



A Vision for Thriving Salton Sea Communities

Findings from the Pathways to a Resilient Salton Sea Survey

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UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center

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The UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center (CSRC) was established in 1969 to have a systemic impact on the campus, within higher education, and across society through original research on the Chicano and Latino communities in the U.S.

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Alianza Coachella Valley works to expand economic, environmental, and education justice for the Salton Sea region of Eastern Riverside County and Imperial County through policy and systems change campaigns.

Alianza's Campaign for Thriving Salton Sea Communities convenes stakeholders and organizes community voices to facilitate inclusive land use decisions and advance projects that promote healthy communities and economic empowerment near the Salton Sea. We lead a coalition of mission-aligned residents, nonprofits, researchers, and civic leaders committed to bringing about real change for a more vibrant and prosperous Salton Sea region. Current projects include:

- *Introducing multi-benefit infrastructure that is responsive to community needs and demonstrates an innovative approach to addressing climate issues facing our region.*
- *Conducting community science to produce publicly available data and inform solutions to the challenges of the receding Salton Sea and improve health outcomes for residents.*
- *Facilitating the identification of projects of mutual high-priority for the Salton Sea region to create high-quality jobs and a thriving economy.*

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With Appreciation to Our Community Partners:

Lideres Campesinas
Coachella Valley Parents
Sierra Club
Loma Linda University



Table of Contents

Message from the Director

Introduction

Key Takeaways

Access to the Salton Sea State Recreation Area

Recreational Area Amenities

Environmental Restoration

Conclusion

Appendix

1

2

3

4

7

9

11

13



MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR

The Salton Sea's future is tied to California's future. What happens in our region will have ripple effects across the state and nation. Those on the front line of Salton Sea issues know this well and will be integral to the path ahead.

The Salton Sea region and those who call it home will be directly impacted by the decisions that policymakers make in the coming months and years. Our region faces economic pressure to become a substantial domestic supplier of lithium, placing greater challenges on lower-income communities that already face significant disparities yet contribute so much to the prosperity and quality of life of others. Without meaningful investment, these communities will fall further behind as their needs are sidelined in the rush for lithium development.

This story is all too real to the farm laborers and low-wage tourism workers who live in this region. Growing up in a small mobile home park near the Salton Sea, I saw the economic and health challenges my family and neighbors faced. I witnessed the perseverance of farmworkers toiling in the fields to produce food for other people's families and communities left vulnerable to the impact of dust storms, power outages, and severe heat.

That is why we think it is important to center community voices and create vehicles like this survey to channel resident input into crafting the Salton Sea region that they want to see.

What did the community tell us?

- An overwhelming majority desire access to the Salton Sea area in North Shore via Highway 111, but they encounter infrastructure barriers.
- A majority are supportive of a trail to the Salton Sea for residents and visitors.
- One-third prioritize environmental and public health measures in the Salton Sea region.

We invite you to read this report and work with us, and our partners, to make the vision of our Salton Sea community a reality. We thank the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center for shepherding this survey, as well as our partners Lideres Campesinas, Coachella Valley Parents, Sierra Club, and Loma Linda University, who made this study possible. We hope you will join us in the coming years and months as we continue to work toward thriving Salton Sea communities.

Thank you,

Silvia Paz, MPP
Executive Director, Alianza Coachella Valley



INTRODUCTION

Alianza Coachella Valley brings together community members, nonprofit organizations, researchers, and government officials to pursue projects that can help the Salton Sea region thrive. As part of its mission to improve the region’s environmental condition and residents’ quality of life, Alianza developed and administered the Pathways to Resilient Salton Sea Survey to East Coachella Valley residents. Alianza’s goal was to gather residents’ preferences for projects designed to transform the Salton Sea State Recreation Area, a California state park. The park attracts thousands of visitors every year, but it lacks adequate infrastructure for recreational activities. In addition, environmental concerns have grown as the Salton Sea shrinks, exposing contaminated soil that is dispersed as dust, presenting a serious threat to residents’ health. The Pathways Survey focused on access, amenities, and environmental restoration in the Salton Sea State Recreation Area. Survey findings will be used to inform campaigns that seek to make improvements in the region.

