



Annual Report 2025

OUR MISSION

To protect the ocean by engaging multicultural youth and their communities in transformative experiences in environmental education, scientific research, outdoor recreation, marine conservation & entrepreneurship.

OUR STRATEGIC PILLARS

1

Community Engagement:
Outreach, Public Forums & Assessments

2

Capacity Building:
Climate, Ocean & Energy Literacy

3

Youth & Community Participation:
Scientific Research & Habitat Restoration

4

Outdoor Recreation, Leadership, Career Pathways & Green Entrepreneurship

Immersive environmental education for more 3,200 students in grades 3rd-12th

- Reached **3,200+ students** through hands-on environmental education programs
- Programs included **From the Avenue to the Channel Islands (ATCI)**, **Ventura River Action Network (V-RAN)** in collaboration with the Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority, **¡Vamos a la Playa! (VLP)**, the **Oxnard Beautification Project (OBP)**, and our newest initiative, **Youth Education & Engagement at Ormond Beach (YE&EO)**.
- Built on **MERITO Foundation's curriculum**, teaching climate, energy, and ocean literacy through observation, experimentation, and hands-on exploration.
- Grades 3–12 explored topics through **sandy beach and rocky intertidal monitoring**, learned about **harmful algal blooms**, practiced **bird identification**, and explored the ecological importance of **wetlands**. Additional activities and topics included **water-quality testing**, **aquatic macroinvertebrate** identification, **habitat restoration**, **microplastics** investigations, and learning about the importance of **conserving the Channel Islands**.
- Students prepped for the **EECCOA Challenge** by auditing water, waste, and energy use and designing environmental business proposals to reduce their school's carbon footprint.



Community Science & Stewardship

- Supported by teachers, partner organizations, agencies, volunteers, and donors, students protected local watersheds and coastlines through **beach cleanups, biodiversity surveys, habitat restoration, and water-quality assessments.**
- Contributed real data to community science platforms like **eBird** and **NOAA's LiMPETS Sandy Beach & Rocky Intertidal programs**; used **ArcGIS StoryMaps** to track additional local indicators (microplastics, macroinvertebrates, water quality).
- Partnered with **The Nature Conservancy**, **the City of Oxnard**, and **California State Parks** on wetland and dune habitat restoration and municipal beach cleanups, where students identified and documented litter.
- Gained science knowledge, critical-thinking skills, exposure to environmental careers, and the mental-health benefits of outdoor learning, building confidence and hope by **contributing to real-world solutions.**



- Participated through MERITO programs including **Ventura River Action Network (V-RAN)**, **From the Avenue to the Channel Islands (ATCI)**, **Oxnard Beautification Project (OBP)**, **¡Vamos a la Playa! (VLP)**, and **Youth Education & Engagement at Ormond Beach (YE&EO)**.
- Co-hosted the monthly Sea Ramble bike ride and beach cleanup with Patagonia Ventura, biking from the Ventura store to Marina Park Beach to **remove and document shoreline debris.**

Outdoor Recreation & Environmental Education

- Marking the final year of 3.5 years of the California State Parks Outdoor Equity Grant, our **From the Avenue to the Channel Islands (ATCI)** engaged **600+ De Anza Middle School students** in outdoor recreation in 2025 alone.
- **6th graders:** learned outrigger canoeing with **Hokuloa Outrigger Canoe Club**, tried new boogie boarding sessions with MERITO, and biked to the Ventura River Estuary for watershed education and a beach cleanup with **Once Upon a Watershed**.



- **7th graders:** explored the beauty of **Santa Cruz Island**, hiked to Cavern Point for reflection and environmental education, and played MERITO's Carbon Dioxide Game to learn about reducing emissions.
- **8th graders:** learned to surf (many for the first time) with support from **Surf Class**, and explored **Bear Creek in Los Padres National Forest**, learning about native plants and habitat restoration across riparian, chaparral, and coastal sage scrub ecosystems.



