

2019 ACCOMPLISHMENTS



Peter Clark

PRESIDENT'S NOTE

Restoring our nation's estuaries, habitats that provide valuable resources for both wildlife and people, is a crucial mission not only to our organization and our members, but to all Americans.

For the past 12 years, I have led Restore America's Estuaries through many periods, from varying political climates and natural disasters, to the emergence of new science and techniques. In this time, I have seen our small, but nimble organization emerge as a national leader in the field of estuarine restoration and serve as a key convener of diverse stakeholders. In 2019, we leveraged these abilities to equip our partners with the know-how and ingenuity to succeed in their efforts.

The restoration community has recognized that our nation's coasts are on the frontlines of defense against the impacts of climate change. Yet when we look to the future our vision is clear: Our nation's estuaries and bays are healthy, thriving, and resilient, and we face the oncoming challenges as one collective voice.



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SHARING OUR EXPERTISE

Advocating for blue carbon science and policy



Over the past year, RAE has worked diligently with Congressional staff to advance the coastal blue carbon legislative agenda. Senator Cory Booker's (NJ) staff worked closely with RAE to incorporate blue carbon into his *Climate Stewardship Act*. The Act, introduced in August 2019, would restore or protect over 2 million acres of coastal wetlands by 2030 as a means to mitigate climate change by sequestering carbon, while creating thousands of new jobs. RAE also collaborated with Representative Suzanne Bonamici (OR) to provide technical assistance and feedback on her *Blue Carbon for Our Planet Act*. This bill lays out a federal plan to strengthen research on blue carbon, including an inventory of ecosystems, and the conservation and protection of these habitats. The growing momentum on Capitol Hill regarding blue carbon is a testament to the public's increasing awareness of this important ecosystem service and the benefits it provides.



MEET OUR PARTNERS

Cheniere is committed to being a responsible corporate leader in the communities of the Gulf Coast. As a longtime partner of the RAE Alliance, they support community-based restoration efforts in the region, including a volunteer driven dune restoration project led by the Coalition to Restore Coastal Louisiana and the construction of an oyster reef in Harris County, Texas led by the Galveston Bay Foundation.



Taking learning outside in North Carolina



Held this year in beautiful Beaufort, NC, the *2019 Living Shorelines Tech Transfer Workshop* brought together researchers, practitioners, government officials, and landowners to share knowledge and enthusiasm for living shorelines. The workshop opened with field sessions to visit living shorelines sites in action. Site visits included Hammocks Beach State Park, Pivers Island, and the North Carolina Aquarium. Throughout the event, attendees heard about the latest methods and findings, and shared lessons learned. The conversational atmosphere encouraged questions and dialogue, and as one participant described, "It felt like entering a large room of 250 friends who had been working together forever. There was a tangible synergy among participants that was invigorating."

DIVERSIFYING OUR COMMUNITY



Research into the topic of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in the coastal sector shows that a “leaky pipeline” exists for underrepresented groups as they seek to enter or advance their scientific careers. RAE recognized the need to offer individuals the skills and tools to advance the ultimate goal of increasing DEI in coastal and environmental conservation organizations. Through support from the National Science Foundation, RAE convened a daylong workshop in Washington, DC focused on recruiting, hiring, and retaining diverse employees.

This session, and future ones like it, could have profound impact on the ability of environmental organizations to engage their community members and constituents; simultaneously, this work encourages members of traditionally underrepresented demographics to enter and remain in the conservation field, creating broad and increasing impacts on society at large.

Facilitators of the workshop encouraged role-playing and group discussions to simulate real-world situations involving diversity and inclusion challenges. Attendees learned how to combat bias within themselves and within their individual organizations, as well as how to change their recruiting, hiring, and retention practices to become more equitable. They walked away with the ability to identify examples of injustice in their workplace and daily lives, and knowledge of how to challenge them.

*“I will be incorporating ideas and information from this workshop into my organization's **policies** and **procedures** when we review them at year's end.”*



MEET OUR PARTNERS

The National Science Foundation is committed to broadening participation in programs and activities it values and supports. Through its experience working in the coastal restoration sector, NSF recognized the need for training in this area and partnered with RAE to connect with our dedicated networks across the coastal community.



IMPACT OF THE RAE ALLIANCE

Cleaning up around Galveston Bay



Galveston Bay Foundation (GBF) has increased its focus on marine debris issues and initiatives for the past few years. RAE and the SeaWorld & Busch Gardens Conservation Fund have proudly supported these efforts, and in 2019, GBF hosted several large and small-scale cleanup events around Galveston Bay. Each large-scale event was part of a broader, multi-organization statewide campaign.

