

YALE CENTER FOR ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

**5th Annual Global
Environmental Justice
Conference Report**

Oct. 27-28, 2023

A large, light blue graphic on a dark blue background. It features a stylized globe in the upper center with the continents of North and South America outlined. Below the globe, two hands are raised, palms facing up, as if holding or supporting the globe. The entire graphic is rendered in a lighter shade of blue than the background.

ENVIRONMENTAL JOY

*Exploring the transformative solutions of
environmental justice communities*

YALE CENTER FOR ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

Reflections from Dr. Michel Gelobter, Executive Director



It turns out a conference about joy has to make room for a lot of tears too.

In October of 2023, Yale's Global Environmental Justice Conference unfolded not only against the backdrop of what was to be confirmed as the warmest year in recorded human history but amidst unprecedented humanitarian and environmental crises, and new wars.

As the Yale Center for Environmental Justice's faculty leader Gerald Torres pointed out "Joy is not the opposite of sorrow, nor a repudiation of tragedy or grief." And attendees joined presenters in permitting ourselves to seek joy and the solutions it provides in the face of these adversities.

Every session and panel was opened with a small, sacred practice meant to ground us and to open us. Presenters were brief and breakout sessions long and deep. Cases presented included some where joy seems elusive, like in the water crises of the Caribbean and the Middle East. But many highlighted the beauty, the hope, and the happiness that environmental justice communities have found in responding to crises and in finding new ways forward that the whole world can learn from.

Amidst the difficulties we face, the goal of "Environmental Joy" was to wake us to the joy of how those at the frontlines of our global environmental crises -- indigenous communities, climate migrants, environmental justice communities -- embody the energy and the solutions we most need. The conference unearthed methods of joy, lessons and practices that too often go unnoticed. The ways frontline communities are not just holding together, but coming together and weaving the future that will hold us all.

So there were tears that came from looking at what is happening, from hearing stories of real trouble, from being together and hearing about the hard things that come before joy.

And then there were tears of solidarity, tears of joy, and tears of recognition for solutions and wisdom that emerged from our days together. We hope that, as you review this report, the video highlights, and our forthcoming whitepaper series on Environmental Joy, you help grow the practices of environmental joy, and that they make us all smile.



The work of environmental justice communities around the world would not be possible without the element of joy –

- how joy holds communities together in the face of injustice and adversity,*
- how the search for well-being and joy powers community innovation,*
- how resilience, survival, and even thriving all serve as deep resources that power big change*

The 5th Annual Global Environmental Justice Conference on Environmental Joy was a multi-disciplinary and multi-cultural exploration and celebration of these practices. The conference made plain how practices and experiences of joy are core to the work of Indigenous and environmental justice communities everywhere, and how they hold the key to solving our most pressing environmental challenges.

