

A Culture of Care: *Community and Environmental Stewardship in Baja California*

Author: Mary K. Thayn



I. Introduction: Listening for a Different Rhythm

In a world increasingly defined by ecological grief and extractive habits, Baja California stands as an exception. Here, environmental care is not just preached, it is practiced. This paper explores the ways in which communities across the region are embodying forms of relational responsibility, from conservation policy to social opinion. Through field observations in Loreto, La Paz, and San Carlos, I document four expressions of these ethics in action and consider their implications for rethinking environmental stewardship elsewhere.

During my time in Baja California, I observed things such as posters, murals, and several enacted policies, each promoting this concept of relational environmental care. When speaking with multiple guides, I found specific evidence to suggest that this mentality isn't just in the policymakers; it is a mentality shared by the majority of the populous. Baja California cares about the environment at every level.

As someone heavily interested in the environment and policy action, I have long been fascinated with the way Baja California handles its environmental concerns; how their economy, based in domestic tourism, prioritizes the environment and creating an easy transition for involvement, rather than appealing purely to the interests of tourists. What impresses me most is that this priority is not just of the local government, but also of the guides, and of the locals themselves. I intend to showcase that through my observations.

II. Contextual Framing: What Counts as Environmental Care?

The concept of relational environmental care is deeply rooted in community, enacted through daily practices, and grounded in emotional investment and place-based knowledge (Kartupelis).

When environmentalism enters mainstream discourse, it often arrives dressed in the form of metrics, efficiency, and individual responsibility: carbon footprints, policy targets, personal lifestyle changes. While these frameworks have their place, they frequently reflect a technocratic and individualistic orientation: One that treats Earth as a system to manage, a problem to solve, or a crisis to avert (Shellenberger, Michael, and Ted Nordhaus). Using this logic, environmental care can become performative, transactional, or outsourced to experts and institutions.

But what if care could be something else entirely?

The concept of relational environmental care offers a different orientation. Rather than seeing nature as a passive background or resource, this approach begins with the recognition that humans are entangled with the rest of Earth's living systems. From this perspective, care is not an occasional intervention or awareness campaign. It is an ongoing way of being.

Relational environmental care is:

- **Rooted in community** - not as a demographic, but as a web of interdependence among people, place, and environment.
- **Enacted through daily practices** - in how people fish, build, speak, restrict, protect, and celebrate within their ecosystems.
- **Grounded in emotional investment and place-based knowledge** - the kind of care that comes from proximity and responsibility.

This framing invites us to pause and ask:

What does it look like when care for the Earth is not just an event or a campaign, but a collective ideal?

In the context of Baja California, this rhythm pulses not only through environmental laws or NGO programs, but also through murals, marine practices, community refusals, and quiet adaptations. What follows is an exploration of that pulse; how it lives, how it's protected, and how it invites us to listen more closely to the places we inhabit.

III. Environmental Stewardship in Practice

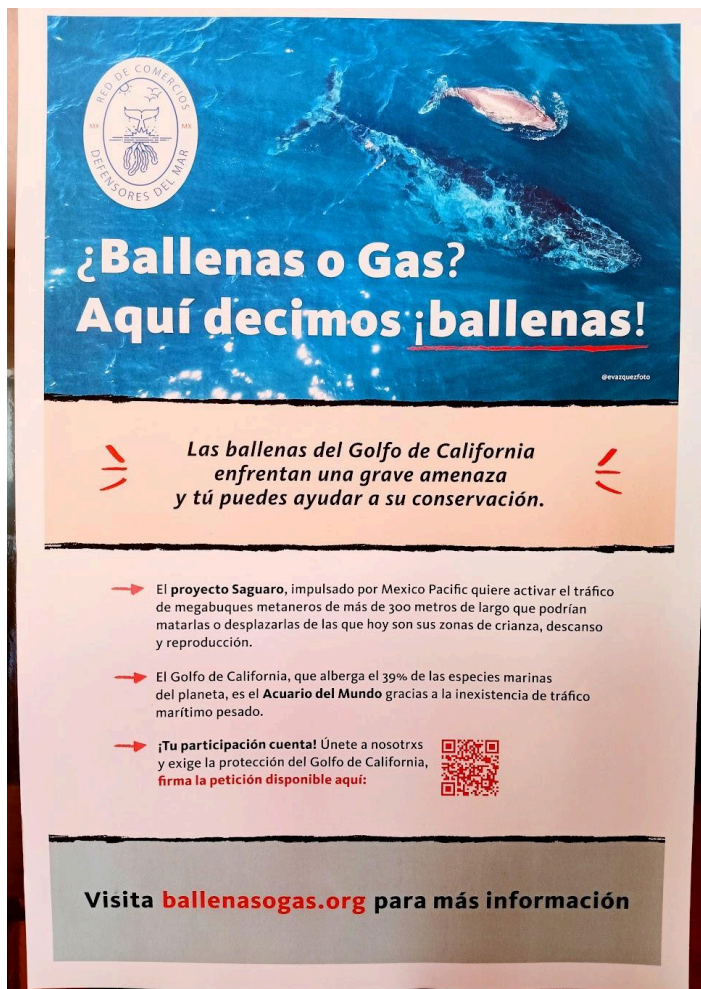
A. Poster in Loreto: “Ballenas o Gas”