Furthering Educators' Capacity to Bring the Ocean to Their Classroom

- Equipped 38 educators with lesson plans, ecological monitoring training, and real-time data access from partner organizations, including **Southern California Coastal Ocean Observing System (SCCOOS)** and **NOAA Channel Islands National Marine Sanctuary**.
- Hosted two January PD webinars: one on harmful algal bloom (HAB) tools with SCCOOS for **¡Vamos a la Playa! (VLP)** and **Oxnard Beautification Project (OBP)** teachers, another on watershed and island ecology for **From the Avenue to the Channel Islands (ATCI)** teachers preparing students for the EECCOA Challenge.
- **Trained 14 science teachers** aboard the Shearwater Research Vessel (with NOAA Channel Islands National Marine Sanctuary) and at Santa Cruz Island, covering plankton identification, HAB monitoring tools, seagrass monitoring via BlueROV, an interpretive hike, and snorkeling at the Scorpion Anchorage Marine Protected Area.
- Represented MERITO internationally at the **Ocean Science Path Forum in South Korea** (Nov 18–20), exchanging ocean literacy strategies, tools, and best practices with educators from Korea, Taiwan, and the U.S.



Greening Schools & Homes (EECCOA Challenge)

- Celebrated **10 years of the EECCOA Challenge**, an initiative that empowers students to develop innovative environmental solutions for their schools and communities. This year, **129 Ventura Unified students** and **48 teams** from Buena, Ventura, Foothill Technology, and De Anza Middle School submitted proposals; **16 teams advanced as finalists**.
- Finalists (grades 7–12) **presented environmental business proposals** on carbon reduction and Matilija Dam removal at the May 29 Awards Ceremony, judged by local leaders and professionals, with prizes from **Clean Power Alliance**, the **Port of Hueneme**, **California State Parks** through the Outdoor Equity Grant, and **Ventura County Credit Union**.
- Ceremony featured keynote speaker **Florencia Ramirez** (author/activist) plus remarks from De Anza Principal **Clara Ortiz**, **Councilmember Liz Campos**, and Michelle Sevilla, representative for **Assemblymember Steve Bennett (AD-38)**.



- All participating students spent the school year involved in MERITO Foundation's **From the Avenue to the Channel Islands (ATCI)** or **Ventura River Action Network (V-RAN) programs**, where they built the scientific knowledge and leadership skills needed to develop their proposals. Their projects reflected months of environmental learning and continued a decade-long tradition of youth-powered climate action. You can read more about the winning projects at <https://meritostaff.wixsite.com/eccoachallenge/2025-winners-and-their-projects>.

Community Engagement & Outreach

- Reached approximately 12,200 adults in 2025 through outreach events, forums, focus groups, and public engagement.
- Organized **Ventura's Earth Day Festival at Plaza Park on April 19, 2025**, with the City of Ventura's Sustainability Division, drawing ~5,000 attendees and 50 environmental organizations and vendors from Ventura, Santa Barbara, and San Diego Counties.



- Convened a community focus group on April 10, supporting UC Santa Cruz and NOAA Office of National Marine Sanctuaries research on beach and Marine Protected Area access barriers for low-income communities.
- Participated in community events across the region, including Santa Paula Arbor Day, Santa Barbara Earth Day Festival, World Oceans Day Summit, Coastal Cleanup Day, Santa Barbara Creeks Week, Día de la Mariposa, Watershed Walk, Patagonia's Salmon Run, and school career fairs.