Alianza partnered with Lideres Campesinas, Coachella Valley Parents, Sierra Club, and Loma Linda University to administer paper and online surveys. In total, 346 surveys were collected from residents of Mecca, North Shore, Thermal, Salton City, Coachella, Oasis, and Desert Shores between December 2023 and April 2024. The sample included 119 seasonal workers and 124 other adult residents. In addition, the sample included 103 youths between the ages of eleven and seventeen, 13 of whom were also seasonal workers. Staff and student researchers from the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center analyzed the de-identified data as part of a community-research partnership with Alianza. ¹

KEY TAKEAWAYS

1. An overwhelming number of survey respondents desire access to the Salton Sea State Recreation Area via Highway 111.

The Salton Sea State Recreation Area is near the North Shore Beach and Yacht Club, an established community center, but the park can be difficult to reach. Eighty-five percent respondents indicated that their preferred route is Highway 111. About half of respondents said that they had experienced barriers to traveling on this route, and very few reported using public transportation. On the whole, residents indicated a desire for increased investment in alternate means of transportation (e.g., a local bus service, bike lanes and/or trails) to access the recreational area.

2. Most respondents support the development of a trail for residents and visitors.

Ninety-five percent of respondents indicated support for a local initiative to create a trail to the Salton Sea that could be used by pedestrians and bicyclists. Additionally, respondents supported the development within the park of a shaded recreational area and amenities including playgrounds, picnic areas, and cooling stations. They also expressed support for allowing small businesses to operate within the park.

3. Roughly one-third of survey respondents prioritize environmental and public health measures.

Thirty-five percent of respondents would like the recreation area to have trees to block blowing dust. Respondents also favor interventions that they can introduce at home, such as water and air filters, as part of a broader environmental restoration agenda.



ACCESS TO THE SALTON SEA STATE RECREATION AREA

A recent California Natural Resources Agency report found that many Salton Sea shoreline communities have no direct access to the Salton Sea recreation area, limiting residents' opportunities to use the park's spaces for play, exercise, gathering, relaxing, or seeking refuge from the heat.² Given this context, the survey participants were asked if they wanted access to the park via Highway 111 and if barriers had impeded their access. An overwhelming portion of all survey respondents, 85 percent, indicated that they wanted to use Highway 111 to reach the recreation area (fig. 1). At the same time, nearly half, 48 percent, said that they encountered barriers when they used Highway 111 to reach the park. The survey did not ask what type of barriers participants faced; however, a regional mobility plan published by the Riverside County Department of Transportation identified a need for major improvements along Highway 111 and intersecting streets to improve unpaved and poorly maintained roads, incomplete sidewalks and bike lanes, and missing crosswalks.³

A recent study found that accessible trails can facilitate physical activity in rural populations with high levels of inactivity. Inactive populations often include women and people in lower socioeconomic groups.⁴ Developing a walkable trail to the Salton Sea recreation area from North Shore, therefore, is an attractive public health and transportation option.

