

CHANGING THE CURRENTS

Narrative Change *Toolkit*

Water Equity &
Climate Resilience
Caucus

Created by the Narrative Change Working Group

Spring 2025

WATER EQUITY & CLIMATE RESILIENCE CAUCUS

CHANGING THE CURRENTS

Grounding

By Joy Harjo

I heard they started drilling today
Water is Life
I heard the sound of bit hit bone
Water is Life
I heard the blood rush up from earth's heart
Water is Life
I heard the children asking for a drink
Water is Life
What will it take to make the takers hear the song water makes as it runs over stone?

What will it take for the takers to feel the sound of the unborn crying for water as they emerge from mother's earth?
What will it take for everyone to see that they carry water's blood in every circular cell?
What will it take to stop eating at the trough of greed?
I heard they started drilling today.
What will it take to believe
Water is life
Water is life
Water is life
Uewvt Hesaketvtos.





Toolkit Outline



Origin of this toolkit

Introduction to narrative change

What's the current dominant narrative?

What's the alternative?

From concept to practice

Change In Action

Resources and frameworks

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How to use this toolkit

Color coded sections allow you to flow through the sections and use this toolkit as a collective tool for organizing and strategy.

Exercises are practical activities to put each section to use and are meant to serve as a guide on how to **infuse narrative change principles into our every day work.**

Groundings are fragments, poems, or creative pieces meant to connect us with the **emotional, spiritual or cultural side of our water work,** which can often be overlooked but that holds meaning and power for change.

Origin of this toolkit
Pages **6-10**

Introduction to narrative change
Pages **11-20**

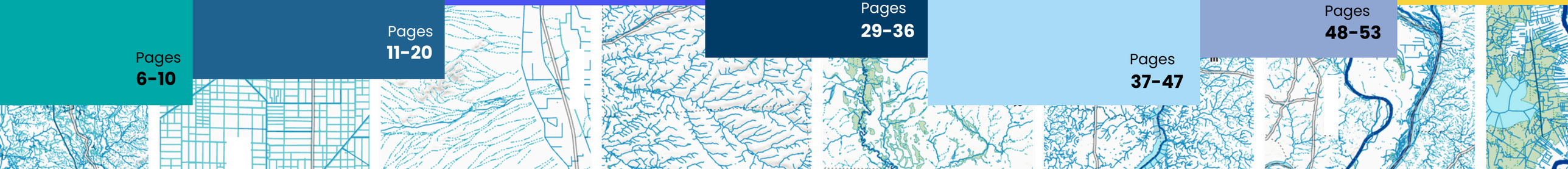
What's the current dominant narrative?
Pages **21-28**

What's the alternative?
Pages **29-36**

From Concept to Practice
Pages **37-47**

Change *in* Action
Pages **48-53**

Resources
Interactive Sticker Pages
Pages **54-60**



Origins of this toolkit

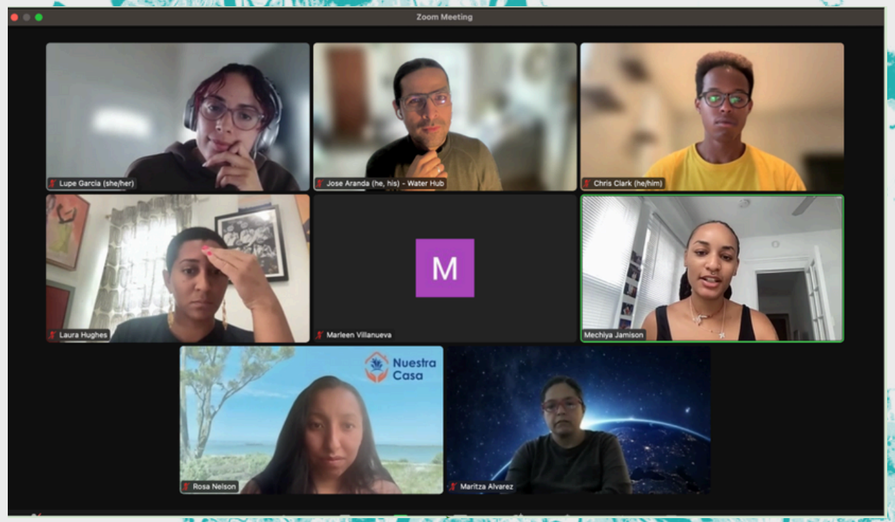
What is this for?

And for whom?

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Narrative Change Workgroup

Want to join? Email lupe@policylink.org



Caucus workgroups meet regularly to develop knowledge, build capacity, strategize and dig deeper on particular topics or priorities.

The Narrative Change Workgroup is one of the seven workgroups of the Water Equity and Climate Resilience Caucus.

The Narrative Change Workgroup brings together advocates, cultural bearers, storytellers, and communicators on a regular basis to deepen connections with one another, explore our relationships with water, and shape alternative narratives around water and climate to influence solutions and policy development that protect our planet and better serve impacted communities.

Theory of Change

This workgroup is helping *seed a narrative change strategy* – within and outside the Caucus – that is **grounded in dismantling and decolonizing existing harmful narratives** and toxic ways of being in relationship with each other and water.

The Narrative Change Workgroup believes that in order to secure the **transformational policy and systems change** we want to achieve, our dominant culture and narratives need to transform as well.

Ultimately, the workgroup helps **reimagine what is possible** and surface cultural practices to lay groundwork for a better future.





Goals of this toolkit

1. To serve as an entry point to narrative work for WECR Caucus members, water equity and climate justice advocates, and the broader water, environmental and climate fields

2. To build capacities on how to better center people and our inherent relationship with with nature in policymaking

3. To help those who bear the brunt of water injustice to share their own stories, cultural practices, and solutions with a strong foundation and voice







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Introduction to narrative change

Principles and examples of narrative change work around water and climate

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Exercise #1:

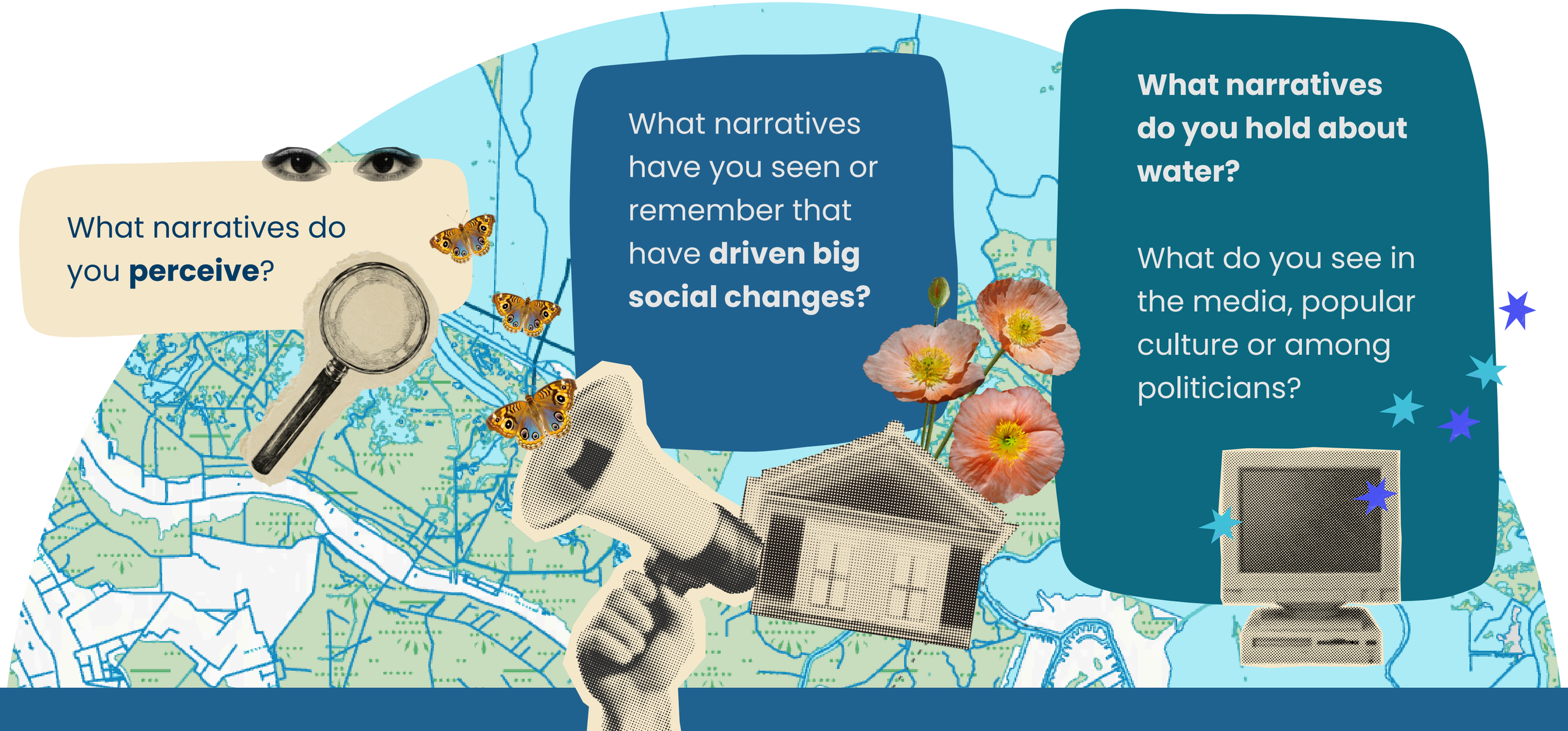
Let’s think about narratives

What narratives do you **perceive**?

What narratives have you seen or remember that have **driven big social changes?**

What narratives do you hold about water?

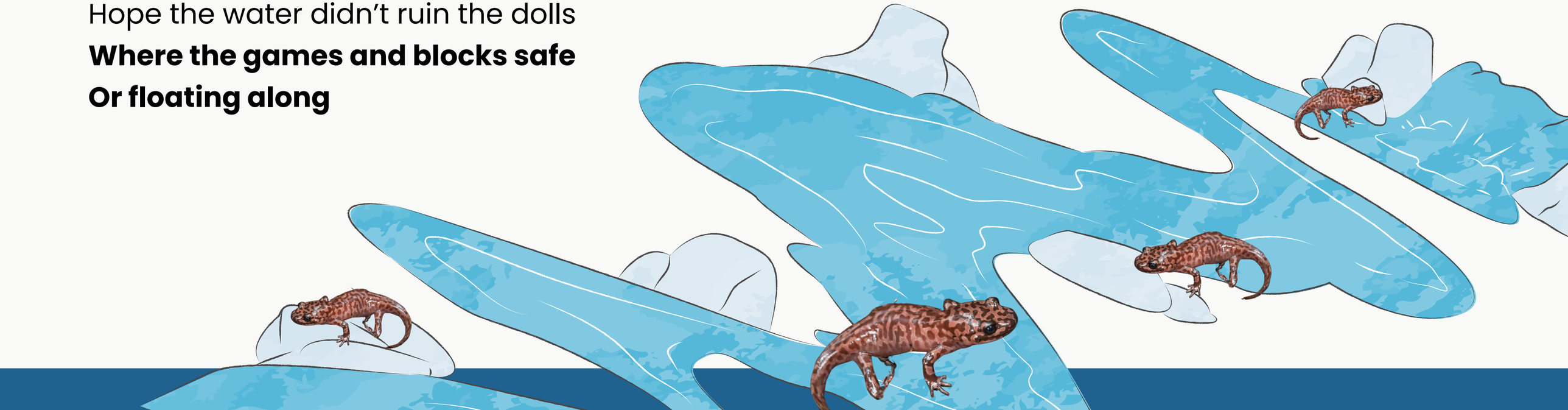
What do you see in the media, popular culture or among politicians?



Grounding

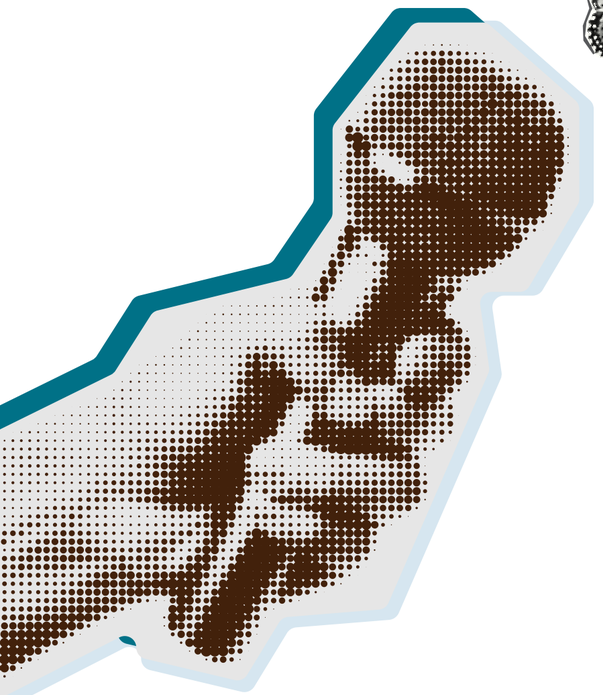
Alisa Kamis-Brinda (Wingo-WHAT? Initiative with Trapeta B. Mayson)