almost
400

Registered Attendees

350

Active Participants with 250 In-Person

over
60

EJ Leaders from across the US and the world

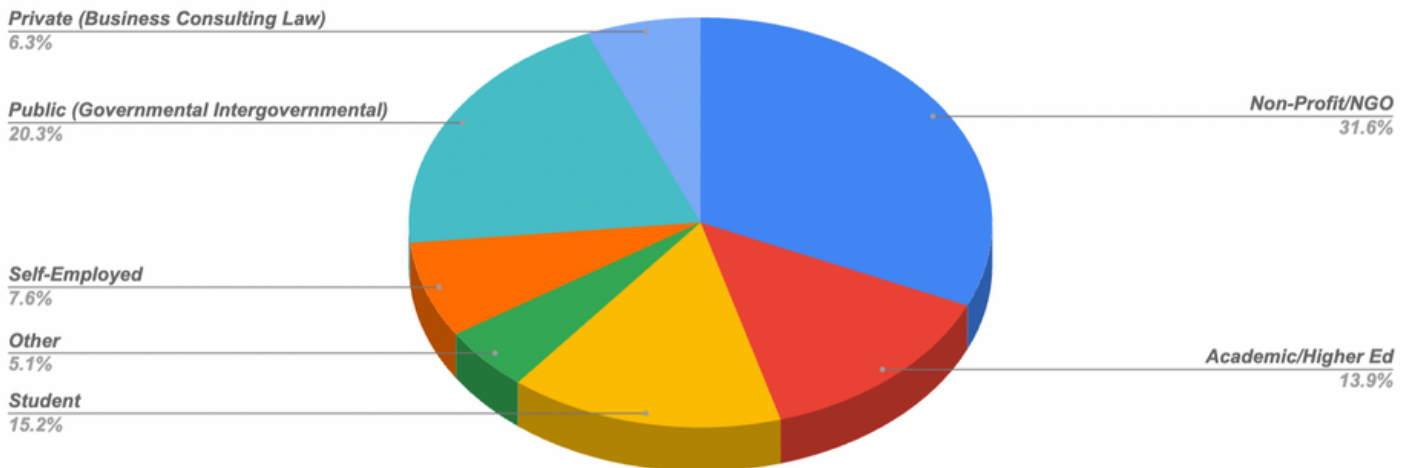
11

Sessions with presenters from 7 Countries

WHERE DID ATTENDEES COME FROM?



ATTENDEE SECTOR BREAKDOWN



PLENARY SESSIONS

1 Welcome and Opening Statements

Welcome by Ingrid C. “Indy” Burke
Carl W. Knobloch, Jr. Dean,
Yale School of the Environment

Opening Remarks by Graciela Chichilnisky
Professor of Economics and Mathematical
Statistics, Columbia University;
Co-founder, Global Thermostat

Sarah Sladen
Agency Youth Coordinator,
USAID

Nalleli Cobo
Environmental Advocate



2 Panel: What is Environmental Joy? A Multi-Disciplinary Perspective

Environmental leaders in the arts, policy, science, and economics explore dimensions of joy within their respective fields and why it is worth attending to joy to advance environmental justice.

Moderated by Gerald Torres,
Professor of Environmental Justice, Yale School of the Environment



Panelists

J. Nicolas Hernandez-Aguilera
Associate Research Scientist,
Yale School of the Environment

Michael Méndez
Assistant Professor of Environmental
Planning and Policy,
University of California, Irvine

Bruni Pizarro
Director of Brand Strategy,
For La Diáspora Studio

PLENARY SESSIONS

3 The “Happiness Lab” Live Podcast with Dr. Laurie Santos

Moderated by Laurie Santos
Chandrika and Ranjan Tandon Professor of Psychology, Yale University

Panelists

Christine Cordero
*Co-Director,
Asian Pacific Environmental Network (APEN)*

Elizabeth Dunn
*Professor of Psychology,
University of British Columbia*

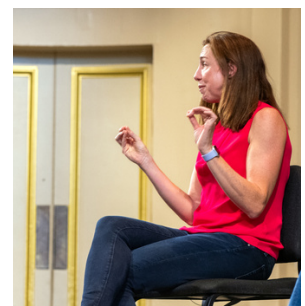
Louis Qaqish
*Senior Water Advisor- Team Lead,
USAID*



Look forward to listening on Spotify or Apple Podcasts!

“While fear can activate people, Santos and her panelists said a sense of awe about the world and all those fighting for climate justice can be sustaining. ‘If we concentrate on negative emotions, we won’t be able to stay in the fight. Create some space for positivity and joy. ...When behavior makes us happy, we are more likely to stick with it,’ Dunn said. Cordero said she was feeling burnt out until she began focusing on self-care and on storytelling to help communities envision and create positive outcomes. ‘Exercise that imagination muscle and imagine the future,’ she said.”

Read the full article, [Find the Joy in Environmental Work; It’s There](#), on YSE News.



