rise reported a significant increase in their level of concern after viewing the scenarios;
- Users who expressed high levels of post-viewing concern also indicated a willingness to take a more active role in addressing sea level rise impacts locally; and
- 88% of individuals who attended the deliberative dialogue event indicated they learned something new from participating, while a majority indicated the small-table conversations were the most informative piece.

## Challenges and Lessons Learned

Our project team learned a great deal from the *Here. Now. Us.* project. The following section examines a few of these challenges, what we learned, and how we used those learnings to improve the model.

### *Using Visualizations to Engage the Public*

Challenge: The way information is presented can change how a person processes and interprets it. Traditional forms of climate change communication tend to rely on facts, figures and other types of data intended to motivate the public to act. Unfortunately, these communication methods don't reflect insights from recent social science that suggest information needs to be relevant and showcase the benefits of action to instigate an emotional response in audiences. Specific types of visualization can translate complex information into a digestible format for the public, convey simple, strong messages, and cut across socio-cultural barriers.

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<sup>1</sup> User sessions are defined as an individual activating the OWL. Each user session can include the same individual multiple times and does not indicate the individual completed the entire survey.

Lessons Learned: The OWL visualizations allowed people to envision what climate impacts could look like in their community. Local climate visual communication can incorporate aspects of relevancy, urgency, immediacy, perceived control of an outcome (efficacy), and instill hope in the viewer by showcasing positive future scenarios as a result of action. Survey results from the OWLS resulted in **significant increases** in incoming **levels of concern** after viewing the scenarios. In fact, users who expressed high levels of post-viewing concern also indicated a **willingness to take a more active role** in addressing sea level rise impacts locally. Framing climate change as a local impact taps into the connections and attachments individuals have to the homes, neighborhoods, and communities where they live.

### *Creating Space for Collaboration and Solutions*

Challenge: Attitudes toward climate change are extremely polarized in the U.S. and public engagement around both the issue and its impacts must overcome an individual's tendency to adhere to group norms and work across group identities toward collaborative solutions. The *Here. Now. Us.* team sought to overcome these ideological and political barriers by creating a space where individuals could come together to discuss questions and concerns about sea level rise, and develop a set of shared priorities and solutions for the county to investigate.

Lessons Learned: Deliberative dialogues can help bridge the gap between personal and public concerns and foster mutual understanding through the creation of shared values. The scenarios were developed collaboratively by the project team, including county staff, elected officials, tech and other climate experts. Engagement approaches that promote dialogue between stakeholders allow for the co-production of knowledge between residents, decision makers, experts and others. Research has shown open and honest conversations that include active listening help people learn about an issue and potentially change their opinions in light of new information. The deliberative dialogue process focuses on finding common ground and developing shared solutions, which breeds hope for a positive future vision.

### *Reaching Beyond the Usual Suspects*

Challenge: Advocates often target audiences with shared values who are already supportive of a desired policy action or personal behavior. While this can help activate those who may be in agreement on an issue but are not yet doing something about it, targeting “the choir” can also unnecessarily limit the total number of people engaged – particularly at the regional or local level where populations are smaller. In order to reach beyond those already supportive of an issue, strategies must be designed to meet all kinds of people where they are at in terms of their knowledge, beliefs and even physical location. The *Here. Now. Us.* project intentionally placed the OWLS in a high traffic pedestrian/bike trail where anyone could interact with and experience the visualizations. Instead of bringing a targeted audience to the project team, *Here. Now. Us.* brought the visualizations to the community. Individuals that interacted with the OWLS represented all

age groups, along with gender, political party affiliations and could have been defined as both citizens and stakeholders to the issue. In addition, the concluding dialogue event was open to all citizens of Marin (even as the planning team identified specific stakeholders and targeted its outreach, encouraging local decision makers from the various agencies and municipalities to participate).

Lessons Learned: In order to effectively engage a range of audiences, consider how to make the issue relevant and tangible and showcase the range of solutions that are possible. While the placement of the OWLS within the target community achieved this goal, the concluding deliberative dialogue event might have garnered more participation if it was structured differently. For example, instead of a 'one and done' type of meeting venue, consider incorporating a 'meet-up' type of event where 5-10 individuals come together to deliberate on the issue. These events can happen at homes, restaurants, work places, and community spaces across a targeted geographic area. The 'meet-ups' can be facilitated by volunteer steering committee members and supported through partnerships with community organizations and academic institutions.

### **Measurement**

We measured success based on survey responses collected from user sessions at the OWL, audio feedback from the OWL, and surveys at the conclusion of the community dialogue session. Survey results indicate the OWLS increased levels of concern about sea level rise, and that motivation to engage in the process was higher among participants that either increased or concluded with concern on the impacts from their OWL experience. Survey results from the community dialogue indicated participants learned something new from the event, mostly from the dialogue, and left with a better understanding of what Marin County is and could be doing to prepare for sea level rise.

The pilot project has finished for now, but the conversation in Marin is continuing at [www.MarinSLR.org](http://www.MarinSLR.org).