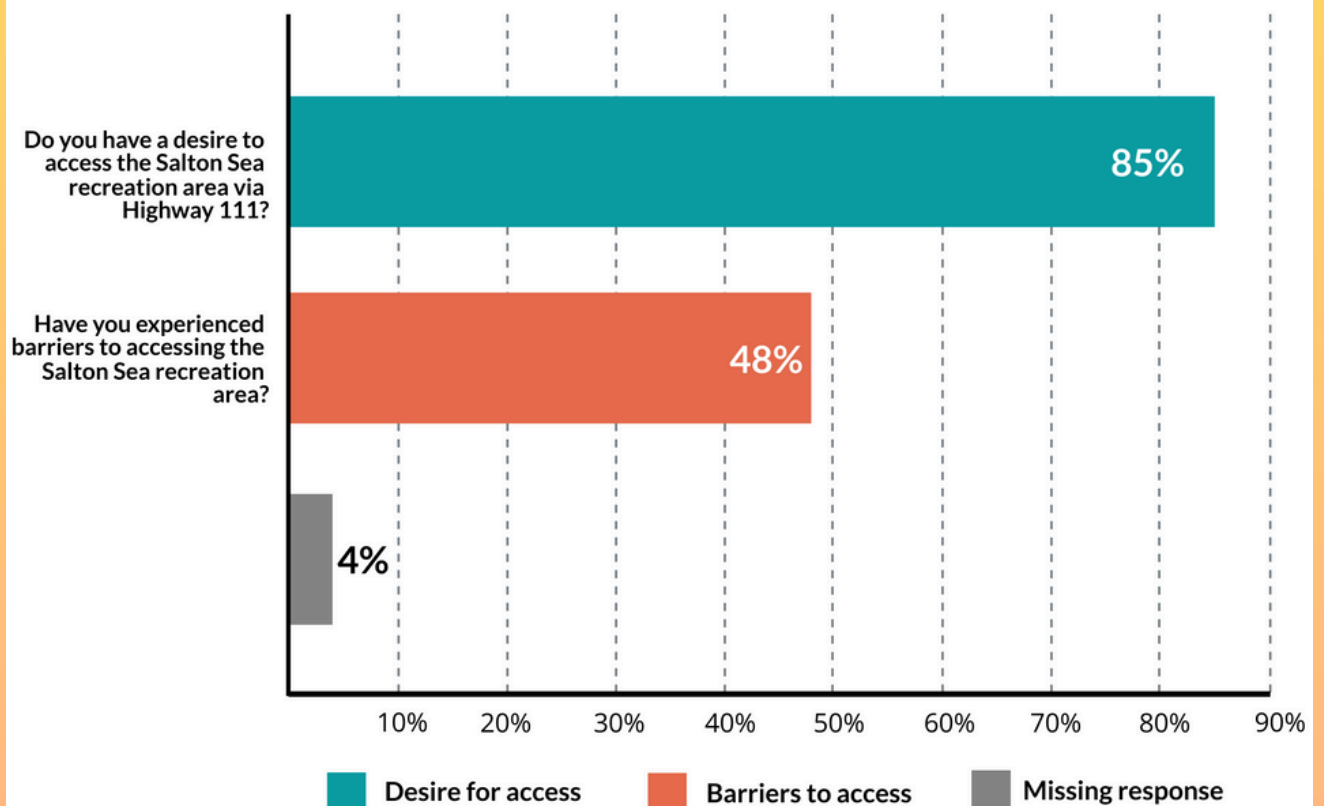
2 Better World Group Advisors, *Salton Sea Community Needs and Recommended Actions*, 2023 (Sacramento: California Natural Resources Agency, [2024]), https://saltonsea.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Salton-Sea-Community-Needs_BWG-Jan-24.pdf. The report cites data drawn from the California Department of Parks and Recreation's Park Access Tool, <https://www.parksforcalifornia.org/parkaccess/?overlays1=parks%2Cnoparkaccess&overlays2=parks%2Cparksper1000>.

3 Riverside County Department of Transportation, *Regional Mobility Plan for the Unincorporated Communities of the Eastern Coachella Valley* (Riverside: Riverside County Department of Transportation, 2020), <https://trans.rctlma.org/sites/g/files/aldnop401/files/migrated/Portals-7-documents-Trans-20Planning-20Docs-ECV-Regional-Mobility-Plan-Feb-2020.pdf>.

4 Ross C. Brownson, Robyn A. Housemann, David R. Brown, Jeannette Jackson-Thompson, Abby C. King, Bernard R. Malone, and James F. Sallis, "Promoting Physical Activity in Rural Communities: Walking Trail Access, Use, and Effects," *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 18 no. 3 (2020): 235-41.



