

Tips and Insights for Climate Solutions Practice

from the 2022/23 SJN Climate Solutions Cohort

The Solutions Journalism Network's Climate Solutions Cohort was a diverse and talented group of 20 journalists who came together virtually for a year to write climate solutions pieces and, along the way, work toward a solutions journalism practice that comprises new ways of engaging with the communities journalists cover. That shift requires empathy, self-reflection and an honest reckoning with how the mainstream version of media culture has led to the alienation of many groups whose voices (historically and currently) have not been heard or represented.

This cohort wrestled with core questions such as: How do you build trust with communities that are not yours? How do you tell their stories without being extractive or exploitative? How do you honor the lived experience of communities by centering their definitions of real solutions?

Individually and collectively, these 20 journalists worked toward a living, breathing partnership with their audiences, using approaches that have been forged in the crucible of community-based journalism, especially by the Black press. Below you'll find insights and lessons from four of the cohort members, which we hope will help you deepen your solutions practice as well.



J Whitney Bauck



Don't gloss over imperfections

Context: Solutions stories often focus on what an individual, community or institution is getting right, but that doesn't mean they should be Pollyannaish or naive about shortcomings.

Advice: Include mention of the flaws or hurdles that remain in the way of the solution being realized to its utmost. Mention of the flaws doesn't need to make up the majority of the story, but shortcomings should at least be acknowledged.

The How: When interviewing sources about the solution in question, ask, "What are the challenges that still remain?"

The Why: Acknowledging potential shortcomings bolsters audience trust and can help differentiate rigorous journalism from fluffy stories that are meant to make readers feel good but lack substance.

The Win: A final story that highlights solutions while still acknowledging potential setbacks — not to undermine the story of the overall solution, but to ground the piece in the reality that there are almost never silver bullets.

Story Links

[Extreme weather is only getting worse. Can cities protect public transit?](#)

[A chef's quest to prove insects taste delicious](#)

[How Norway can help cure America's 'range anxiety'](#)

[The visuals of today help create the reality of tomorrow](#)

[How 2 communities, separated by an ocean, are working together to manage trash better](#)

[Denver's e-bike rebates are so hot they're gone within minutes](#)

Whitney Bauck is an independent climate and environment reporter who contributes to The New York Times, The Washington Post, Financial Times, Grist and more. Prior to going freelance, Whitney built out the sustainability vertical at a fashion news website, and she was named an environmental reporting fellow at the Metcalf Institute in 2020. Whitney grew up in Manila, Philippines, and is currently based in Brooklyn, New York. You can follow her work via Twitter, Instagram and her newsletter.

Location: Brooklyn, NY

Pronouns: she/her

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Lead with people's assets

Context: When journalists write about gnarly problems, we often start with the most sensational parts of a person's or community's story, which can sometimes lead to reducing people to their worst moments or experiences.

Advice: Rather than leading with all the ways a situation is terrible, use [Asset-Framing](#)® to introduce people the way they might introduce themselves — highlighting their strengths and contributions first.

The How: If you're writing a story about the attempt to clean up pollution in a resource-strapped community, for example, don't start with a graphic depiction of rotting trash. Instead, start with a description of the clean-up solution in action, or a community member talking about how proud they are of their community garden.

The Why: Asset-Framing can help journalists resist feeding into negative stereotypes about an area or group of people, and avoid "poverty porn" and other trope-filled storytelling.

The Win: Telling stories in a way that more closely mirrors how people might talk about themselves. The goal isn't to hide or gloss over the very serious issues that need to be faced, but to center the humanity and dignity of subjects first, before outlining problems.

Solutions with a proven track record are the most valuable

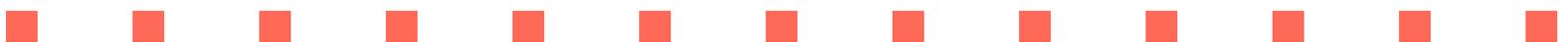
Context: Companies that have a financial interest in the public believing that their product or service is a solution will put lots of money into publicizing their launches. But that's often before the alleged solution has a track record.

Advice: Prioritize stories that feature solutions that have been around long enough for you to verify that they're more than just hype, and are able to actually accomplish what they claim to.

The How: Before jumping into reporting on something as a solution, ask: Is there any data to back the idea that this solution works as promised? Who's saying this is a solution, and do they have a vested interest in it being perceived as such? Are there any third-party sources I can check with to verify the viability of the solution?

