



Mari Rose Taruc (1974-Present)

State Organizing Director
Asian Pacific Environmental Network

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Overview

Mari is a social justice leader, community organizer and mother of two. In her 15 years working at Asian Pacific Environmental Network, Mari Rose has been a key staff helping to build and grow a deeply community-rooted organization protecting the health and livelihoods of low-income Asian Pacific Islanders in Richmond and Oakland. From winning successful campaigns against Chevron, to building the first API state-wide coalition to fight climate change in California she leads with her heart, and stays grounded in principles of environmental and social justice.

This interview was conducted in 2015.

Early Life and Education

Mari Rose Taruc grew up on a rice farm in the Philippines where life was connected to land and community. "Farming was what most everyone did. That meant a dependence on land and climate." At eight, she immigrated with her family to Delano, CA and witnessed her parents struggle as farm workers picking grapes. This early influence led her to pursue an environmental career. She explains, "To have an appreciation for the environment, weather, plants, and people who make it happen so that we can eat is integrally important to who I am and what I do now."

Taruc earned her bachelor's degree in Environmental Science and Fine Arts from the University of California, Berkeley in 1996. She felt at home in the land-based environmental field, and learning about environmental justice further sharpened her studies. Taruc says, "My purpose and identity matched the vision of environmental justice. I was convinced that whatever skills, networks or connections I had, I would contribute to the environmental justice movement." During her freshman year, she called a number on a flier posting "jobs for the environment" and soon became a canvasser for the California Public Interest Research Group (CALPIRG). She knocked on doors & engaged residents throughout the San Francisco Bay Area on the importance of recycling. This position was just the start to Taruc's environmental career.

Career

After graduating from UC Berkeley, Taruc took a position with the Southwest Network for Environmental and Economic Justice (SNEEJ) and lead a project running site visits with 50 grassroots environmental justice groups throughout the American southwest and Mexico. She cites this experience as her career highlight thus far. “As a young person, having my eyes opened to so many communities struggling with multiple crises, seeing them fight to improve their conditions, and connecting their local efforts to a bigger environmental justice movement was overwhelming and inspiring.”

From SNEEJ, she went on to work with a variety of social justice organizations before beginning her position at the Asian Pacific Environmental Network (APEN), where she has been for the past ten years and is currently the State Organizing Director. APEN works to empower low-income Asian and Pacific Islanders to build healthy environments, as part of the multiracial movement for economic and environmental justice. She is able to use her scientific training for community organizing by translating technical information into accessible concepts for impacted residents. In doing this work, she is able to fulfill her purpose by sharing her skills and capacities with those who need it most.

Taruc reminds us that there are multiple ways to define diversity, including racial, cultural and lingual. As a student at UC Berkeley, Taruc and her peers challenged the department to be inclusive of work designed to serve communities of color in the environmental field. She was active in student campaigns to protect affirmative action. She has presented on the importance of staff diversity as well as environmental justice programs to organizations such as the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and unions. And as part of an APEN campaign in Richmond, CA, she helped to ensure that emergency warning systems are multi-lingual.

Challenges

The years between graduating from UC Berkeley and finding her position with APEN were the most difficult for Taruc. “I was floating between groups and wanted to land somewhere where I could make a contribution and see that contribution over time...to not be in one community to see the change was disheartening.” Keeping her sights on big picture movement work helped her through those years.

Importance of Mentoring to Career

Mentors have helped Taruc find her way, from her fierce grandmother to big environmental justice leaders like Richard Moore of SNEEJ and Peggy Saika, an APEN founder. They invested in her leadership development, teaching her the importance of multiple skill sets. Taruc makes a conscious effort to share wisdom from her mentors by supporting leadership of high school students and interns in APEN’s programs, as well as those new to the field. “There are a whole lot of skills we need to be successful in our movement to improve our communities: fundraising, research, organizing, membership training, alliance-building... There are multiple issues and needs in our communities, so versatility is important,” she explains. She also encourages those she mentors to not lose sight of their larger purpose, and to take time to learn from the past—reading historical documents and listening to stories of movements that came before us.

Advice to Young Professionals

To people of color who are considering a career in the environmental field, Taruc gives the same advice she would give to her two sons, “We are in the greatest ecological crisis of our time. We know that the folks who are hit first and worst are low-income communities of color. We need everyone’s leadership, skills and time to make sure that low-income communities of color are protected and are part of the solving this ecological crisis.”