When it rained again, she asked to leave
When it rained again, she asked to leave
At 6 years old, who wants to clean?
The basement flooded, how much water is there?
We took off work, squeegee and wet vac in hand
Hope the water didn’t ruin the dolls
Where the games and blocks safe
Or floating along



What is Narrative Change?

from the Narrative Initiative



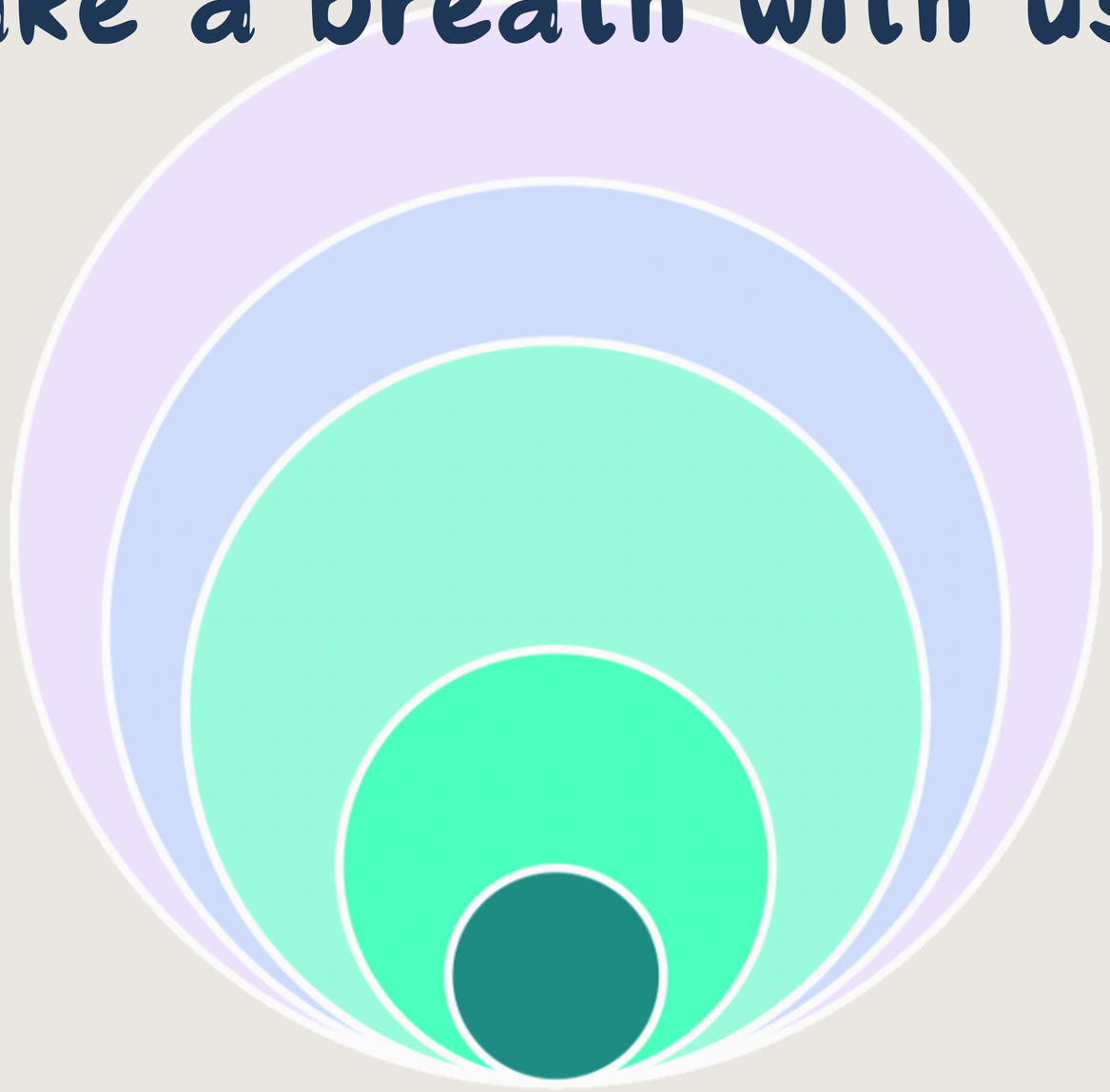
A narrative is a **shared interpretation** of our reality that is grounded on the ideas contained in a collection of stories.

Narrative change is the theory and practice of **creating, communicating, and advancing holistic, healthy and balanced ways** to interpret our reality while replacing harmful ones.



Narrative change impacts how we make **sense of our relationships with ourselves, others, and the broader world** and how we view power – who can exercise it, how, and for what purpose.

Take a breath with us...



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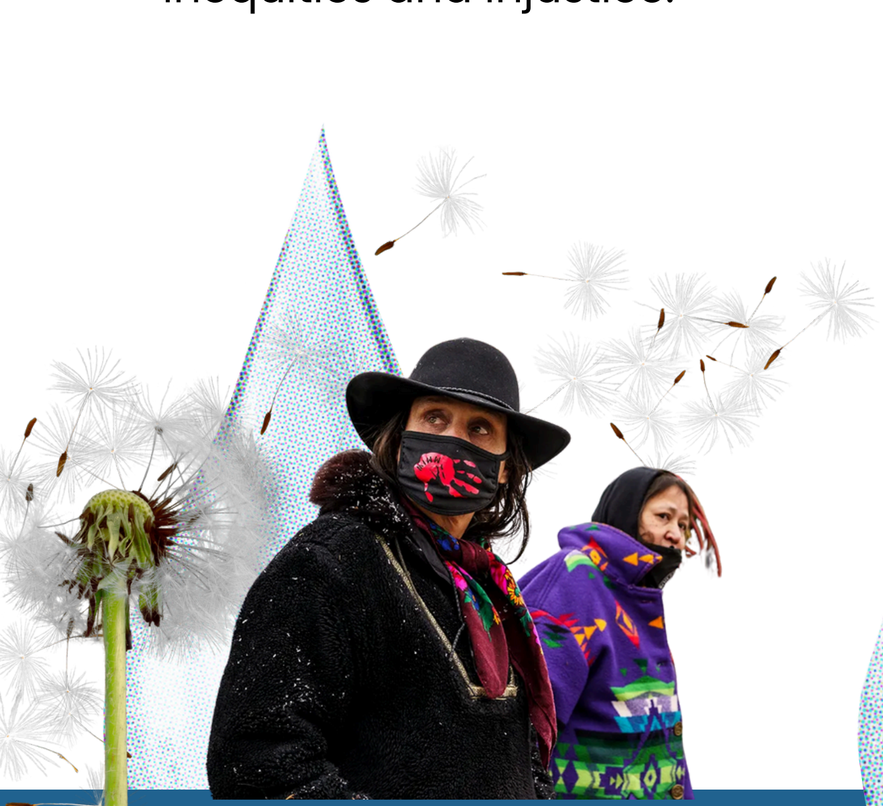
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Why Narrative Change matters?