The Why: Readers are looking to journalists to help them distinguish between real solutions and marketing ploys. Asking tough questions can help you make those distinctions.

The Win: Successful solutions reporting means not amplifying every breathless press release, but allowing time and data to highlight solutions that actually have a track record..



J J.D. Allen



Make community collaboration a key part of production work

Context: Often we separate journalism into editors and reporters, especially at non-broadcast outlets, but there is a lot to be said for the effectiveness of strong producers and assignment editors who can establish and keep relationships with communities heavily impacted by climate change.

Advice: Build on everyday digital engagement tools to create a small network of community insiders who have been historically ignored in their neighborhoods.

The How: This group of insiders can meet on Microsoft Teams, weekly Zoom meetings, Slack or in a Facebook group with producers and reporters on the climate beat.

The Why: Building a platform gives community members a forum to speak directly to your media outlet about how they are adapting to climate impacts.

The Win: Response-driven story ideas coming from the people who understand the climate problem in their communities. This strategy builds trust between a media outlet and the community it serves.

Story Links

[Landfill inflicts 'generational trauma' on North Bellport residents of color](#)
[Food, gas, power: Anaerobic digesters and Long Island's untapped market](#)
[Long Island sorts through the patchwork of innovative ways to handle trash](#)
[Bill shifts reducing plastic and paper waste in New York to manufacturers](#)
[Urgent Long Island trash study headed up by veteran Stony Brook researcher](#)
[Communities take steps to overcome Long Island's food scrap dilemma](#)

A native Long Islander, J.D. Allen is managing editor at WSHU Public Radio. He also hosts the climate podcast "Higher Ground." J.D. has reported for public radio stations across the Northeast and has written for community newspapers about the intersection of business, real estate and land use with the climate crisis.

Location: Long Island, NY

Pronouns: he/him

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Ditch the solo approach

Context: Journalism about climate solutions is a collaboration among scientists, science communicators, the media and communities. Draw a Venn diagram of who is creating and sharing knowledge about climate solutions to figure out the role that everyone can have to ensure the information reaches the people it needs to reach.

Advice: Be transparent. Have open conversations about the expectations of how you intend to re-create and distribute information that came from the community.

The How: Who's on the team? The journalist is obviously creating and sharing the story through the media outlet. The scientist might be able to share data or graphics that can be re-created for a general audience — perhaps with the help of a science communicator. A science lab, academic institution or nonprofit group might be able to cross-share or redistribute the story. You could create roundtable internal or external conversations with an institution about the story; true also for the community leaders, grassroots advocacy groups or civic organizations that can generate education and engagement within neighborhoods.

The Why: Your sources (a term I detest) might not be aware of industry practices, corporate guidelines or journalistic ethics that you must adhere to. Also, there might be a deeper collaboration

to be had in the way their voices can be shared. Being a “source” is extractive; we should want to do solutions journalism that is restorative.

The Win: A climate solutions story that gets everyone involved on the same page and is able to create more together even after the ink is dry.

Make it a solutions series

Context: There are many complicated problems, so shouldn't there be multiple complex solutions?

Advice: Make your solutions story into a series that publishes over time — instead of a one-and-done.

The How: Plan out your story list and get the necessary approval from management. Weigh how different story structures might make some solutions more engaging and comprehensible to your audience. Reporting on a climate solution might lead to breaking news, which you can center with more nuance than traditional conflict.

The Why: Series reporting can allow for more time for engagement and community outreach.

The Win: A well-defined series can cover responses to complex problems that change over time, which can strengthen relationships with the communities affected.



J Justin Cook



Pursue a new climate visual vocabulary

Context: We are making up the climate change visual vocabulary as we go, so here are some approaches that have worked for me.

Advice: Make photographs beyond pictures of fire, smokestacks, oil derricks and starving polar bears.

The How: Yes, photograph the effects of extreme heat, floods, etc. But don't linger on destruction. Focus on what people love and want to preserve in their communities, and why those things are significant. A climate visual can be a photograph of daily life: a town dance, a church service, a parade or a birthday party in a town affected by climate change.

The Why: A lot of these things can be similar among communities, and this creates solidarity.

The Win: Show people why a place is worth saving via empathetic character sketches and scenes of ordinary life.

Take your time

Advice: Time is the most important ingredient in climate storytelling.