While passing through the lobby of the hotel we were staying at in Loreto, I noticed a poster that immediately pulled my attention. Not through bright colors or flashy graphics, but through the stark simplicity of its message:

“¿Ballenas o Gas?” (*Whales or Gas?*)

Right beneath that, the poster declares “Aquí decimos ¡ballenas!” (*Here we say whales!*). It was promoting a website: www.ballenasogas.org. The organization behind this poster, *Ballenas o Gas* organization is a grassroots resistance movement opposing the installation of a fossil gas

terminal in Loreto’s marine corridor. The website, which also serves as a campaign hub, details not only the potential ecological risks to the local whale population and marine ecosystems, but also the broader implications of expanding fossil fuel infrastructure in a time of escalating climate crisis.



But the poster does something the website can’t: it interrupts. It shows up in a tourist space, a hotel lobby, and inserts itself quietly but powerfully, into a context where visitors are usually invited to relax. It invites awareness not as an abstract value, but as a relational responsibility. For a moment, the lobby becomes a site of choice and moral imagination: How do we align ourselves?

This form of visual invitation plays a critical role in shaping public awareness. It doesn’t rely on confrontation or guilt. Instead, it frames the issue in terms of what we already

love. You don’t need to be a marine biologist or activist to feel moved by a whale’s presence. The poster harnesses that shared emotional ground and asks, gently but firmly: *Are you paying attention to what’s at stake here?*

In many ways, this image is a small but powerful act of relational environmental care. It doesn't offer a solution, but it changes the lens. It asks both locals and visitors to see beyond the surface of economic development and to consider the deeper costs; those borne by the ocean, by future generations, and by the fragile relationships that make life in Baja California possible.

B. Mural for the Parque Nacional Bahía de Loreto

During our stay in Loreto, my father and I pulled up at a gas station. He pointed out to me a mural on the wall to our right. Painted across a wide, flat wall, it shows a young child seated in a small wooden boat, drifting gently on calm blue waters. The child is not alone: beside them, a bird is perched peacefully on the bow. Behind them rise the dusky outlines of the Sierra de la Giganta mountains, bathed in the soft glow of either sunrise or sunset.



Beside this scene, in bold letters, the mural reads:

"Una sociedad se define no solo por lo que crea, sino por lo que se niega a destruir." (A society is defined not only by what it creates, but by what it refuses to destroy.)

It was provided by the National Park of Loreto Bay (Banas). The hashtag at the bottom

says "Todos y todas somos guardaparques" (*We are all park rangers*). The mural's tone is striking in its layered simplicity. It is:

- **Hopeful** - it shows a world still intact, still beautiful, still shared.
- **Intergenerational** – it places a child, not a policymaker or an adult, at the center of the scene.
- **Community-based** - it frames the importance of protecting things as a responsibility of everyone.

This mural invites viewers to remember what matters, what endures, and what can't be replaced once it's gone. Its power lies not in urgency, but in gentle insistence: Look. Feel. Remember. Choose again.

Importantly, the mural doesn't separate environmental care from community identity. It doesn't say, "Protect nature out there." It says, "This is us. This is home." In this way, it becomes more than art: It becomes a relational anchor. A reminder that protecting ecosystems isn't just about policy, it's about culture, memory, kinship, and legacy.