The year began with Texas Parks and Wildlife's *Abandoned Crab Trap Removal Program*, an initiative that involves thousands of volunteers to find and remove derelict crab traps from the Bay during a ten-day, state-mandated closure period. Abandoned crab traps have lasting impacts on the ecosystem, including unintended bycatch and lower harvest numbers. Galveston Bay Foundation hosted two crab trap removal sites and gathered more than 100 volunteers who removed 141 lost or derelict traps.

This past year volunteers also participated in the Rivers, Lakes, Bays N' Bayou's *Trash Bash*, a statewide event that aims to educate the public about the importance of the state's waterways through hands-on clean-up activities. Galveston Bay Foundation's Trash Bash site brought together 448 volunteers near the Armand Bayou waterway, and together they collected 5,500 pounds of trash and nearly 3,500 pounds of recyclables.

By mobilizing thousands of volunteers, GBF is able to produce significant conservation results for the Bay while also providing valuable opportunities for community outreach, education, and engagement.

Searching for scallops in Tampa Bay



Scallops disappeared from the cushiony seagrass beds of the Tampa Bay in the 1960's. Poor water quality resulting from dredging operations and municipal waste was the cause of their collapse. But today, due to the restoration efforts of many partners, including RAE member group Tampa Bay Watch (TBW), these bay scallops are slowly making a comeback. As a keystone species, scallops can be used to measure an ecosystem's health and signal changes in water quality.

Tampa Bay's water quality and seagrass beds have improved to levels that will once again support the bay scallop population. In fact, the most recent research by scientists with the Southwest Florida Water Management District's Surface Water Improvement and Management state that Tampa Bay now supports 40,652 acres of seagrass. This continues the success of the previous mapping efforts reported in 2015, supporting the largest amount of seagrass measured since the 1950s.

Since 1993, TBW has led the *Great Bay Scallop Search*, a resource monitoring event held each summer. With support from the SeaWorld & Busch Gardens Conversation Fund and the Tampa Bay Estuary Program, volunteers snorkel in search of scallops. Approximately 40 boats and 200 volunteers participate each year. In 2019, 51 scallops were discovered within the search perimeters, indicating that water quality was recovering after the previous year's Red Tide events.

FUNDING CRITICAL RESTORATION

Restoring coastal ecosystems in Southeast New England

In 2018 and 2019, the U.S. EPA *Southeast New England Program (SNEP) Watershed Grants*, a program administered by RAE, awarded more than \$6.5 million in grants to 25 partnerships throughout Rhode Island and Southeast Massachusetts, funding a diversity of important projects. In Narragansett Bay, funding supports a network of real-time water quality monitoring buoys; in Falmouth, MA, an innovative project to return abandoned cranberry bogs to natural wetlands and streams; and on Martha's Vineyard, cutting-edge technology to reduce pollution from groundwater before it enters coastal waters. With continued support from the U.S. EPA, RAE will guide millions more in federal investments in 2020 and 2021, helping these communities tackle pressing coastal challenges.



Cranberry bog restoration. Inter-fluve.



OUR NEW PARTNERSHIP

RAE was selected to administer the *National Estuary Program Coastal Watersheds Grant Program* by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. This is a new, nationally competitive grants program that will provide approximately \$4 million in funding over four years to projects that strive to improve the waters, habitats, and living resources within watersheds across the country. The first round of grants will be awarded in 2020.

“This cooperative agreement is the first of its kind and solidifies the partnership between EPA and non-governmental organizations as we work together to improve the health of our coastal waters.”

– Andrew Wheeler, EPA Administrator

Community conservation in the Gulf Coast region

What started as a National Estuaries Week program evolved in 2019 to encompass volunteer restoration projects throughout the fall planting season. Funding provided by CITGO enabled the reimagined *Caring for Our Coasts Gulf Region Grants Program*. Grants provided the opportunity for high school students in Alabama to learn about salt marsh habitats and participate in native plantings, while in Louisiana, community members were offered the chance to join interpretive trail hikes before participating in invasive tree removal. The true value of this program is seen not only through direct conservation impacts, but also through the local engagement by Gulf Coast communities. By creating environmental stewards, we are securing a healthy future for these habitats and their surrounding region well into the future.



*Volunteers planting native species.
Woodlands Conservancy*