The How: Slow down. Report and photograph indigenously by becoming indigenous to place. Spend time there.

Story Links

[Homecoming, Part 1](#) and [Homecoming, Part 2](#)

[Origins, Part 1: The soil farmers](#) and [Origins, Part 2: The whales of Fishing Creek](#)

[Whales Introduction](#)

[Origins](#)

Justin Cook is a photographer and journalist based in Durham, North Carolina. He documents resiliency in communities living along the edges in America, often by focusing on environmental issues, climate change and climate solutions. His work has been funded by the Pulitzer Center and the North Carolina Arts Council, and honored by POYi, the Society of Professional Journalists, and American Photography. When he is not making photographs, you can find him hunting for fossilized shark teeth in eastern North Carolina.

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(Note: Cook spent a year building relationships with farmers and activists in Princeville, North Carolina, before he discussed writing a story. He planted vegetables, volunteered at the farmers market and dug for whale fossils with a woman who became central to his story. To those inclined to say that relationships like that compromise “objectivity,” Cook urges them to consider how a distant and unempathetic lens has led journalists to write stories that are uninformed, distorted and untrue.)

The Why: You need time to see how climate change symptoms, like sea level rise, slowly alter a community.

The Win: Give the land and water the same respect you’d give people.

Don’t convince, activate

Advice: Seek out regular people who are taking action in their communities. Connect climate to things they already care about.

The How: Figure out what makes them tick. Probe their minds and hearts and make images that convey their climate emotions and ambitions. Let your work serve their psychological needs, and scaffold their stories around solutions reporting.

The Why: My goal isn’t to convince people that climate change is real, but activate people who are already climate aware.

The Win: Stories that are important to the communities you’re covering. Their stories may not match the tastes of an editor in New York City, but that doesn’t make those stories unimportant. Think local.

Other advice:

Put your solutions in context with history: How did we get here? What other factors beyond climate drove a community to actions/solutions? Are there other justice issues that climate is exacerbating? Show us how injustices are interconnected, and a way forward.

Use the IPCC rubric when reporting solutions: The U.N. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) says climate adaptations and solutions should have a long-term focus; address multiple issues simultaneously (multi-solving); prioritize justice and equity; link scientific, indigenous and local knowledge; and be tailored to the needs of local communities and ecosystems.

Have reciprocal relationships with your reporting partners, especially the most vulnerable. Make them prints, share your images, find ways to bring them with you to conferences.



J Gabriela Barzallo



Engage and LISTEN to frontline communities

Avoid overlooking or making assumptions about marginalized communities who are disproportionately affected by climate change. Instead, prioritize listening to their experiences and perspectives. These communities often have valuable insights and innovative solutions to share due to their lived experiences. For instance, during my reporting in the Amazon Rainforest, I discovered that local indigenous communities have already implemented solutions, such as bio entrepreneurship projects, as alternatives to extractivism and the fossil fuel industry.

Local stories can have a global impact

Climate issues often transcend geographical boundaries and similar challenges can be observed in different countries or regions. Avoid underestimating the significance of a story simply because it is hyperlocal or a solution is specific to a small community. Many times, you will discover that these stories and solutions can inspire and be applicable in other parts of the world as well. Recognize the universal elements and lessons that can be drawn from these local narratives to foster broader awareness and action.

Story Links

[Biodiversity on the Ballot](#)

[To Fight Deforestation, Amazon Guardians Embrace a Tech Boom](#)

[Can the bioeconomy replace oil extraction in the Ecuadorian Amazon?](#)

Gabriela Barzallo is a bilingual journalist and media entrepreneur from Ecuador based between New York City and Latin America. A graduate of NYU, she tells stories about climate, environmental justice, human rights, etc, from a solutions angle. She writes for international media outlets including Al Jazeera, BBC Future, El País, and more.

Location: New York City

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J Jane Palmer



Look for positive steps forward

Context: Sometimes in your reporting you are not seeing a fully fledged solution story, but you can see strategies that are working to either build resilience or reduce emissions.

Advice: A solutions story doesn't have to be tied up with a bow. Being a solutions journalist means acting like a scientist. You hunt for something that shows promise and then report it thoroughly — the positives and the negatives.

The How: When it comes to water and food security, for example, people are resourceful and innovative. They may be looking for something to solve an immediate problem they face, but those small steps can make a difference. Maybe those steps can be scaled up? Maybe they can be refined?