Figure 1. Access to the Salton Sea Recreation Area

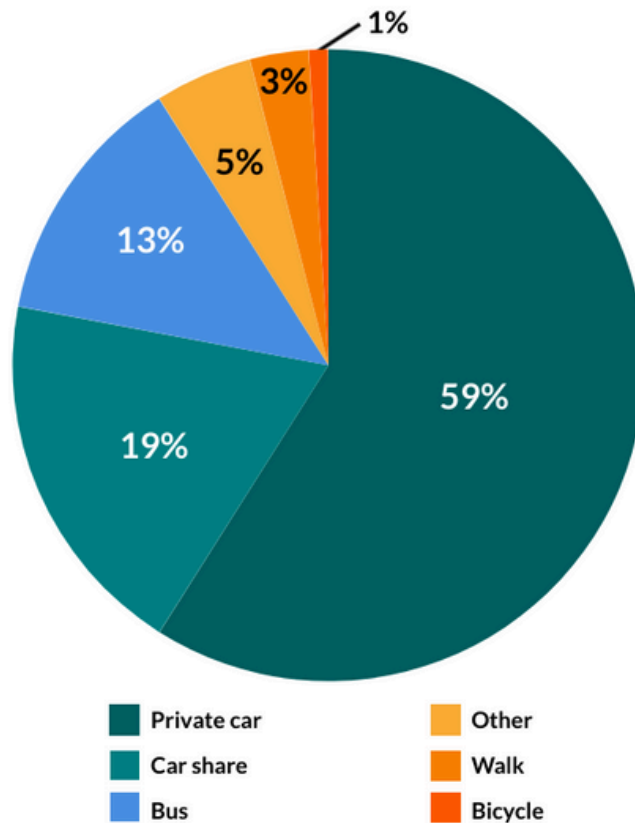


Source: Pathways to Resilient Salton Sea Community Survey by Alianza Coachella Valley

Travel to the Salton Sea recreation area is highly dependent on access to a car. The survey found that nearly eight in ten of all survey respondents used a car to reach the park (fig. 2). When asked about their primary mode of transportation, more than half, 59 percent, said that they drove their own car and another 19 percent said that they shared a car. Among seasonal workers, 66 percent reported that they drove their own car and another 18 percent reported that they shared a car.

Only 13 percent of all survey respondents relied on public transportation - buses - to access the recreational area. The proportion of respondents who reported walking or bicycling was much lower, at 3 percent and 1 percent respectively. Of the 103 youths surveyed, however, a much larger portion, 27 percent, stated that they relied on public transportation to reach the recreation area.

Figure 2. Primary Mode of Transportation to the Salton Sea Recreation Area



Source: Pathways to Resilient Salton Sea Community Survey by Alianza Coachella Valley

Investment in bus routes and bicycle lanes may help address the region's long-documented public transportation gaps.⁵ For example, Coachella Valley's primary transit agency, SunLine, currently offers only one bus route that services the communities of Oasis, Mecca, and North Shore.⁶ Survey respondents indicated a desire for investment in active (human-powered) and public transportation to the Salton Sea recreation area. When asked about the types of transportation that should be offered, respondents most often chose bicycle trails (78 percent) and a local bus service (75 percent) (fig. 3).

5 Jonathan K. London, Teri Greenfield, and Tara Zagofsky, *Revealing the Invisible Coachella Valley: Putting Cumulative Environmental Vulnerabilities on the Map* (Davis, CA: UC Davis Center for Regional Change, 2018), <https://regionalchange.ucdavis.edu/report/revealing-invisible-coachella-valley>; and California Institute for Rural Studies, *Policy Brief: East Coachella Valley Public Transportation* (Sacramento: California Institute for Rural Studies, n.d.), https://cirsinc.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/transportation_policy_brief_final.pdf.

6 SunLine Transit Agency. SunLine System Map. January 2021. <https://sunline.org/sites/default/files/SunlineSystemMap-012021.pdf>.



RECREATION AREA AMENITIES

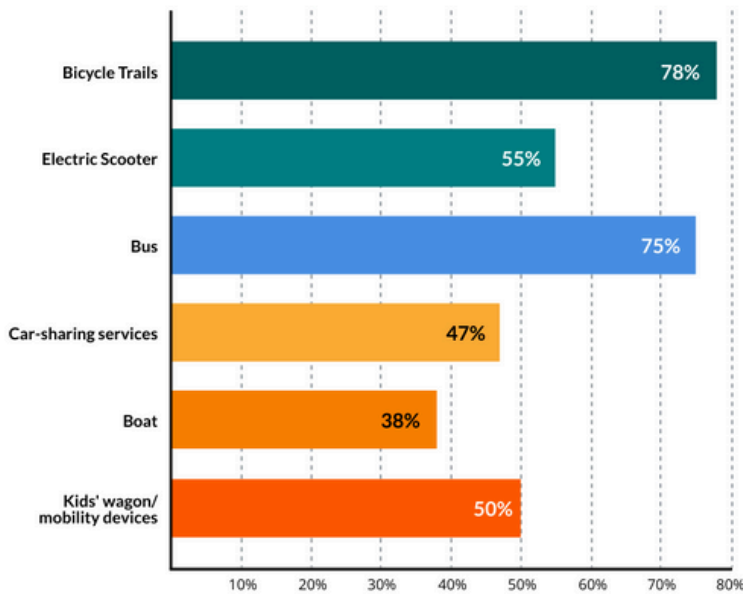
Government officials are aware that shoreline communities would like additional walking trails, sidewalks, bike paths, and picnic areas in the Salton Sea recreation area.⁷ Almost all survey respondents, 95 percent, reported that they support a local initiative to create a trail within the park that runs along the Salton Sea (fig 4). This finding aligns with a similar survey conducted in 2023, which ranked parks and walking paths as the most desired outdoor amenities.⁸