With narrative change and storytelling we may **build more power** to deeply shift the systems that perpetuate water inequities and injustice.

Narrative change can broaden the impact of advocacy by helping to **reclaim, reimagine, and replenish** our collective stories to transform water policies and systems.

This **reclamation** can create space for ideas and solutions to embrace life-affirming policies and systems.







Case Study

Human Right to Water in California

Most people take clean water for granted, but water is out of reach for millions of households. Still, US federal government doesn't recognize an obligation to **ensure safe drinking water and sanitation.**

California organizations like Community Water Center and AGUA Coalition have been fighting for decades for large-scale policy reforms to advance policy and funding to ensure clean water.

As a result, California passed the first law of its kind to establish the **Human Right to Water in 2012.** Since then, Californians have also approved a multi-billion bond measures designated for water projects, including funding directed to communities with the most need.

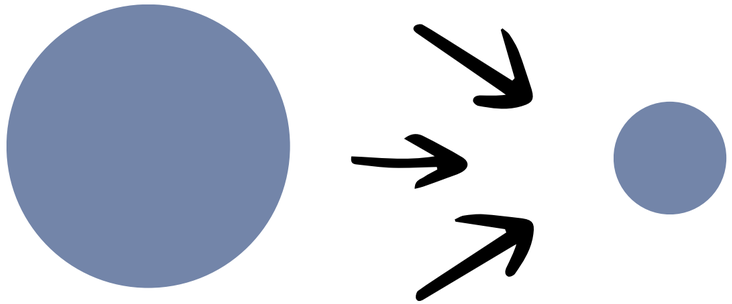


Case Study

Example: Human Right to Water in California

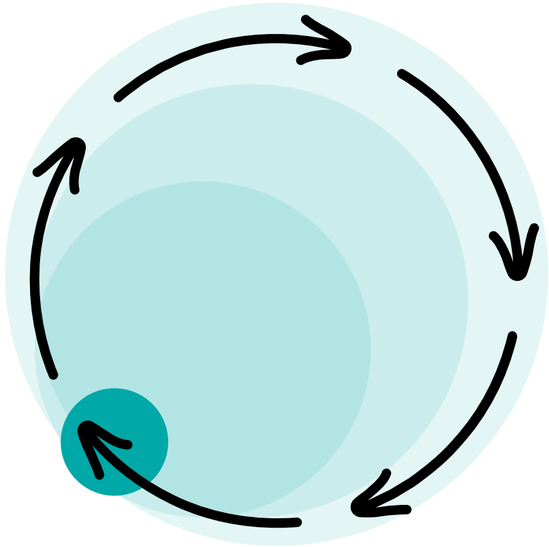
Dominant narrative

Water is a commodity, a tradable good on the market, with farmers, businesses, and municipalities able to buy and sell water rights.



Alternative narrative

Water is a common good that everyone deserves, regardless of address or income



Check in - What are you feeling as you move through this toolkit?

Climate Emotions Wheel



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Climate Emotions Wheel © 2024

Climate Mental Health Network

ClimateMentalHealth.Net


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What's the current dominant narrative?

What's the problem with current narratives?

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Exercise #2: Spot existing harmful narratives

The below reflect harmful narratives many of us see, hear, or encounter in water:

"Water is a resource to manage or support our economic development."

"Scientists/officials are the valid water experts and should be making the decisions."

"People deserve water only if...(they can pay, are legal citizens, work hard, etc.)."

"Private management of water is necessary and efficient."

Select a dominant narrative from the left and consider:

1- **Why is it harmful? —› Harmful to who?**

2- **What's problematic? —› Why does this need to shift?**

3- **What other narratives are associated? —› Who promotes them?**



Grounding

Water Sounds

The sound of water can provide multiple psychological benefits, including: anxiety and stress relief, increased concentration, better sleep quality, increased feelings of relaxation.

This **collage of water sounds** was created by Seth using phone recordings that Caucus members made during the 2023 Caucus convening in Los Angeles, CA.

Listen here



Harmful narratives are often hidden and accepted!

Often times, harmful and healthy narratives are existing **alongside** one another, conflicting at every corner

Because the two are often forced to co-exist in some fashion, **conflict between narratives** can be expressed in the form of aggressive conversations, harmful policies, contradictions, etc.

Narrative change can bring people together by drafting new narratives that are broader and more inclusive of different groups.







Barriers to narrative change

Narratives and words can be **usurped, adopted and co-opted** by dominant powers to their benefit.

Harmful and false narratives are often **heavy and violent** and a reflection of dominant forces.

The constrainment and **imprisonment of water** is a reflection of the dominant values in western society.

An alternative narrative needs to question relationships with water (and ourselves).

