

HONORING OUR STORIES OF HABITATS AND HEALING

Stories of Great Lakes Restoration

Here are some stories and art that emerged as we worked on habitat restoration in the Great Lakes. A special thanks to our story tellers and artists for sharing these rich and evocative stories to unlock new narratives that center our hearts, bodies, and minds. These stories lead us on a journey to decolonize our work in habitat and conservation. We hope that they spark new ways of thinking, learning, and unlearning for you as you read the stories and soak in the gorgeous art-based representations of each story.

[Learn More About Our Habitat Restoration Project](#)



This artwork features the story of Vidya Balasubramanyam, CSO's Research, Science and Program Director. Vidya works on Great Lakes coastal management through her role at CSO.



“My relationship with nature is a disconnected one. It’s why I work on shorelines and habitat restoration in the Great Lakes, hoping to forge a connection to it as a form of healing. Watercolors, I have realized, are a way

experience water in a way that feels safe. I can work with the water, witness its whimsicality, and hear its lessons all from my fingertips.

By engaging in dance, I am tapping into my body, another amazing storehouse of water, and embodying its lessons into my movements. **Water is a part of me, just like I am a part of water.** Art has been a way to discover what it means to have healing relationships with water, to digest and comprehend complex engineering plans that are a big part of my work, and to imagine the possibilities.”

Vidya Balasubramanyam

Research, Science, and Program Director, Coastal States Organization



This artwork features the story of Gitigaazh Miinikaaan Giizhigong (He plants seeds in the sky), Mark McConnell is a Veteran and Elder of the Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa. Mark has lived on Gichigami (Lake Superior) his entire life.



“Lake Superior’ is my mino-bimaadiziwin or ‘good life.’ The history of this place is much longer than the textbooks tell. As a small child, I used to walk the shores, tributaries and estuaries with my Grandpa. He would tell me stories of our relationship to the water. We would walk by the shipyards and coal docks. He would talk about the extraction happening. He knew the generations would be impacted.

As Native People, our lifeways rely on the water, the fish, the animals that inhabit those areas, and the plant medicines that grow along the water; blueberries, wild roses and sweet grass. Water is life, and we especially need our waters to be healthy. Now as an elder, my work is to bring this education to the younger generation, to tell the old and new stories of our connection, and what is possible.”

Mark McConnell

Descendant of Chief Osaugie and Fond du Lac Band Elder, Lake Superior



This artwork features the story of Mechiya Jamison, an Environmental Artist, Storyteller, and Curator. She attended the University of Illinois at Chicago, where she studied Urban Studies and Public Policy through an environmental lens.

Mechiya was molded during her studies by my campus cultural centers and the grassroots community organizations she worked with. She has dedicated her being to cultural-environmental justice and liberation, choosing art as the tool to build solidarity, cultural understanding, and a means of collective power and consciousness.

A means to an End.

*Professionally, these means have manifested in a way that mirrors the vastness of freedom and the natural environment. Mechiya is the Communications Coordinator for Climate Justice Alliance and the independent curator and creator of interactive, educational exhibits *Moving Freely* and *Wishing Well*.*

*She is also a Voqal Fellow, Roger Arliner Young (RAY) Fellow, an ELP Great Lakes Regional Fellow, and served as Special Projects Manager and In-house Creative for Equiticity, a WILD YAMS 2023 Artist-in-residence, and a contributing Mobile Artist to the city-wide plan *We '***' Chicago*.*



“I have had a complicated and tumultuous relationship with water. As a Black woman, a common saying is “I can’t get my hair wet” if you have a press out or even if you are wearing your hair curly, because the water will mess it up. It’s a judgment rooted in Anti-Blackness that I internalized. I was also a very anxious and sensitive child, and drowning in water was one of the things I was deeply afraid of. When I learned of climate change, and specifically flooding disasters, it confirmed that fear.

My mom passed away when I was 15. I became convinced that I would live a life filled with trauma. I was really in need of a mother and friend. Living near Lake Michigan my visits and interactions with the water became a safe haven. One sunny summer day at the water’s edge I had a powerful meditation. **The sound of the water** lapping against the shore, sounded **like a whisper saying the universe is on my side**. It released something in me, and I felt safe and free. It was an affirmation, just between me and the water.

I learned about African traditions, and the Deity Oshun, the essence of sweet waters, love, beauty and sensuality, everything that is me. It was the

repairing my relationship with water and to see myself as part of it. For the first time, in public, I dunked my head underwater and I remember feeling no fear. It felt like living.”

Mechiya Jameson

Environmental Artist, Storyteller, and Curator, Lake Michigan

The five Great Lakes — Erie, Huron, Michigan, Ontario, and Superior — span a total surface area of 94,600 square miles. They are all connected by a variety of lakes and rivers, making them the largest freshwater system in the world.

SHARE A WORD, DOODLE, OR SHORT PHRASE ANSWERING:

WHICH GREAT LAKE DO YOU FEEL DEEPLY CONNECTED, OR DISCONNECTED, TO?

WHAT IS ONE THING YOU LIKE MOST ABOUT IT, OR WHAT IS ONE THING THAT AFFECTS YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH IT?



Use this form to share your Great Lakes story with us!

Name	Email Address
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Message

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Our Artist

We'd like to thank Lauren Boritzke Smith, founder of Heartseed Creative, for these beautiful artistic renderings of the testimonies! You can check our more of Lauren's work here:

<https://heartseedcreative.com/>



Our Narrative Lead

We'd like to thank Jothsna Harris, founder of Change Narrative, for facilitating the emergence of these beautiful testimonies! You can check out more of Jothsna's work here:

<https://changenarrativeconsulting.com/>



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[More info here](#)