A recent study found that accessible trails can facilitate physical activity in rural populations with high levels of inactivity. Inactive populations often include women and people in lower socioeconomic groups.⁹ Developing a walkable trail into the Salton Sea recreation area, therefore, is an attractive public health and transportation option.

Survey respondents also indicated a desire for the addition of bike lanes (76 percent), children's play areas (76 percent), shaded and solar-powered picnic areas (74 percent), and cooling stations (72 percent) (fig. 5). The least popular option was infrastructure for duck hunting (21 percent). For seasonal workers, the most popular amenities were children's play areas (82 percent) and cooling stations (80 percent). Meanwhile, youth respondents prioritized shaded and solar-powered picnic areas (72 percent) and picnic areas with grills and places to sit (72 percent).

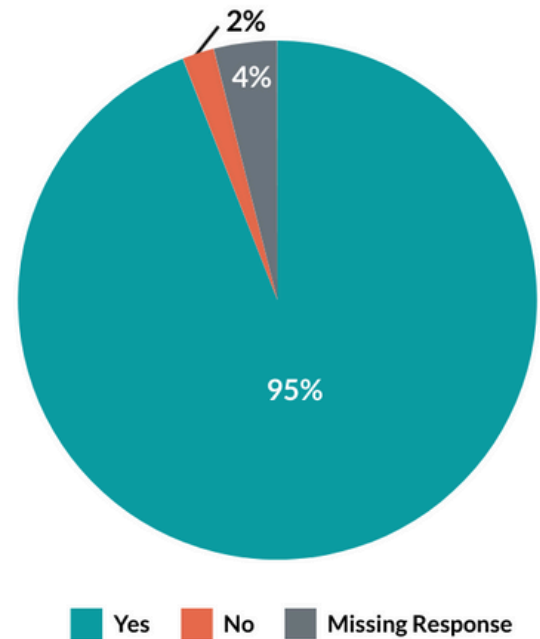
⁷ Imperial County, *Imperial County Pedestrian Master Plan* ([El Centro, CA]: Imperial County, 2021), https://publicworks.imperialcounty.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/ICPMP_Final.web_.pdf; and Riverside County, *Regional Mobility Plan*.
⁸ Better World Group Advisors, *Salton Sea Community Needs*, op. cit.
⁹ Ross C. Brownson, Robyn A. Housemann, David R. Brown, Jeannette Jackson-Thompson, Abby C. King, Bernard R. Malone, and James F. Sallis, "Promoting Physical Activity in Rural Communities: Walking Trail Access, Use, and Effects," *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 18, no. 3 (2020): 235–41.

Figure 3. Preferences for Offered Transportation to Salton Sea State Recreation Area



Source: Pathways to Resilient Salton Sea Community Survey by Alianza Coachella Valley

Figure 4. Support for Trail Along Salton Sea



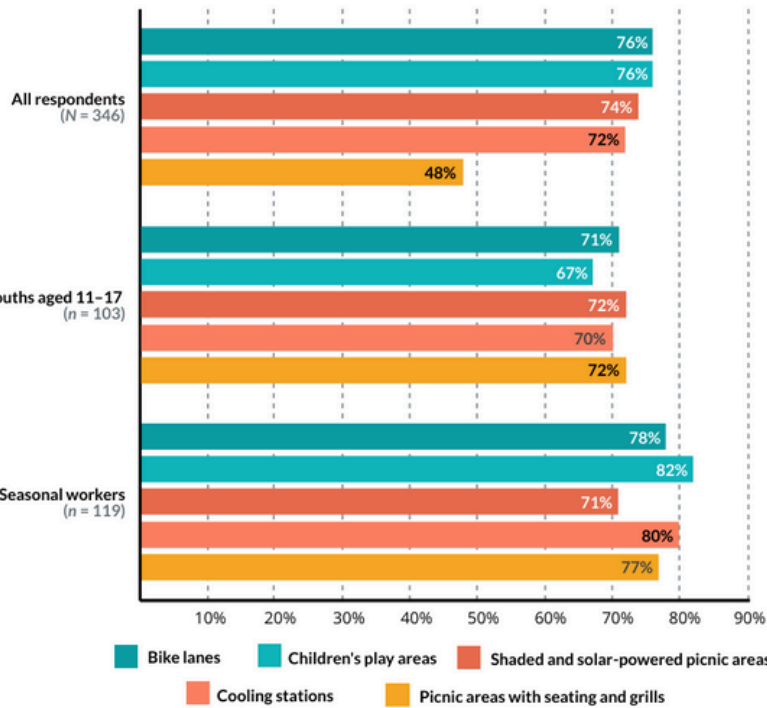
Source: Pathways to Resilient Salton Sea Community Survey by Alianza Coachella Valley