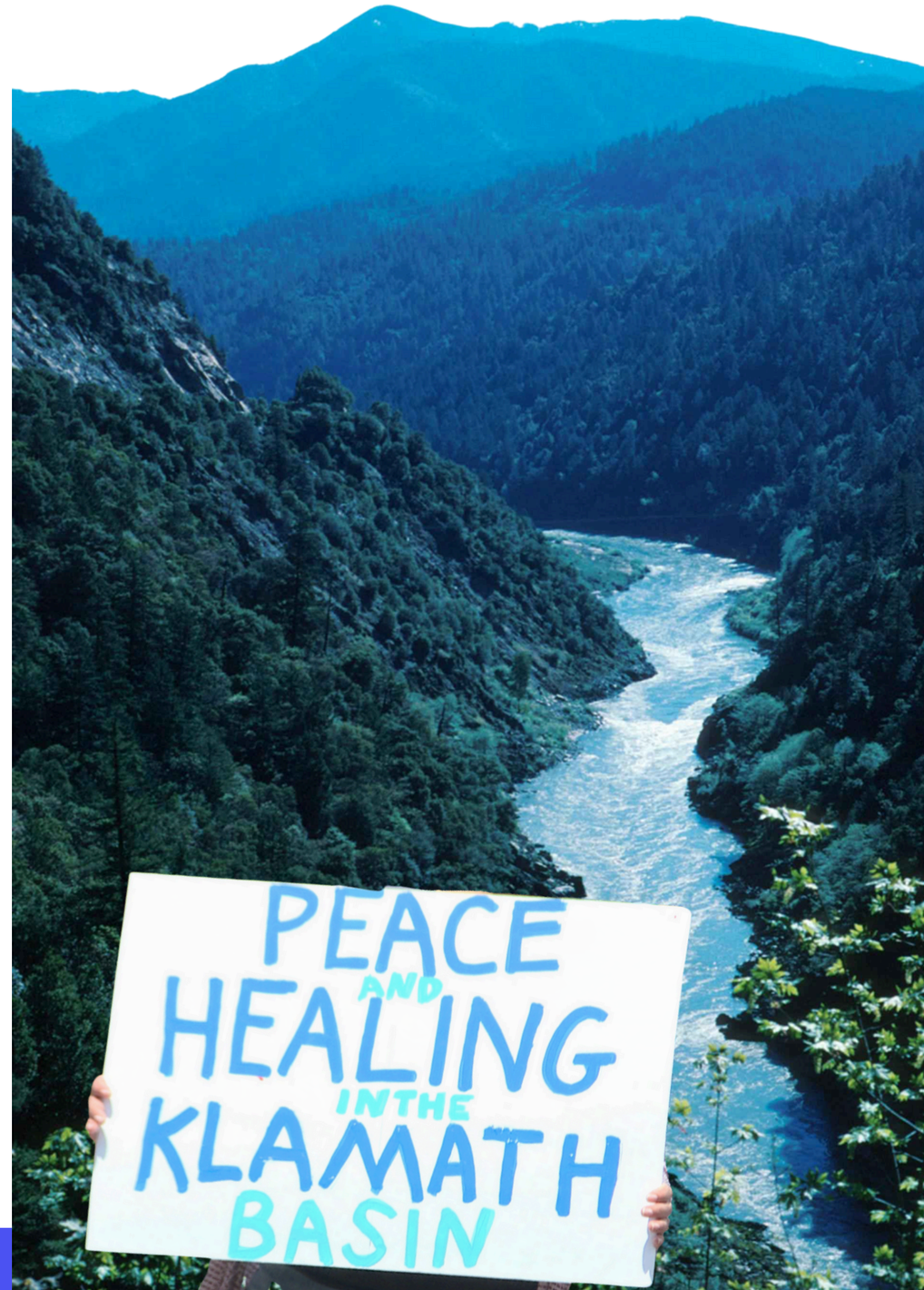
Example: the Klamath Basin

Farmers and tribes clashed over water from the Klamath River, particularly during droughts. The dominant narratives of the farmers alluded to the legacy of generations of farmers who built their livelihoods on the land.

However, the construction of the dams on ancestral tribal lands without proper consultation with the tribes is now seen as a major injustice, leading to a strong push for their removal by the Klamath, Karuk, and Yurok tribes.

The sides found some common ground, including on the removal of four dams on the Klamath River to benefit salmon.

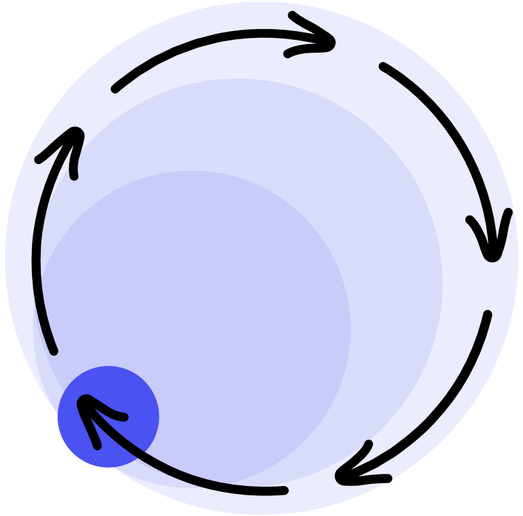
This is considered one of the largest ecosystem and Tribal community health restoration projects in history.



Example: the Klamath Basin

Dominant narrative
Best use of water is extraction/ development/profit and also the idea of that farmers and fish/environmental health are always at odds.

Alternative narrative
Water is sacred/inherent value of healthy rivers and the potential to balance everyone's needs by working together and honoring water.



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What's the alternative?

Replacing harmful narratives with healthy, justice-oriented narratives

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Exercise #3:
Advancing new narratives

Below are some ways to promote a new narrative:



Craft a **compelling story** that resonates with their values and experiences



Know your audience and actively engage with your audience to build a strong connection



Maintain a **steady flow** of content across your chosen channels to build awareness and keep your narrative top-of-mind for your audience

How can we shift the narrative? —>

How else might **we** move hearts and minds to embrace this **new narrative?**



Grounding



Cold Water Splash

For a **brisk awakening,** splash cold water on your face or immerse your hands in cold water to bring yourself back to the present moment. This sudden sensation can jolt you back into your body and trigger some of your physiological and psychological responses.

Consider cold water immersion as a **workout for your stress response system.** The controlled stressor of cold water becomes a personal trainer for your body and mind. While stress is typically viewed as an adversary, subjecting the body to manageable stressors, like the brief shock of cold water, can foster resilience.

Where do alternatives come from?

Alternative narratives are narratives that **differ from the widely accepted or dominant narrative,** often highlighting the experiences of marginalized groups and challenging established power structures, stereotypes, and biases by offering a different viewpoint on events or situations; essentially, they present a "counter-story" to the prevailing narrative.

These narratives are not always new, but often come from communities that have been kept aside such as Indigenous Tribes. These **communities should be at the forefront of narrative change**

We want to spread alternative narratives to decrease the impact of harmful narratives and increase the power of justice-centered narratives. But alternatives often face push back, especially in policy and decision making spaces.



How do we advance alternative narratives?

Narrative change is more of an everyday practice for long-term change and less of a one time effort. In order for both internal and external narrative change to be effective, it must be repeated over and over.



Connect with your emotional, cultural, spiritual background - take a deep dive!