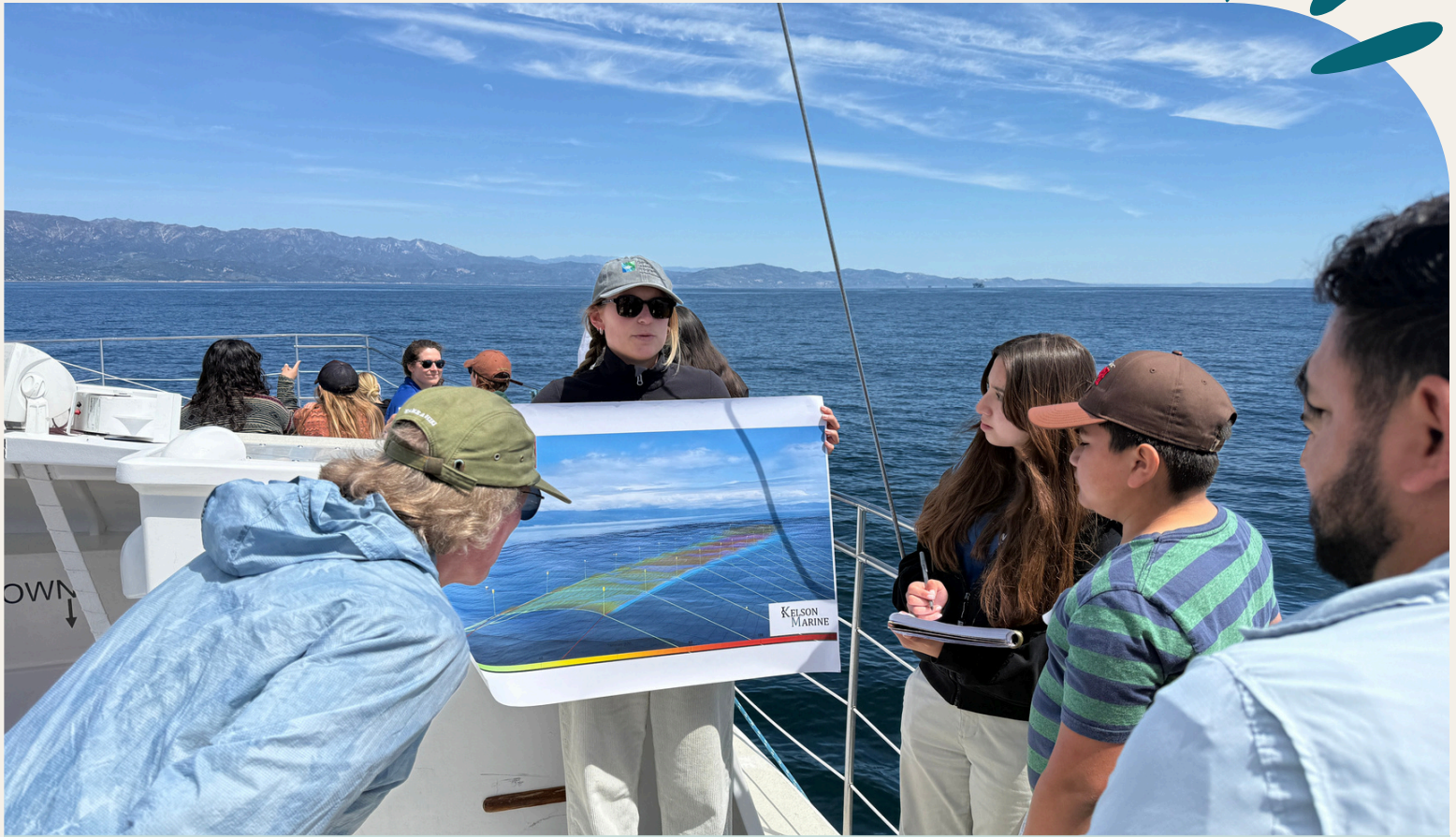


Building Ocean Leadership

- Hosted monthly **Sea Ramble Bike Rides and Beach Cleanups** with Patagonia Ventura, biking from the store to Marina Park Beach and collecting an average of 15–20 pounds of trash per event, with food wrappers making up the majority of debris and occasional discoveries such as soda cans dating back to the 1980s.
- **427 students** involved in the From the Avenue to the Channel Islands (ATCI), Oxnard Beautification Project (OBP), and ¡Vamos a la Playa! (VLP) programs took part in 9 beach cleanups and 5 dune restoration projects with California State Parks and The Nature Conservancy at San Buenaventura State Beach, Ormond Beach, Ventura, Oxnard, and Port Hueneme.
- Before restoration work, students learned to identify native vs. invasive plants and understand the importance of protecting fragile coastal ecosystems.
- ATCI students at De Anza Middle School also joined the weekly **composting and gardening club** with support from Once Upon a Watershed, cultivating environmental stewardship and healthy habits that students carry into their homes.



Outdoor Leadership & Advocacy



- Through **EECCOA Challenge**, **From the Avenue to the Channel Islands (ATCI)**, and **¡Vamos a la Playa! (VLP)**, students build leadership skills, explore environmental careers, and become community advocates.
- 2024 Matilija Dam Tier winners brought their **"Paint the River" proposal to life at Buena High School**, a mural and website envisioning a dam-free Ventura River.
- **15 Outdoor Environmental Stewards (ATCI)** and **8 Ocean Ambassadors (VLP)** completed a year-long leadership cohort, including community service, public outreach, and job-shadowing across Ventura and Santa Barbara Counties
- **Youth leaders supported major MERITO events** (Earth Day, EECCOA Awards Ceremony, Sea Ramble rides) and began their journey with a 3-day Outdoor Youth Leadership Camp through **California State Parks' Office of Community Involvement**.
- Explored careers through job-shadowing with **Ventura Water**, the **NOAA National Weather Service in Oxnard**, and **Ocean Rainforest's** headquarters and seaweed farm in Goleta.