Residents also supported allowing local businesses to sell goods and services in the Salton Sea recreation area (fig. 6). When asked about what types of businesses they would like to see, most respondents, 82 percent, selected small businesses like food vendors and farm stands offering local products. Other businesses selected included gas stations (67 percent), convenience stores (64 percent), and healthy food stalls (65 percent). These results may be explained by the lack of food accessibility in the region. For instance, data from the US Department of Agriculture identified several low-income census tracts near the Salton Sea in which a significant share of residents lived more than ten miles from the nearest supermarket; these areas are known as “food deserts.”¹⁰ Food deserts make access to healthy foods more difficult, which can have an adverse effect on community health outcomes. Using the same dataset, the UC Davis Center for Regional Change found high rates of food insecurity among children in communities surrounding the Salton Sea.

Additionally, more than half of all survey respondents wanted to see bike rental stations, fast food options, and a souvenir store. Similar trends of support for small businesses and gas stations were found among seasonal workers and youth.

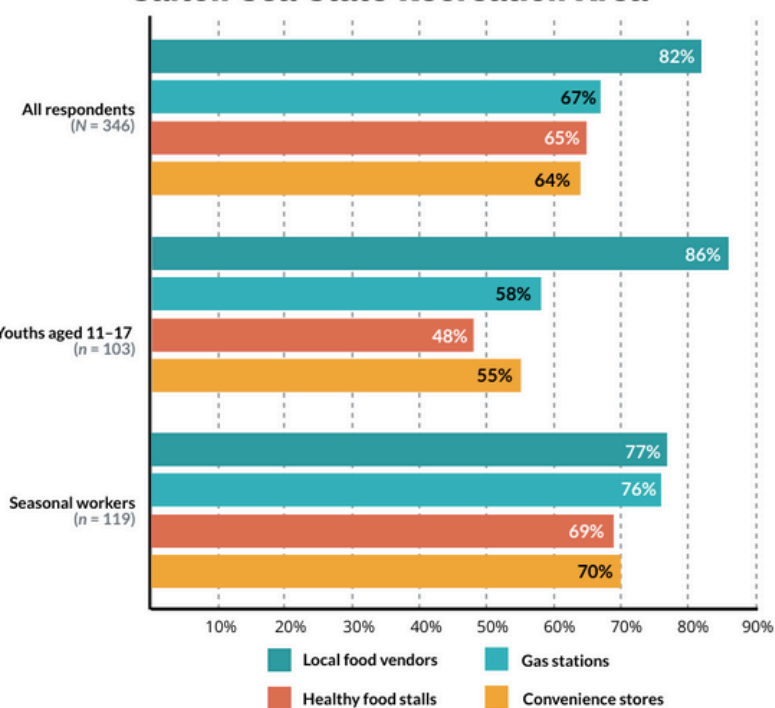
¹⁰ Economic Research Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food Access Research Atlas (online research tool), <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-access-research-atlas/>.