Ground your narratives in personal stories - everyone is a storyteller

Center community voices - the messenger matters

Repetition, repetition, repetition - tell it many times



Emotions and feelings are important

- Harmful narratives feel very wrong and make us angry
- Better narratives feel reflective of **who we are,** what we truly value, and the world we want and deserve to live in
- There is an **emotional compass** around stories and narratives
- We need to be strong, authentic, loving, allies to water - because water offers us a lot
- The tide turning, that kind of powerful feeling we want to convey... something we can see and feel... **embrace it to be able to flow with water**



Dominant vs alternatives

Self-centered mindset:
we need to control nature/water/climate; people denying historic inequalities and ignoring Indigenous wisdom/communities; people avoiding responsibility for pollution and thinking of water as a resource and continuing to extract/drill/pump

Myth of meritocracy:
people deserve water only if (they pay, are legal, work hard), only scientists/officials are valid water experts and only experts decide on and solve water problems

Community-centered mindset:
we steward water (not own it) and are grateful for water; we have all we need and help each other; water decisions are intersectional/interconnected and solutions are connected with and led by local community and Indigenous leaders in their homelands; reconnecting with water traditions and its healing power

Calling out injustice:
being explicit about the levels of injustice affecting different groups (naming Black communities, brown communities, Indigenous communities -> versus using generalizations); naming and calling out those responsible for injustices; advancing a just transition that prioritizes impacted communities

Water's inherent value:
water is life and alive, it's a relative and a spiritual & cultural anchor; water is a human right and a public good of which we are all stewards

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From concept to practice

Exploring how organizations and projects take on narrative change work as a practical part of their work

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Exercise #5:

Understanding who supports alternative narratives

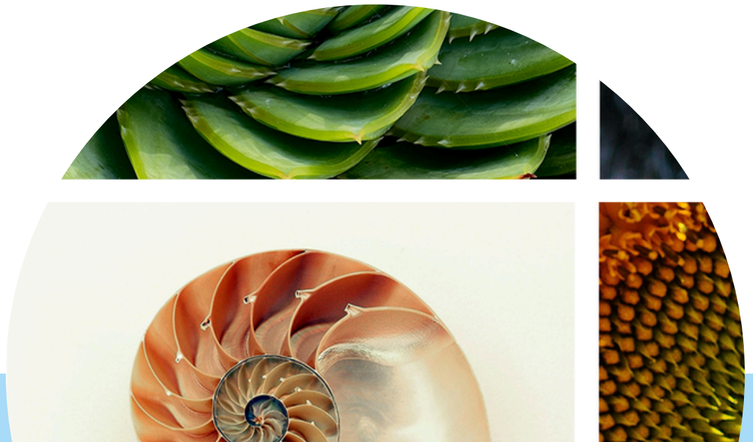
Narratives can have passive support, active support, and inside game support:

- Passive support: People agree but are not outspoken about supporting an alternative narrative
- Active support: People agree and are willing to speak and convince others
- Inside game support: People who agree and are outspoken but belong to a group that continues to hold the dominant narrative

What kind of support does your alternative narrative have?

What does it need more of?

Who supports your alternative narrative passively? And actively? Are there people who do the inside game?





Grounding

By Nikita Gill

The rage you are feeling
Comes from the same place
Inside your heart **as the love.**

This is why you refuse to accept
A world where cruelty reigns
And the fire consumes all.

You have known hope
And joy and kindness
Like you have known water.

And justice is a river
That demands
You do not give up on it.

Implanting narrative change into our work

Organizations

Sacred Places Institute for Indigenous Peoples

Bayou City Waterkeeper

Wisconsin Green Muslims

Campaigns

Water Affordability Campaign

Water Equity Podcast Series

Just Infrastructure Campaign





Wisconsin Green Muslims

Educating the Muslim community and the public on the Islamic environmental justice teachings



- Connecting faith, environmental justice, sustainability, and healing through education and service
- Encouraging people to apply teachings in daily life
- “Water” ماء and “Mother” أُمّي are written with the same characters in Arabic

Dominant narrative

Water as an environmental issue or object separate from our daily lives and faith.

Alternative narrative

Connecting water to our **daily lives and values** through faith and service.

Sacred Places Institute for Indigenous People

- SPI highlights how the Tribes from California's forest, urban, desert, and coastal lands protect sacred waters and how the violence of colonization continues to affect tribal communities in California.
- SPI's Indigenous Media team produces and digitally distributes documentaries **uplifting the environmental and climate justice stories of California Native Nations and Indigenous Peoples.**



Dominant narrative

Water is a scarce resource and therefore we need to solve challenges related to access and supply through technical management and distribution.

Alternative narrative

Waterways are alive, have a spirit, and are a sacred good inextricably connected to **land sovereignty,** traditional ways of life and native biodiversity.

Bayou City Waterkeeper

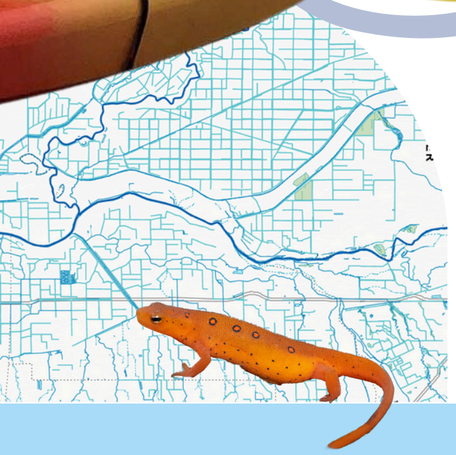




- BCK's Resource Hub offers educational materials, resources, and guidance to support their advocacy efforts and advance water justice

- The Justice in the Sewers map provides a detailed look at where sewage overflows have occurred in Houston, highlighting the areas most impacted by these environmental challenges.





Dominant narrative

Solving the problem of sewer backups is difficult because it's costly and technically complex.

Alternative narrative

Sanitation is a human right that everyone deserves.

Solving sewage issues is a social justice and public health priority.





WECR Caucus' Water Affordability for All Campaign



Status-quo

Millions of people face rising, unaffordable water bills (80% rise in a decade), and risk being disconnected or losing their homes if they don't pay. Federal funding for water systems has fallen since the 70's.

Public support

Polling shows there is strong public support for water affordability policies like investing in water infrastructure, permanent water bill assistance programs, and to a lesser extent ending water shutoffs for low-income families.

The vision for change

The campaign wants to activate people to advocate for water systems that have the resources to provide safe, affordable service; where people can reliably afford their bills and no one loses water access because of where they live or how much money they make.



Dominant narrative

People deserve water only if they pay. If people can't pay and need assistance it's their responsibility.

Alternative narrative

All people deserve safe and affordable water for health and safety. Assistance helps to mitigate the disproportionate burden of rising costs on low-income households.

https://climatewaterequity.org/water-affordability

Water Equity Podcast





- The podcast highlights the creative and cultural solutions at the forefront of climate justice through interviews with environmental justice advocates and artists.
- Features the voices and perspectives of people who push to advance water equity through federal advocacy and communications efforts.

Dominant narrative

Equity is a secondary issue to water challenges like supply and efficiency, it's a "nice to have."