PLENARY SESSIONS

4

Saturday Opening Plenary Session

Incorporating Indigenous Knowledge in Federal Regulations

Gretchen Goldman

*US Dept. of Transportation, White House
US Department of Transportation*



5

Saturday Opening Plenary Session

Human Being as Gift to the Earth

Lyla June

*Indigenous Musician, Scholar,
Community Organizer*



6

Saturday Closing Plenary Session

Everything's Gonna Be Alright

Bishop William J. Barber II

*Co-Chair, Poor People's Campaign
Founding Director, Center for Public
Theology and Public Policy*



7

Saturday Opening Plenary Session

Closing Conversation with Xiye Bastida

Xiye Bastida

*Activist, Organizer, Speaker,
Author*



TRACK SESSIONS: GOVERNANCE

8 Grounded Joy: Sovereignty, Land Tenure, Carbon, and the Sacred

Track Lead

Aja DeCoteau
Executive Director,
Columbia River Inter-Tribal
Fish Commission

Panelists

Pat Gonzales-Rogers
Lecturer,
Yale School of the Environment

Radiatu Haja Sheriff-Kahnplaye
Policy Advisor,
Natural Resources Women Platform

Elenor Thompson
Deputy Director, Programs,
Namati Sierra Leone

Key Takeaways

- *The governance track allowed panelists and participants to reflect and share their experiences on the joy that cooperation between activists, the state, and private sector groups can bring. This conference track emphasized that the work of governing the environment is carried out across scales: from villagers to local representatives to multinational corporations. It is through a negotiation of these divergent interests that governance concerns itself with environmental justice.*
- *Joy is a necessary experience to maintain the pursuit of environmental justice.*
- *Participants emphasized the importance of local and indigenous rights and practices as a central principle in the governance of land. Joy is integral to these rights, practices and acknowledgments of land tenure and of communities' connection to their environments.*
- *Although the struggle for environmental justice is long and ongoing, centering joy allows activists and communities to reaffirm their hope and commitment to an environmentally just future.*
- *Documenting and celebrating activists' campaigns is an important way of recognizing the victories of the environmental justice movement and of deterring feelings of despair and disillusionment. The acknowledgement of joy is not a refusal to recognize hardship, but rather an opportunity to inspire further collective action.*

TRACK SESSIONS: EVALUATION

9 Migration, Displacement and Joy: Evaluation for What Really Matters

Track Lead

Tabitha Sookdeo

Director of Community Engagement, Integrated Refugee and Immigrant Services

Panelists

Camila Bustos

*Assistant Professor of Law
Pace University*

Mark Freudenberger

Director of the Land Tenure and Property Rights Sector, Tetra Tech

Bruni Pizarro

Director of Brand Strategy and Partner For La Diáspora

Key Takeaways

- *Migration and displacement from environmental crises and political conflicts have never been joyous situations. They disrupt social networks, economic activities, and overall well-being of the displaced communities.*
- *Quantifying and evaluating "Joy" is difficult. But the narratives of the communities that participants work with, the experiences of migrants and the displaced, can be told, can be shared, and can be a vital element of assessing impacts.*
- *The power of storytelling, ethnography, and participatory engagements capture what truly matters in the context of the communities in even harrowing relocations .*
- *Evaluation practice carried out through intentional, active and inclusive listening can also capture the lessons of joy within collective trauma.*
- *How do we reconcile the conflict between trauma and joy without compromising people's lived experiences and their right to tell their own stories?*

TRACK SESSIONS: ECONOMICS

12 When the Well Runs Dry: Economics, Finance, and Joy in Water and Mutual Aid

Track Lead

Nidhi Menon
*Accelerator Program Manager,
Imagine H2O*

Panelists

Michael Malcom
*Founder and Executive Director,
The People's Justice Council and Alabama
Interfaith Power and Light*

Kimberly Milligan
*Associate Professor/Director of the DSU
Water Quality Lab,
Delaware State University*

Louis Qaqish
*Senior Project Management Specialist,
USAID*

Key Takeaways

- *Mutual aid has surged since the pandemic and in response to climate disasters to create a new “economics” of solidarity and joy.*
- *Joy fosters a sense of communal accountability and investment that allows us to work towards possibilities, instead of breeding hopelessness and putting the onus on the individual consumer/leader.*
- *Joy is grounded in small practices that re-familiarize people with the land and foster stewardship. Including: involving younger generations, increasing access to outdoors, mutual-aid and community gardens in food deserts in order to work towards food sovereignty, etc.*
- *In this way, joy can be seen as a grassroots movement that often challenges state actors/hierarchies. For example, Black and brown communities, who have been neglected by state actors when it comes to disaster relief, can gain a sense of agency through mutual aid.*