The Why: Even when faced with the most dire situations, people might be taking positive steps in the right direction.

The Win: Stories that inspire an idea for a future solution. It's about putting the ideas out there, so they can be built on.

Jane Palmer is a freelance science and environmental journalist who writes for a diverse range of outlets including Nature, Science, Proto Magazine and Eos. More recently she has written several features on Traditional Knowledge and the lessons that can be learned from Indigenous and traditional experiences sustaining and managing the environment. Before becoming a journalist, Jane was a scientist.

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Story Links

[Building resilience in the face of a dwindling Colorado River](#)

[Urban water conservation success in the Colorado River Basin](#)

[Agriculture 3.0: Preparing for a drier future in the Colorado River Basin](#)

[A solar solution to the West's changing climate?](#)

[Colombian City pioneers path to 'early warnings for all'](#)

[Taking a fine-grained approach to investigating climate's impact on crops](#)

Other Climate Solutions Cohort Stories

Alexandria Herr	Why heat waves become deadly	“The Carbon Copy”
	The Ike Dike could protect Houston from the next big hurricane	“The Carbon Copy”
Britny Cordera	How St. Louis churches are revealing the disparities in the air we breathe	Next City
	Facing extreme weather, Spanish Lake farmer makes changes to routine and crops	St. Louis Public Radio
	Christmas Bird Count could confirm decline in bird species across the St. Louis region	St. Louis Public Radio
	Supporting young farmers of color can help the U.S. meet its goals	Yes! Magazine
	Justice40 Accelerator program boosts Detroit nonprofits, but advocates say more help is needed	Planet Detroit
	St. Louis was once Mound City. Its Native American residents still feel erased	St. Louis Public Radio
	Has the heat pump’s era arrived? What Michiganders need to know.	Planet Detroit
	Fans of The Little Mermaid are getting together to fight for Ariel’s home	Imagine5
	Tower Grove Park’s restored stream teaches about the Osage Nation	St. Louis Public Radio
Caleigh Wells	Hotter, more humid, but cleaner: How LA’s air has changed	KCRW
	Future of tomatoes in CA drought: hydroponic farming?	KCRW
	Joshua trees’ quest to gain protection just got longer	KCRW
	How to teach climate change without scaring kids	KCRW
	This climate solution saves water and creates solar energy	KCRW
	Healthy soil can be a climate change solution	KCRW
	Residents want a natural LA River. Officials say it’s risky	KCRW
	LA reuses lots of stormwater, but wants to save more	KCRW
	LA’s controversial plan to switch a gas plant to hydrogen	KCRW
Caroline Tracey	How a volunteer trash pickup club tackles housing and climate justice	High Country News
	How protecting trees can fight gentrification	High Country News
	LDS environmentalists want their institution to address lake’s collapse	High Country News
	Can this beef cooperative become ‘the West’s largest climate-smart ranching program’?	Civil Eats



Other Climate Solutions Cohort Stories

Cayte Bosler	<u>Adirondack lakes: Insights into a changing climate</u>	Adirondack Explorer
	<u>Communities getting 'smart' on climate change</u>	Adirondack Explorer
Haley Samsel	<u>'It's a win-win': Fort Worth will sell gas from your trash through new landfill program</u>	Fort Worth Report
	<u>Major companies pledged funding for Texas water projects. What are the results so far?</u>	Fort Worth Report
	<u>The River Walk transformed San Antonio. Could Panther Island do the same for Fort Worth?</u>	Fort Worth Report
	<u>Fort Worth remains one of few major cities without a climate action plan. Where does it go from here?</u>	Fort Worth Report
Jenna Kunze	<u>In the extinction capital of the world, a Native school is restoring Indigenous forests</u>	Native News Online
Katherine Rapin	<u>How using nature's tools is helping clean up urban rivers</u>	Yale360, Wired
	<u>The grassroots movement that built Puerto Rico's first community-owned microgrid</u>	Palabra, Next City
	<u>Can Conversations be a Climate Solution?</u>	Teen Vogue, Fast Company
Keerti Gopal	<u>Youth-powered science</u>	Palabra
	<u>"Island of People"</u>	Inherited
Ray Levy Uyeda	<u>Decolonizing regenerative cattle ranching</u>	Yes! Magazine
	<u>Young people are using the court system to fight for climate justice</u>	Prism
	<u>Resident-owned mobile home communities intersect housing and climate justice</u>	Prism

