

Environmental Justice Organizing - How do we do it?

By Gianna Patchen, Chapter Coordinator

While the grief, anger and fear of the 2024 election results sit heavily on my chest, my solace is in the collective power and love we ignite when we build community and organize for justice – at the Sierra Club and in our communities. In the face of deep injustice, we are stronger together. But how do we unite for justice – on the Central Coast and beyond?

I'm brought back to the "Organizing for Justice" training I attended in September alongside twelve ocean conservation leaders and three [Midwest Academy](#) trainers. We spent a week sharing stories and learning how to create effective organizing campaigns that strategically address root causes and shift power structures towards justice. These lessons will prove essential in our work to protect people and the planet during these next four years and for generations to come.

Our cohort, brought together in Tomales Bay, California by the [National Ocean Protection Coalition](#), are leaders in equitable ocean protection across the US and territories, including partners I work with on the Chumash Heritage National Marine Sanctuary campaign. Organizations represented included the National Ocean Protection Coalition, Center for American Progress, Aquarium Conservation Partnership, Azul, EarthEcho International, Friends of the Mariana Trench, The Conservation Law Foundation, The Next 100 Coalition and the Santa Lucia Chapter of the Sierra Club, with trainers from the Midwest Academy.



We began the week with breakfast and a group walk. At that moment it was clear, this program is rooted in wellness. **The first lesson:** "self-renewal" is a foundation of justice work, though all too easy to cast aside and certainly a privilege to have the time and space for. It's part of how we can bring our full selves to this work.

With full bellies, moving our bodies and breathing fresh air, we dove into learning Direct Action Organizing skills that help us answer the question "How do we organize for justice?"

What is Direct Action Organizing?

The Midwest Academy defines it as “The process by which people impacted by injustice take collective action to build power to win meaningful change in their lives and communities and transform our society.” This is grassroots organizing work to shift systems of power towards justice for all people and the planet.



Trainer Cris leads the group in review and reflection of the prior day's lessons.

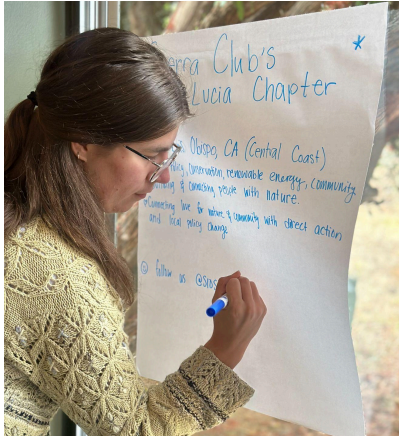
Our trainers taught us how to create campaigns that are strategic and effective, utilizing the Midwest Academy Strategy Chart. We practiced identifying problems and goals, breaking them down into issues, and then figuring out how to target decision makers to take action. This included skills for building the capacity and people power within our organizations and communities.

The training emphasized analysis of our work's effectiveness in furthering justice. They posed many questions, including “Are we sufficiently altering the structural relations of power so decision-makers and institutions are more accountable to the people?”

In these conversations, I was pushed out of my comfort zone. We shifted our perspectives not only on HOW we do our work, but WHY we do our work and what we're working TOWARDS. It was a safe space to ask questions and discuss how our environmental work is often within the bounds of pre-existing power structures. We asked ourselves and each other: How do we incorporate justice further into every element of our work? Who is missing from the conversations and why? Is our work taking steps to create deeper, long lasting change?

I especially loved discussing leadership development within our organizations and movements. We cannot do this alone, and part of that is fostering new leadership. Are we intentionally

creating space for new leaders to step up and learn? Leadership takes many forms and our Central Coast communities need all the leaders we can get – including you! Your voice and participation is essential. We need each other to make this vision of justice a reality.



I came back from this training, not with definitive answers, but with new skills and resources to inform our collective work at the SLO Sierra Club and in our communities.

I am grateful to have you as part of our SLO Sierra Club Chapter as you join us in this work to further environmental justice in the Sierra Club, SLO county and beyond.

Thank you.

Me, sharing SLO Sierra Club's work with the group.

Lots of Love,

Gianna Patchen

Your Coordinator for the Santa Lucia Chapter

PS: Joy mixed into this work is essential! Some of our cohort took a dip in Tomales Bay on the last night. A cold and exhilarating bonding moment.

