Arts Integration for Social-Environmental Transformation of Wetland Communities
Valdivia, Los Ríos, Chile
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I aspire to design and implement a series of community-based artistic workshops to transform the social-environmental conflict surrounding urban wetlands in Valdivia, Chile, modeling an innovative, local response to the global climate crisis. Developing creative approaches to communication and cultivating a sense of agency is an integral part to peacemaking. The proposed workshops provide a direct means to deepen sense of place and responsibility over place, ideally enabling participants to act as empowered agents for change in the process of transformation within wetland zones.

My personal experiences as a dancer, embodied researcher, and student majoring in Environmental Justice, combined with my lived experience in Valdivia, place me in a unique position to carry out this project, with the support of committed community partners. I have formally studied Arts Integration pedagogies and have practical experience with facilitation ranging from instructing learners in environmental education to leading multi-age movement workshops. I first lived in Valdivia for three months before starting college, when I volunteered as a teacher’s assistant in a local elementary school. I elected to return to study abroad and live in Valdivia for the full academic year 2022-2023. During this time, I worked towards full Spanish proficiency and reached the point where I can successfully lead groups as well as navigate complex social situations in Spanish. I feel fortunate for the roots I have planted in Valdivia in relation to social action and the wetlands, and have developed relationships with geographers, scientists, dancers, artists, environmentalists, academics, and all those in-between, through a variety of classes, volunteering, and attending experiential workshop and relevant lectures. My connections here position me to be seen as a trusted presence in the community, with a proven track record of passion for this work and dedication to those around me. I am aware of my positionality as a foreigner and will conduct all parts of this project humbly, grateful to learn from local experts, improve my skills as a facilitator, deepen my community partnerships, and further myself as an agent for change.

During my year of study abroad in Chile, I connected with my primary mentor for this project, Marcela Márquez-García, expert in Human Dimensions in the Center for Wetlands in Valdivia. In May 2022, I joined her transdisciplinary research team investigating community action, urban wetlands, and the potential impact of social-ecological transformation through Transformation Labs (T-Labs). T-labs are spaces designed to foster collective agency as a means to positively transform a social-ecological system. This Project for Peace will train and prepare the facilitators, as well as creatively equip participants for the Social-Transformation Labs planned for August 2023 in Valdivia’s wetland zones. This project will sustainably have a larger effect on the community as it will teach creative and collaborative skills to use for conflict resolution and peacemaking in the future; these skills serve as a stepping stone for those working with T-Labs in Valdivia with the Center for Wetlands.

The Center for Wetlands in Valdivia is the only wetlands center in all of Chile and was founded after the environmental devastation from an industrial plant covertly draining toxic chemicals into River Cruces, which flows down directly into Valdivia from the north. In addition to the Center for Wetlands Río Cruces, my other regional collaborators include: Escuela El Bosque, a local school with a focus on place-based learning; Angachilla Neighborhood Association and Ecological Committee, formed in response to social-environmental conflict with wetlands, as well as a series of other central neighborhood associations such as Catricio Wetlands Park and Krahmer Wetlands Park.

The project facilitation team consists of a Social Ecologist, a Human Geographer, and an Environmental Architect and Designer, along with three community-based artists and dancers who have previously worked in Valdivia on an Embodied Research Investigation of Urban Wetlands. This diverse, transdisciplinary team of facilitators centers the knowledge of those who are from the region and prioritizes expertise in their respective fields.
The project will consist of a series of ten social-transformation, arts integration workshops conducted both within individual neighborhoods, and across different neighborhoods. Workshops will be held within Neighborhood Council spaces, as well as at the Center for the Wetlands. The workshops will be designed for varied ages, ranging from youth to adults and elders in the community. This Project for Peace acknowledges change can only happen in community and the importance of change beginning from home. By hosting workshops within the wetland ecosystems of people’s “backyards”, we encourage neighbors to be in closer contact with each other, developing networks that potentially would not have existed before and deepening a sense of agency over their home environments. This peacebuilding project aims to bridge connections between communities, to bring people together who are geographically centered around similar conflicts, but may be fragmented in their viewpoints to the issue itself. The workshops will offer a series of participatory exercises ranging from community mapping, artistic expression, embodied movement, as well as conversation and reflection. Community participants will ideally be empowered to reimagine the communal landscape of place and re-envision their place within it.

All workshops will be conducted in Spanish and facilitated by trained facilitators who have established preexisting relationships with these communities. The work of this facilitation is not to offer predetermined solutions, but to create a learning opportunity for people to live more fully into themselves and exchange ideas with each other. The facilitators will hold space for community members to feel a sense of agency in their home environment and cultivate conflict resolution skills that can further their process of peacebuilding. The timeline includes organizational planning and development of workshops between April and May, conducting the workshops in June and July, with reflection spaces and post program evaluation held in August. The Project for Peace funds will be used to develop, execute and document the workshops as well as to pay expenses for travel, food, lodging, and stipends to collaborators.

Valdivia is a growing city in Southern Chile, built around and upon an extensive wetland ecosystem, that has been a site for some of the largest environmental actions and mobilizations in the country. A wetland is an saturated area that is temporarily or permanently covered in water; is home to important biodiversity; has cultural and spiritual significance to the native populations in the area; and plays an important role in combating climate change as it sequesters high amounts of carbon, filters fresh water, and mitigates flooding in urban settings. The urban wetlands of Valdivia are cherished by the communities who live here, while also have been a focus of long-standing territorial disputes. These endangered ecosystems are caught in disputes between opposing interests for land use, at risk of being filled in for urban development projects or drained entirely for agricultural or forestry usage, and suffer high levels of pollution from sewage discharge, improper waste dumping, and invasive species. Throughout all, the health and well-being of communities and their home environments has been at stake.

With global warming forcing southward migration of climate refugees, the growing urban population expanding on Valdivia's wetlands adds increasing competition for adequate clean water, safe housing, greenspaces and sustainable infrastructure. These issues of environmental justice place residents at odds with larger, more powerful entities, and peacebuilding is essential in the process of collaborating across such diverse groups. How can we respond innovatively to imagine pathways of peace through these territorial conflicts and opposing agendas? This project centers the health of wetlands and their inhabitants together to prioritize the sustainability of a whole social-ecological system.

Although there is tension and growing conflicts over land use, the core issue is the way inhabitants learn to relate to and identify with land itself. By using arts integration methodologies, participants will have the opportunity to deepen creative intelligences that could be used in response to community conflict management as well as innovative responses to confront the local effects of the imminent climate crisis. By gathering communities around their local “home” green spaces, such as the wetland ecosystems closest to them and exploring ecologies of care, we can reweave pathways of human-environmental interactions into a greater form of sustainability for long term social-ecological well-being.