

Community Projects Program: Working with Partners to Make a Difference

In our efforts to protect and restore Morro Bay and the lands that surround it, we greatly value our collaborative partnerships. The Estuary Program works with agencies, nonprofits, landowners, and private citizens to implement our conservation and management plan for the Morro Bay estuary. One aspect of this collaborative approach is our Community Projects Program that allows organizations and individuals to work with our staff to develop projects that benefit the Morro Bay estuary and work towards the goals of our management plan. We accept applications for these projects twice a year, on the first Fridays in September and March. Once the application deadline closes, staff work with our review committees and the Bay Foundation Board to determine which projects will receive funding of up to \$5,000.

The following are some examples of recent Community Project partnerships.

Helping Boat Owners Protect our Estuary's Waters

As any boat owner knows, vessels require constant maintenance. Morro Bay does not have a haul-out facility to remove larger boats from the water in order to conduct this type of upkeep. Instead, boat owners often perform as many of these tasks as possible with their boat in the water in order to avoid costly trips to other ports for haul-out. Unfortunately, activities such as hull scraping and sanding can cause toxic chemicals to be deposited in the bay's waters.

Knowing this, the Morro Bay Commercial Fisherman's Organization (MBCFO) saw a need. If they could raise funds to purchase sanders equipped with dust collection systems, then boaters could conduct needed repairs with their boats in the water while protecting the bay from toxic dust. MBCFO successfully applied for funding through the Community Projects Program. This Estuary Program funding allowed them to purchase two sanders that capture up to 98% of dust produced during sanding.

The units are stored at the Morro Bay Harbor Department, and Morro Bay boat owners can stop by and check the sanders out. Since their purchase in 2014, the sanders are used at least monthly. The Harbor Department helps get the word out that these units are available and even supplies the necessary accessories and upkeep for their continued use.



The two vacuum sanders are stored at the Harbor Department and can be checked out to boaters.



The vacuum component collects 98% of the toxic dust generated by the sander.

“The Harbor Department feels really good about the effort,” said Becka Kelly, the Harbor Patrol Supervisor. “The upkeep and maintenance of units is pretty minor, and the Harbor Department plans to continue the program.”

The project is a great fit for the Estuary Program. It provides resources that help boat owners implement best management practices in boat maintenance and raises awareness about the estuary’s health among a population of community members that have a large impact on estuary health.

Capturing Rainwater to Keep Our Gardens Green

As residents of the West, drought is on all of our minds, which makes the sight of drought-tolerant gardens common. With our Mediterranean climate of dry summers and wetter winters, the practice of rainwater harvesting is becoming more common, allowing us to gather water when it is plentiful for use in times when it is not.

Morro Bay in Bloom saw an opportunity to demonstrate how rainwater harvesting could be implemented on a small scale. This local nonprofit focuses its work on beautification in the city of Morro Bay. Through the efforts of its dedicated volunteers, Morro Bay in Bloom designed and installed the system at Centennial Park, located on the Embarcadero.



Wetter winters allow us to harvest water for use in the dry season.



This is one of two water tanks at Centennial Park

It can capture about 800 gallons of water for every inch of rainfall. The project involved designing, fabricating, and installing the system as well as an educational sign to explain the process and benefits of rainwater harvesting to the public. The Estuary Program provided funding for the effort and assisted with designing the signage.

This project helps prevent stormwater-runoff impacts by capturing rainfall rather than allowing it to run through the streets and into the bay. It conserves water by providing irrigation for a public park. The effort also serves as a demonstration project that educates the public on rainwater harvesting.

This educational component promises to have a lasting impact on Morro Bay. Walter Heath, Morro Bay in Bloom’s founder, reported that the City of Morro Bay introduced an economic incentive for residents and business owners to install rainwater-harvesting barrels as a direct result of the project. As Walter says, this is “only the beginning of a gradual conversion to responsible

stormwater management but the installation at Centennial Parkway will serve as a constant reminder of the goal.”

Padding to Protect Wildlife

Visitors and resident alike enjoy the beautiful waters of our bay, and a big part of the draw is the abundant wildlife that calls the bay home. But in order for the sensitive marine mammals and birds to thrive, people recreating on the water need to know how to observe these animals without causing them any harm. If a boat startles an otter into “flushing,” which means diving into the water, then that otter uses up precious energy. The same goes for birds that take flight when they perceive a threat. Observing these animals from a distance, so that they do not change their behavior at all, is important for their health.



Sea otters rest near the South T-Pier.



SeaLife Stewards paddle on the bay.

To help bring the responsible wildlife viewing message out on the water, the Central Coast State Parks Association (CCSPA) developed the SeaLife Stewards Program. SeaLife Stewards docents act as roving interpreters, providing information about animals and guidance on how to observe them while maintaining a healthy distance. With funding from the Estuary Program, CCSPA was able to purchase kayaks, paddles, storage racks, and safety equipment to support the program.

In its first season, the program’s 25 volunteers interacted with 1,065 individuals on the water. Program data indicates that 50 contacts prevented imminent disturbance of marine wildlife on the water. The program also reached 842 visitors on land during Sea Otter Awareness Week. The program’s second season built on this success with 30 volunteers and 1,161 on-water interactions, with 152 of those contacts preventing imminent disturbance.

The docents also act as citizen scientists, collecting data on marine mammal use of the bay as well as recreational use. Through their observations, they documented about one disturbance every six hours. The information they collect helps inform their future efforts to reduce wildlife disturbances.



SeaLife Stewards celebrate successful completion of their training.

This project aligns well with our program goals by providing public education, increasing environmentally-balanced uses, and collecting valuable scientific data to aid management efforts.

Cara O'Brien, the State Parks Interpreter who manages the SeaLife Stewards program, is excited about the program's ongoing impact. She says, "The SeaLife Stewards are making significant strides towards the long-range goal of creating shared norms for the local community and visitors to Morro Bay of no-impact wildlife viewing."

Starting Your Community Project

If you have a project in mind that you think would be a good candidate for our Community Project Program funding, please read the full application guidelines to find your next steps. You can find the guidelines and all application materials at www.mbnep.org/community-projects.