Figure 5. Preferences for Amenities in the Salton Sea State Recreation Area



Source: Pathways to Resilient Salton Sea Community Survey by Alianza Coachella Valley

Figure 6. Preferences for Small Businesses in the Salton Sea State Recreation Area



Source: Pathways to Resilient Salton Sea Community Survey by Alianza Coachella Valley

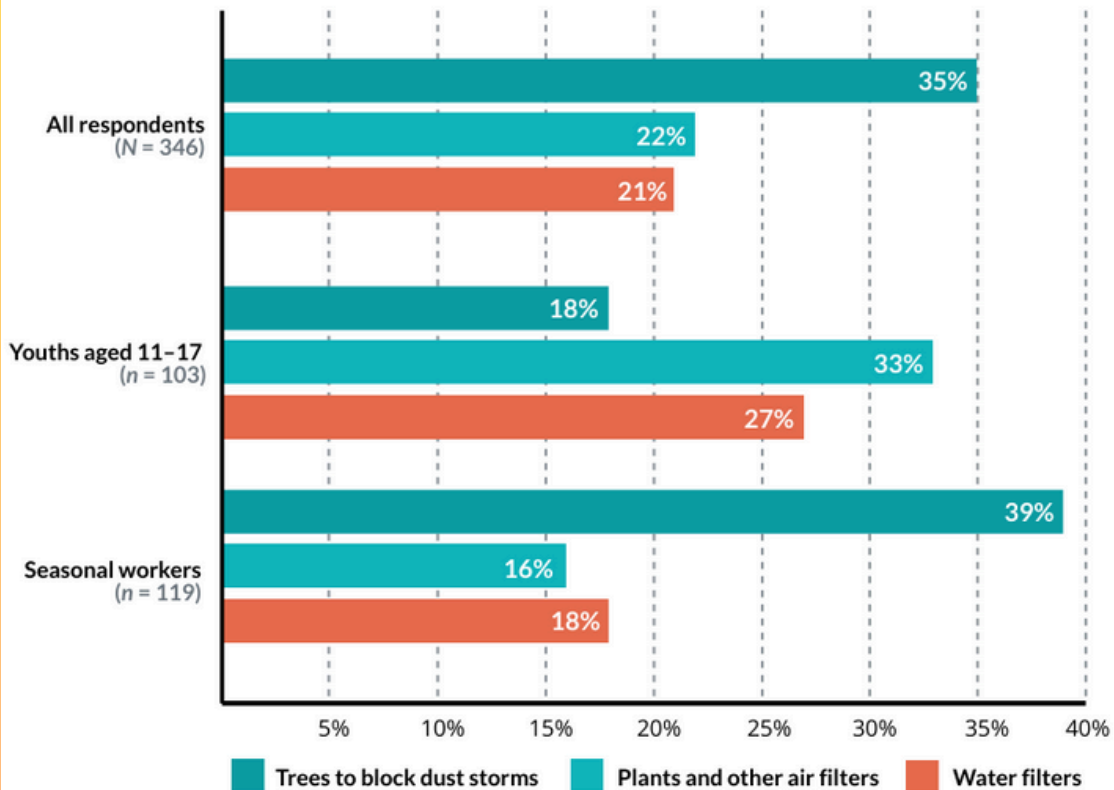


ENVIRONMENTAL RESTORATION

Over the past several decades, the Salton Sea region has experienced dust storms, increasingly poor air quality, and groundwater depletion, issues that have significantly affected residents’ well-being.¹¹ These problems are being addressed by environmental justice policies being developed by the Riverside County Planning Department that are intended to reduce health risks in target communities.¹² Survey respondents expressed support for measures such as climate-resilient infrastructure and restoration projects. These included prioritizing nature-based solutions that are a component of similar projects in the region, such as the Bombay Beach Wetland initiative, which seeks to mitigate dust pollution and restore wetland habitats along the northern portion of the Salton Sea.¹³



Figure 7. Preferences for Environmental Restoration Projects in the Salton Sea State Recreation Area



Source: Pathways to Resilient Salton Sea Community Survey by Alianza Coachella Valley

When asked what environmental restoration projects should be incorporated into the Salton Sea recreation area and nearby communities, respondents expressed support for those prioritizing both environmental and public health (fig. 7). More than one in three respondents, 35 percent, would like the area to include trees to block dust storms. Respondents also favored home-based environmental solutions. Twenty-two percent chose plants and other air filters that can be used at home, and 21 percent chose water filters. Support among seasonal workers for trees that would block dust storms was 39 percent, slightly higher than the support indicated by all respondents. Youth had the strongest preference for plants and other air filters, at 33 percent, and water filters, at 27 percent.

