



The record isn't complete without you

By Aileen Cassinetto Mar 26, 2026 Updated 6 mins ago



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Water in San Mateo County has always been about power. In this context, I facilitated a workshop on March 11 as part of Skyline College's State of Water exhibit where students crafted lyric lines drawn from real-time observations and placed them alongside legal instruments (i.e., the 1879 California Constitution, the Raker Act of 1913, and the more recent High Seas Treaty).

What resulted was a dialogue between policy and human experience; visually, image and language-based collages which reminded students that their voices belong in public discourse (Access the students' final work here: natureofourtimes.poetsforscience.org/watershed).

The workshop also connects to a larger project I've been part of as co-editor of "The Nature of Our Times: Poems on America's Lands, Waters, Wildlife, and Other Natural Wonders," a Poets for Science anthology and companion to the first national assessment of U.S. lands, waters and wildlife. While the original federal assessment was defunded in 2025, the work of scientists and practitioners continues through The Nature Record, a peer-reviewed assessment and "national initiative bringing together knowledge, storytelling and public participation to elevate the role of nature in the U.S." The draft assessment is currently open for comments, and one area where we can be most impactful is through local knowledge (Add your voice here: naturerecord.org/comment).

For instance, San Mateo County is more vulnerable to sea-level rise than any other county in California. With roughly \$203 billion in GDP and an estimated \$39 billion in property and infrastructure that could be affected, the greater risk is to the ecosystems that support both wildlife and a population of about 770,000. Given all these, the county has been preparing for this climate-driven threat for the past several years. The San Mateo County Sea Level Rise Vulnerability Assessments identify adaptation strategies including emergency preparedness, shoreline and site-specific measures, and policy and planning updates to address rising seas. OneShoreline, San Mateo County's Flood and Sea Level Rise Resiliency District, coordinates "countywide efforts to combat the harms of sea-level rise caused by climate change."



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Risk data, however, cannot quite capture what it means to have a stand of trees near our block, or when a bird species disappears from our backyard, or the way of life for those near the coast. That knowledge is unique to inhabitants and cannot be found anywhere else. Even residents who do not or cannot vote carry years of observation about the places they live, and should be able to see their lives reflected in formal assessments and policies. The county's diversity means our communities hold knowledge worth capturing at every level, much of it not previously counted in most institutional surveys.

On a more personal note, co-editing "The Nature of Our Times" was a way to bring my own story and diaspora into America's story of land and water, and to help make room for voices that don't always find their way into official records. Societal shifts often take shape through narratives we tell about our world. For too long, the cultural and community experience of nature has been underrepresented in policy.

The task at hand now is to make nature legible in ways that resonate with our everyday experience, and ultimately, politically hard to ignore.

Aileen Cassinetto, former San Mateo County poet laureate and current member of the county's Commission on the Status of Women, is an Academy of American Poets Laureate Fellow and YBCA 100 awardee. She co-edited two anthologies tied to national assessments.

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Tags

- Skyline College's State Of Water
- Skyline College
- The Nature Of Our Times: Poems On America's Lands, Waters, Wildlife, And Other Natural Wonders
- Poets For Science Anthology
- The Nature Record
- Sea-level Rise
- San Mateo County Sea Level Rise Vulnerability Assessments
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- Sea Level Rise
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MARCH 2026						
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