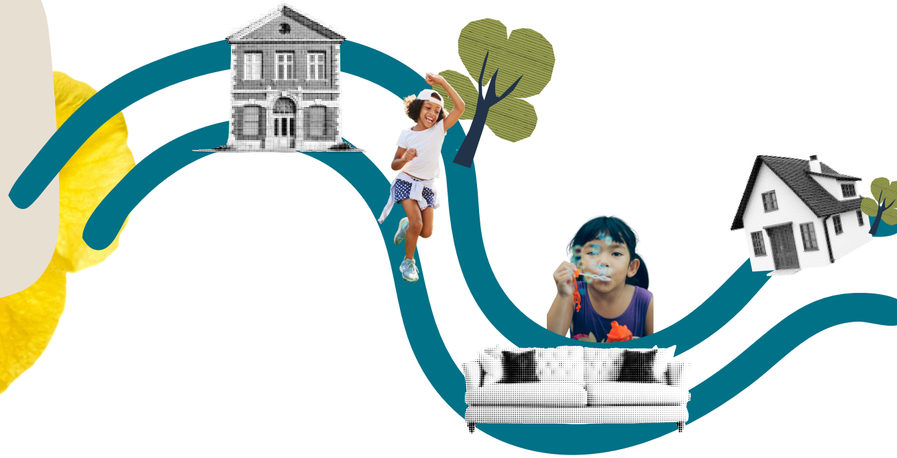
Alternative narrative

Equity is a deep-rooted issue in water and climate and is a **core priority of water and climate work.**

https://climatewaterequity.org/arts-culture-practices/podcast-series



Just Infrastructure



- A campaign celebrating infrastructure projects taking root as federal water dollars flow, especially to disinvested communities, and a **storytelling resource** for those pushing for equitable spending and future funding.

- The goal is to show how equitable, smart water spending can multi-solve interlocking challenges and create more livable neighborhoods and a healthier environment.

Dominant narrative

Water infrastructure is pipes and treatment plants. We can’t afford to fix it in this economy, and should focus on other things. Investing in environmental justice is a waste of money.

Alternative narrative

Infrastructure is the foundation for thriving communities. Investing in both built and natural systems is good for our health, economy, and way of life. **We need to prioritize investments in disinvested communities.**

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Change IN ACTION

Simple (ish) ways to put narrative change into practice

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IN ACTION

Dipping in water

Instructions

Put your hands in water. Focus on the water's temperature and how it feels on your fingertips, palms, and the backs of your hands.

Reflection

Does it feel the same in each part of your hand? Use warm water first, then cold. Next, try cold water first, then warm. Does it feel different to switch from cold to warm water versus warm to cold?

Purpose

Using our senses to help with clearing out our minds and laying a purpose for a given meeting or session.



IN ACTION

Emerging patterns

Instructions

Tie a rubber band around a cloth with deep intention about the gifts that water brings to your life. Tie dye and observe the patterns created with your intention. Thank the water, then hang your piece to dry.



Reflection

We don’t know what water will bring. Oftentimes, she surprises us with unexpected patterns, reminding us that humans can’t control her. Yet, with well intentions and reciprocity, we can have an impact on the outcome. She reminds us to be fluid

Purpose

Dying materials with natural colors from flowers has been a practice in most Indigenous cultures around the world. Each step is rooted in grounded intentions. It is a moment for us to remember that all the natural materials relied on water for their birthing and blossoming.

IN ACTION

Watershed mapping

Instructions

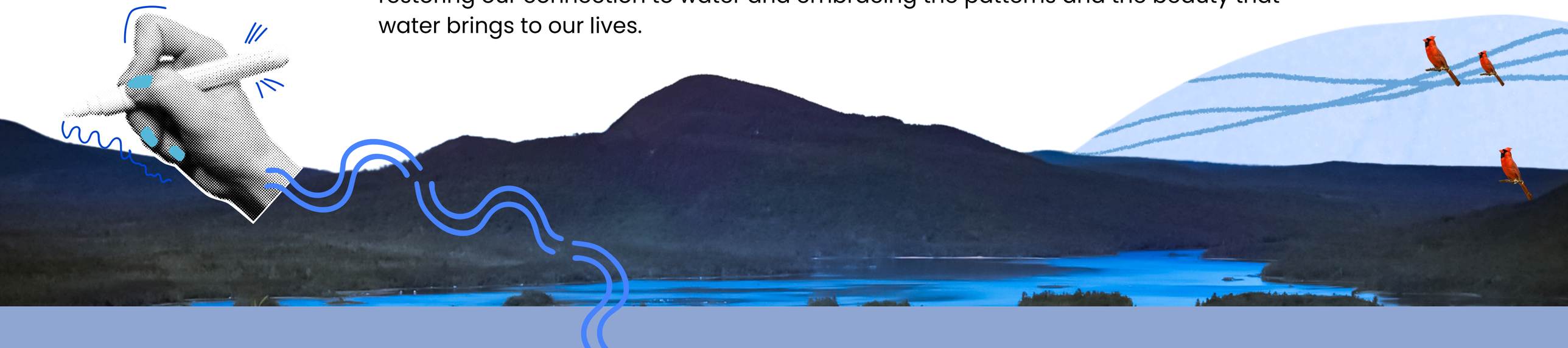
Draw the watershed that your home is nested within. Include places that you frequent such as the grocery store, place of worship, or a friend's home.

Reflection

How might we restore relationships with water in an urban environment? What water flows closest to the place you call home? What is your relationship with the waters that flow through your community?

Purpose

No matter where you are, you are within a watershed. Yet urban environments often feel very removed from free flowing rivers. By drawing our water maps, we are restoring our connection to water and embracing the patterns and the beauty that water brings to our lives.



IN ACTION

Water cup challenge

Instructions

Take turns pouring small amounts of water into a clear cup that's mostly filled. Whoever causes the inevitable spill is the loser. As the bubble gets bigger and bigger, the suspense increases.

Reflection

Social cohesion occurs when members of a group cooperate with each other. Think of it as the "glue" that holds everyone together. When an activist group actively focuses on its cohesion, they are more likely to have better trust and be more effective.

Purpose

Water molecules like to stick together, thanks to a natural property called cohesion, which is what makes a water droplet stay a droplet. Surface tension happens when water molecules on the surface don't have other water molecules on all sides of them. As a result, they will connect even more strongly to the molecules directly next to them.





IN ACTION

Water evocation



Instructions

Focus your mind on water. Think of water and write the different words that come to your mind.

Reflection

What comes up for you? Do you have ideas, feelings, concepts, memories that surface as you think of water?

Purpose

Connecting with water is within the reach of our day to day activities if we take a moment to pause, pay attention and focus our mind. As we work on water policies, we can make it a practice to connect our mind with water.