C. Plastic Straw Ban

One of the most consistent patterns I observed across all of the restaurants and cafés my father and I visited in Baja California was the total absence of plastic straws. In fact, in many of the places we visited, straws were not offered at all. When they were, they were made of biodegradable materials like various fibers or compostable paper- from the most touristic restaurant in town down to the smallest family-run taquería.

This wasn't presented as an inconvenience. It was presented as a norm. What could easily have been framed as a restriction or sacrifice instead felt like a quiet celebration of care.

Behind this shift is more than cultural preference, it's policy. Baja California Sur passed legislation banning the use of single-use plastics, including straws, bags, and styrofoam containers, as part of a broader environmental protection initiative (Cooper). But laws don't change behavior on their own. What was remarkable here was not just the existence of the ban, but the way it had been taken up socially, integrated into the fabric of daily life.

This alignment between policy and cultural rhythm is what makes the difference. Environmental policy, when disconnected from community practices or values, often becomes symbolic or toothless. But here, we see a relational uptake: businesses, workers, and customers all participating in the shift. Not out of obligation, but out of shared conviction.

The straw, in this case, becomes a symbol. It's not just about the plastic itself, but about what it means to refuse convenience for the sake of collective well-being. It's a micro-choice that reflects a macro-consciousness; a recognition that environmental care is not just about dramatic gestures, but about consistency, about what we choose or don't choose every day.

In this way, the plastic straw ban becomes more than a regulation. It becomes a cultural statement. A subtle but powerful message that the environment matters, that what we discard has consequences, and that care for the Earth can be expressed in the smallest of actions when rooted in shared values.

D. Balandra Beach: Reservation System

Balandra Beach, just outside La Paz, is one of the most beloved and iconic natural sites in Baja California. With its calm, turquoise waters, shallow sandbars, and striking rock formations like the famed "*El Hongo*" (*The Mushroom*), it has long drawn both locals and tourists eager to swim, snorkel, and float in its serene beauty. In recent years, however, Balandra has undergone a

quiet yet significant transformation. Not in its landscape, but in how people are invited to experience it.

Today, visiting Balandra requires navigating a reservation system with limited access. The beach operates on two defined time blocks per day: one in the morning and one in the afternoon. Only a set number of visitors are allowed per time slot, and once the limit is reached, no additional entry is permitted until the next shift. Parking is monitored, and there are checkpoints ensuring compliance with the new system (Unmissable Balandra Beach in La Paz: Your Travel Guide).

This access structure was not always in place. In fact, I remember what it was like eight years ago: open access, longer stays, and far more people. The shift wasn't arbitrary. It was implemented to protect the ecosystem, which had suffered from overuse, pollution, and degradation.

The new system, while orderly and relatively unobtrusive, creates a tangible shift. It introduces a sense of rhythm, a pulse that reflects not just human convenience, but ecological capacity. It asks us to arrive on time, to leave when our window closes, to share the space not just with each other, but with the land itself.

At first, the change may seem restrictive. There's a natural human response to push against rules, especially in leisure spaces. I felt it too. A small flicker of annoyance at not being able to stay as long as I wanted or to come and go freely. But then, something else settled in—an understanding that these limits were not punishment, but care.

Care for the beach. Care for the things that call it home. Care for future visitors.



In a world shaped by extractive tourism and endless growth, Balandra offers a different idea; one where limits are not signs of scarcity but expressions of respect. It reminds us that true enjoyment of a place includes respecting its thresholds, listening to its needs, and acknowledging that we are not the only ones who matter.

This reservation system, simple as it may seem, is a profound gesture of relational environmental stewardship. It suggests that we do not love a place by consuming it fully, but by leaving space: space for regeneration, for rest, for the unknown.

In Balandra, I experienced this not just as a visitor, but as a guest. And in that shift, from entitlement to gratitude, I caught a glimpse of what it means to belong to a place without possessing it.

IV. Interview Insights: Voices of Community

To better understand how environmental care is lived, not just legislated, I spoke with locals whose livelihoods are deeply entangled with the ecosystems of Baja California.



The first conversation took place in La Paz with two men who work as snorkeling sea lion tour guides. The second was in the gray whale sanctuary near Magdalena Bay with three boat guides who lead tours during the seasonal whale migrations. All of these men are deeply embedded in their local communities. They spoke with the lived intimacy of those who depend on, and feel responsible for, the health of the sea.

Across both conversations, three key themes emerged: pride, awareness, and responsibility.