11 Alianza Coachella Valley, UC Riverside Center for Social Innovation, and UC Santa Cruz Institute for Social Transformation, *Our Salton Sea: Investing in People for a Thriving Region* (Coachella, CA: Alianza Coachella Valley, 2023), <https://transform.ucsc.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Our-Salton-Sea-Combined-Report-March-2023.pdf>.

12 Riverside County, *Regional Mobility Plan*, 13–14, op. cit.

13 Audubon California, “Bombay Beach Wetland,” accessed August 14, 2024, <https://ca.audubon.org/salton-sea/bombay-beach-wetland>.



CONCLUSION

Results from the Pathways Survey indicate that community members desire a range of infrastructure improvements in the Salton Sea recreation area, including shaded recreational spaces and cooling stations, as well as trees that can block dust storms. Most respondents visit the recreation area by car, but they also want infrastructure that would allow access via alternate modes of transportation, including bicycles.

This analysis found several differences among the preferences of seasonal workers and youths when compared with the rest of the survey sample.¹⁴ Youth are more likely to access the Salton Sea area by bus, and they have a stronger preference for amenities like shaded and solar-powered picnic areas. Among environmental restoration projects, seasonal workers favored the addition of plants and other air filters, as well as trees to block dust storms. While these groups are not mutually exclusive, these are notable differences when compared to the entire survey sample.

¹⁴ It is important to note that 13 of the 106 youth respondents also identified as seasonal workers. The region offers many seasonal employment opportunities through country clubs, tennis events, music festivals, county fairs, and farmwork.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Increase investment in active and public modes of transportation to access the Salton Sea State Recreation Area.

2. Establish a trail near the Salton Sea and develop a recreational area inside the park with amenities that include trees, play and picnic areas, and cooling stations. Offer opportunities for small local businesses to sell food, gas, and other goods and services.

3. Prioritize environmental restoration projects that address both environmental and public health measures.

4. Conduct further research that draws on community expertise and will inform regional development. Community members can offer valuable insights into the specific barriers they face accessing the Salton Sea recreation area and transportation measures that could facilitate better connectivity and make the region more prosperous.

In sum, results from Alianza's Pathways to a Resilient Salton Sea Survey align with the recommendations of recent reports, including *Salton Sea Community Needs and Recommended Actions* (2024); *Regional Mobility Plan for the Unincorporated Communities of the Eastern Coachella Valley* (2020); and *Salton Sea Community Benefits Survey* (2023).¹⁵

The Pathways Survey provides further evidence of the need for resilience infrastructure improvements in the region and for making the Salton Sea recreation area more accessible through public and active modes of transportation.

¹⁵ Better World Group Advisors, *Salton Sea Community Needs and Recommended Actions* (2023), https://saltonsea.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Salton-Sea-Community-Needs_BWG-Jan-24.pdf.

APPENDIX

Methodology

The Pathways to Resilient Salton Sea Survey was created in collaboration with Salton Sea region community members by Alianza and its collaborative partners. Each resident was allowed to fill out the survey one time. The survey was distributed online and on paper, had a total of twenty questions, and took approximately fifteen minutes to complete. Alianza staff administered the survey, and data was collected from December 2023 to April 2024. A total of 346 community residents participated in the survey.

Participant Demographics

- The average age of respondents was thirty-five years old
- Most identified as Hispanic/Latino (88 percent)
- Two-thirds were women (64 percent)
- Nearly all were residents from Riverside County (91 percent)
- Communities with the largest portion of survey participants were:
 - Mecca, 33 percent
 - North Shore, 22 percent
 - Salton Sea, 10 percent
 - Coachella, 9 percent

Industries and occupations represented were:

- Agriculture, 41 percent (12 percent were field workers)
- Office work, 6 percent
- Healthcare and social assistance, 5 percent
- Prepared food services, 3 percent
- Retail, 3 percent
- Business owners, 2 percent
- Construction, 1 percent

Twenty-two percent reported being unemployed, and 10 percent declined to answer. Students accounted for 7 percent of respondents.

The types of housing represented were:

- House, 49 percent
- Manufactured home or trailer, 34 percent
- Apartment, 14 percent
- Declined to answer, 3 percent

This research brief was written for Alianza Coachella Valley by Chantiri Abarca, PhD, UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center, Senior Officer of Community Engaged Research; Victoria Ciudad-Real, MPP, UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center, Graduate Research Assistant; and Desiree Rodriguez, UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center, Undergraduate Research Assistant.