Resources and Frameworks

Further readings and frameworks to deepen your understanding about narrative change

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Additional resources

CHANGING THE CURRENTS Narrative Change Toolkit

- American Rivers utilizes storytelling to emphasize the connections we have to each other (human to human) and to our lands and our waters in their Most Endangered Rivers Project
- The Water Hub's Just Infrastructure website is a celebration of Just Infrastructure projects and a storytelling resource for those pushing for equitable spending and future funding.
- 2024 Wisconsin Resource Guide: PFAS In Your Water and PFAS In Your Municipal Water System? A Quick Guide for Wisconsin Communities.
- Huda Alkaff, Opinion, Clean water is a basic human right. Yet many of us don't have it (Milwaukee Neighborhood News Service)
- Huda Alkaff, Commentary: The Clean Water We All Deserve (Wisconsin Examiner)
- Taproot Earth, Climate on Tap Podcast (2022)

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Narrative Change *Toolkit*

Gratitudes:

Thanks to the Narrative Change Workgroup members who helped shape this toolkit through a series of conversations and reflections.

Citing this Toolkit:

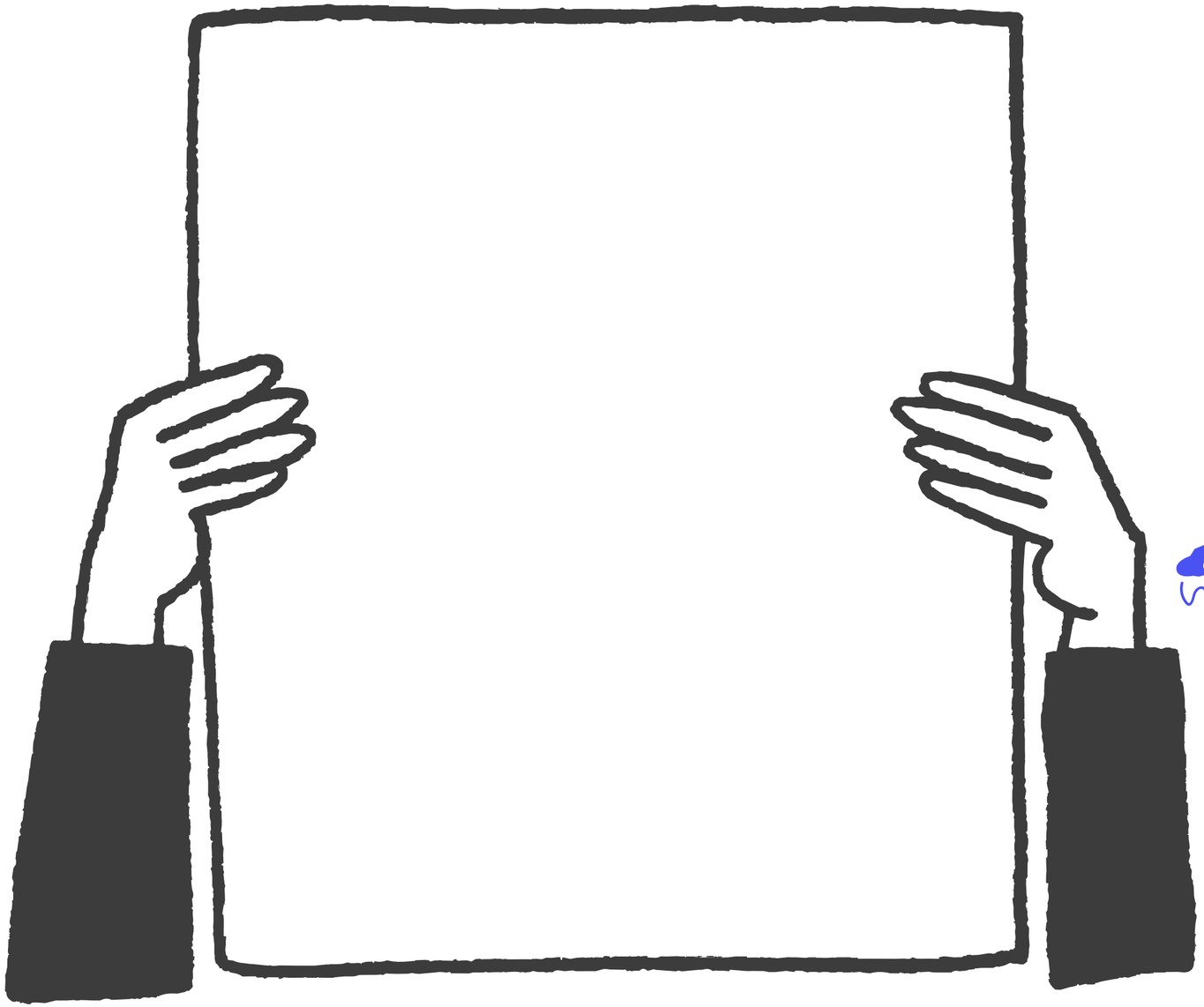
"Changing the Currents: Narrative Change Toolkit" - Water Equity & Climate Resilience Caucus in collaboration with Water Hub and PolicyLink. 2025.

Toolkit Design by Mickey Ferrara

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Toolkit Stickers + Playspace

Design your own vision of a world where water equity is centered and nourished.

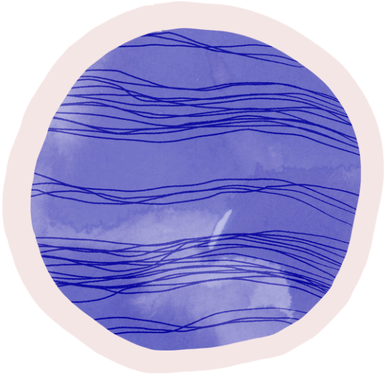






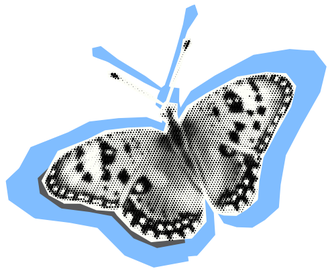












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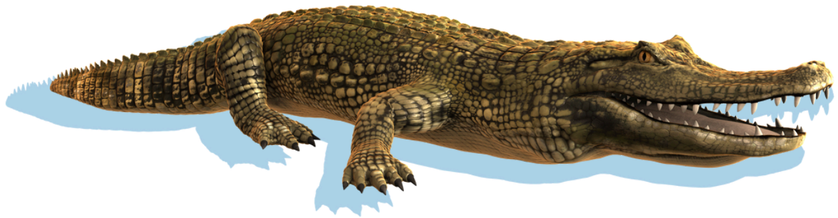













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