1. Pride in Environmental Practices

There was a palpable sense of pride in how local people have taken action to protect their home. The La Paz guides described community resistance to hotel development, emphasizing that it was the locals themselves who organized and said no. They referenced Cabo Pulmo, a small fishing village that transformed into a thriving marine reserve after the community voluntarily stopped fishing.

(All quotes are translated from their original Spanish for simplicity.)

Referring to the return of marine life and the shift toward eco-tourism in Cabo Pulmo:

“They stopped, and now it works.”

Referencing the rejection of development that would have harmed protected areas:

“The locals said no.”

These weren’t framed as top-down victories. They were described as hard-won, collective efforts—local decisions for local futures.

2. Awareness of Ecological Fragility

Both sets of guides were acutely aware of the vulnerabilities of their ecosystems. The Loreto guides mentioned water issues, sanitation, and the impacts of illegal fishing, while the whale guides spoke of large industrial fleets threatening marine life.

Describing the pressures of tourism on a small bay:

“Too many people, not enough fresh water,”

Another spoke about how large fishing boats were causing damage to the marine life and the environment, pointing to how large-scale operations displace or endanger marine species.

There was no romanticism here. Just clear-sighted understanding that these places are both beautiful and at risk. And importantly, they knew that rules alone aren’t enough.

Voicing a common frustration with enforcement that burdens locals while leaving corporations untouched:

“Sometimes laws don’t work—they only affect the simple man,”

3. Personal and Community Responsibility

Despite uneven policy enforcement, what emerged most clearly was a deep sense of relational accountability, not as something imposed, but chosen. The whale guides emphasized unity, expressing that everyone needs to be united to accomplish change.

There was also an understanding of intergenerational duty. One guide mentioned generations, implying that today’s care must ensure tomorrow’s possibility. This wasn’t framed as abstract environmentalism; it was grounded in love for place and people.



These conversations reveal a form of environmental care that is lived rather than theorized, not a stance, but a way of being with the land and sea. The people I spoke to are not just stakeholders; they are relational stewards of ecosystems they know deeply and protect fiercely, even as they continue to depend on them for their survival.

VI. Relational Analysis: What This Teaches Us About Care

When held together, the examples from Baja California; the poster, the mural, the plastic straw ban, the Balandra Beach reservation system, and the interviews with local guides offer more than individual moments of environmental consciousness. They reveal a relational orientation to care: a way of tending to place that is rooted in collective choice, everyday gestures, and deep emotional investment.

Each of these actions, on its own, may seem small or localized. But when viewed together, they form a powerful ecosystem of stewardship: One that contrasts sharply with the extractive norms dominant in many other parts of the world.

In much of the global discourse on environmentalism, care is often framed through the language of crisis, urgency, or sacrifice. Solutions tend to be top-down, market-based, or individualistic, measured in carbon credits, offset strategies, or consumer swaps. Meanwhile, systemic harm continues, and people are left feeling disempowered or numb. In this context, care is often abstracted, moralized, or commodified.

What I witnessed in Baja California was something else entirely. Care here is not a slogan—it is a shared mentality. It moves through regulation and occasional resistance, through art and infrastructure, through pride and practical choices.

Let's break this mentality down:

- **Small, everyday refusals:** The absence of plastic straws isn't just about pollution. It's a cultural cue—a refusal of convenience when it harms the sea. It's an act of unlearning extractive habits at the most basic level and inviting others to join in.
- **Organized limitations:** The access system at Balandra Beach isn't restrictive for its own sake. It is a form of co-regulation; a gesture that says, "This place has limits, and we are listening to them." It's a structural embodiment of restraint as love.
- **Creative protest and imagination:** The mural and the poster communicate what scientific reports can't. They show how art can hold ecological care and intergenerational weight at the same time.

- **Pride and commitment to place:** The voices of local guides reflect more than compliance with environmental rules. They reflect ownership—a sense that this care is theirs to carry, protect, and pass on. They are not waiting for outsiders to “save” the environment. They are already doing the work, in conversation with place.

Together, these examples illustrate that environmental care in Baja is not transactional, extractive, or performative. It is relational, lived, and reciprocal. It moves across sectors: policy, tourism, education, community memory. It is enacted through collaboration rather than individualism.