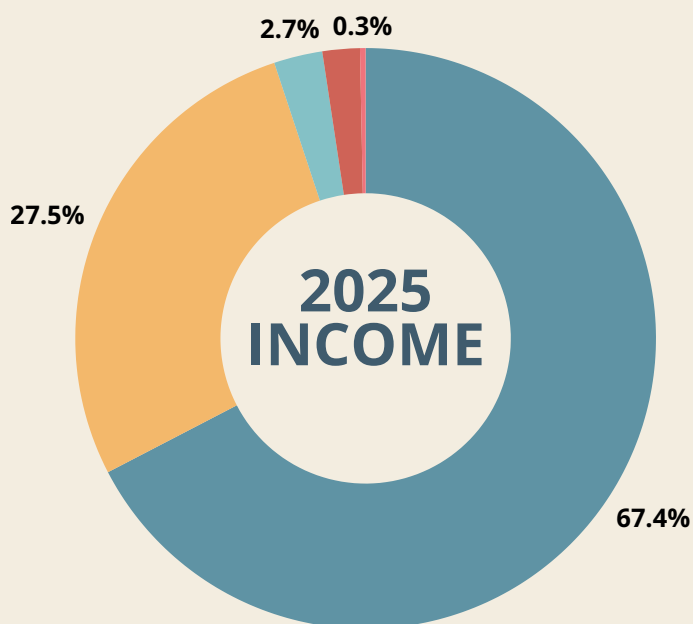
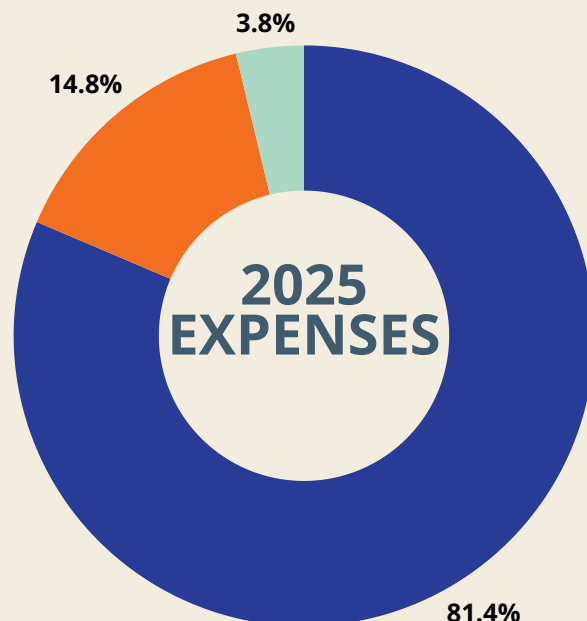
Expanding & Evolving

- **New office space:** On September 1, MERITO moved into a larger office at 3775 Market St., Suite 200, Ventura, CA, with room to host educator professional development workshops, run an ocean classroom for summer camps and after-school programs, facilitate stakeholder meetings, and welcome community events, all with an inspiring ocean view.
- **Simplified name:** In August 2025, our legal name was officially simplified to **MERITO Foundation Inc.**, moving away from the full acronym (Multicultural Education for Resource Issues Threatening Oceans) to make it easier for donors, partners, and volunteers to find us, while embracing the name our community has known since 2014.



- **Sustaining Endowment launched:** led by our Board President, to build a permanent source of funding that strengthens long-term financial stability for programs, staff, and operations.
<https://www.meritofoundation.org/merito-foundation-endowment>
- **Expanding Programming to Santa Paula:** Received a Youth Community Access Grant to launch Santa Paula Wild!, a two-year initiative offering 1,850+ Santa Paula High School students free access to watershed, forest, and coastal exploration, career training, internships, and mentorship starting in 2026.

FINANCIAL OVERVIEW



GOVERNMENT	\$318,753.49
CORPORATIONS	\$130,229.00
INDIVIDUALS	\$12,798.86
EVENTS	\$9,842.16
MERCHANDISE / MEMBERSHIPS	\$1,467.64

TOTAL \$473,091.15

PROGRAM	\$338,906.07
MGMT. & ADMIN	\$61,690.92
FUNDRAISING	\$15,715.30

TOTAL \$416,312.29