TRACK SESSIONS: POLICY

10

The Joy in Just Policy- Making: Fossil Fuel Organizing in California, the Southeast US and the Caribbean

Track Leads

Michael Méndez

Assistant Professor of Environmental Planning and Policy, University of California, Irvine

Nailli Cobo

Environmental Advocate

Panelists

Alfred Brownell

*Tom and Andi Bernstein Fellow, Yale Law School
Goldman Prize Winner - 2019 Africa*

Christine Cordero

Co-Director, Asian Pacific Environmental Network (APEN)

Nigel Salina

Founder and CEO, Globus Energy Group

Key Takeaways

- *Joy is both an emotion and a method in meaningful environmental policymaking.*
- *As a method, it points to policymaking that*
 - *Centers generative solutions*
 - *Goes beyond policies that repair and remedy towards policies that represent new, holistic and just solutions*
 - *Is led by impacted communities*
 - *Pays attention to processes not just outcomes*
 - *Acknowledges the harm caused by conventional policy processes*
- *Joy's emotional role in policymaking*
 - *Creates inclusive spaces where people feel cared for and welcomed*
 - *Involves celebrating the wins with music, dance, food*
 - *Becomes a space to process grief, anger and sadness together*
 - *Helps build community and solidarity*
 - *Creates space for hope*

TRACK SESSIONS: GEOGRAPHY

11 Climate, Culture, Place, and Joy in the Caribbean

Track Lead

Clinton White
Counselor,
USAID

Panelists

David A. Farrell
Principal,
Caribbean Institute for Meteorology and
Hydrology

Liz Riley
Executive Director,
Caribbean Disaster Emergency Management
Agency

Key Takeaways

Practices of Joy in the Caribbean demonstrate how:

- *The strong cultural fabric of family ties and oral storytelling across different island nations build a sense of hope, optimism, and cohesive action in climate preparation ahead of disasters.*
- *To move away from reactive sorrow and apocalyptic narratives.*
- *The inspiration, energy, and creative freedom of youth can be an outlet of unbridled joy and provide the space, resources, and agency to allow young minds to pursue dreams without self-restriction.*
- *Applied field education in nature can inspire curiosity and resilience.*
- *To harness diverse multicultural history and build broad coalitions across island states.*
- *To build international collaborations with countries particularly in Africa - weather systems are not closed by geographic boundaries and borders.*



POST-CONFERENCE SESSION

13 Careers in Environmental Justice

Moderated by Kevin Doyle
*Executive Director, Office of Career and Professional Development,
Yale School of the Environment*

Panelists

Jennifer Baldwin
*Environment Division Chief,
USAID Jamaica*

Mark Freudenberger
*Director of the Land Tenure and Property
Rights Sector,
Tetra Tech*

Eleanor Thompson
*Deputy Director, Programmes,
Namati Sierra Leone*



Thank you to our 2023 conference co-sponsors!

The Graciela Chichilnisky Environmental Fund
in Honor of Natasha Chichilnisky-Heal



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Surdna
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Yale Law School



Schell Center for Human Rights



YALE NATIVE AMERICAN CULTURAL CENTER



LET'S STAY CONNECTED!

Please contact us with questions or comments

YALE CENTER FOR ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

Executive Director [Michel Gelobter](#)

Program Manager [Kristin Barendregt-Ludwig](#)

Faculty Director [Gerald Torres](#)



*Videos of the conference plenary sessions
are available on the Yale Center for
Environmental Justice youtube channel!
Be sure to check them out!*

YALE SCHOOL OF THE ENVIRONMENT

Media Inquiries [Fran Silverman](#)
YSE Communications