This doesn't mean Baja is a utopia. Tensions still exist: uneven enforcement, economic pressure, and vulnerability to global forces. But what stands out is the coherence of care across multiple dimensions of life. This is not environmentalism imposed from above—it is a culture of care arising from within. And perhaps that's the most important lesson: That the health of the planet is not a task to be outsourced or optimized. It is a relationship to be tended, together.

VII. Conclusion: Invitations, Not Templates

At the beginning of this paper, I offered a hypothesis: the people of Baja California demonstrate a strikingly effective and grounded form of environmental stewardship, surpassing the performative or extractive models found in many other places. After walking the beaches, listening to local voices, observing daily practices, and witnessing community in murals and protest posters, I believe that hypothesis holds.

What I found was not just a confirmation of effective environmental policy—I found something more relational, more alive. I found a culture that treats the environment, the species, and future generations not as abstract concerns, but as co-participants in life.

This culture of care does not rely on one perfect solution. It is not a blueprint to be copied or a template to be applied elsewhere. It is, instead, a deeply contextual way of relating to the community. One that emerges from local knowledge, community memory, lived experience, and

emotional investment. And because of that, the culture of care cannot be outsourced, franchised, or scaled—it must be rooted.

That is what makes it powerful, and that is what makes it rare.

What struck me most about my time in Baja California wasn't just the natural beauty or the presence of environmental regulations, though those are important. What moved me most deeply was the cohesion I saw in how people showed up to protect what they love. There was a quiet, collective agreement running through everything: this place matters, and we will take care of it.

From the absence of plastic straws to the limited access at Balandra Beach, from the posters in hotel lobbies to the murals reminding us about what we can do together, what I witnessed wasn't just environmentalism. It was a culture of care enacted by a community that had collectively decided that protecting this land and sea was non-negotiable.

In a world where bad habits often feel inevitable, where environmental responsibility is so often fragmented, performative, or dismissed completely, seeing an entire region practicing aligned, grounded stewardship felt both rare and powerful. There was no single hero, no one group to credit. It was the collective effort that impressed me—the way people, policies, traditions, and even tourism practices had begun to cohere around a shared ethic of protection.



The experience left me with both hope and longing. Hope, because I saw that this kind of community-based environmental stewardship is more than just possible—it's literally happening. And longing, because I want to see more of it. I want other places to feel committed, connected, and alive.

And maybe most of all, it left me with a recalibrated sense of what's worth striving for. If Baja California teaches us

anything, it's that environmental care is about more than science or policy. It's about relationships; among people, with place, across generations, and what becomes possible when those relationships are honored, centered, and protected.

In a world where environmentalism often gets reduced to compliance checklists, personal virtue signals, or distant policy battles, Baja California offers a different possibility: care as mentality. Care as refusal. Care as collective agreement to remember what is sacred before it's lost.

This is not a call to mimic Baja, but to listen for what your own place is asking of you. To wonder how your community might begin to cohere around care. Not as a reaction, but as a practice. Not as a campaign, but as a way of life.

Because perhaps the most radical thing we can do is not invent new systems, but remember how to belong.





Works Cited

- Banas, John. "Murals Celebrating Our Loreto Bay National Park." *KEEP LORETO MAGICAL Foundation*, KEEP LORETO MAGICAL Foundation, 31 Oct. 2022, www.keeploretomagical.org/magical-stories/murals-celebrating-our-loreto-bay-national-park/
- Cooper, Catharine. "Baja California Sur Bans Plastic Bags, Straws & Styrofoam." *Baja Dreaming*, 20 July 2018, bajadreaming.me/2018/07/20/baja-california-sur-bans-plastic-bags-straws-styrofoam/? Accessed 03 Apr. 2025.
- Kartupelis, Jenny. "Relational Care: Precedent, Practice and Potential." *Research in Practice*, 20 May 2024, www.researchinpractice.org.uk/all/news-views/2024/may/relational-care-precedent-practice-and-potential/.
- Shellenberger, Michael, and Ted Nordhaus. *The Death of Environmentalism: Global Warming Politics in a Post-Environmental World*. Breakthrough Institute, 2004, <https://thebreakthrough.org/articles/the-death-of-environmentalism>
- "Unmissable Balandra Beach in La Paz: Your Travel Guide." *2024 VisitBalandra*, 2024
- VisitBalandra, Oct. 2024, visitbalandra.com/home/? Accessed 6 Apr. 2025.