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As Region Wrestles with the Economic Impact of COVID, Waterfront Alliance ‘City of Water Day’ Highlights our Continuing Vulnerability to the Effects of Climate Change at the Future High Tide Line in New York and New Jersey

With Seaport District art installations by [Justin Brice Guariglia](#), [Kamau Ware](#), and [Sarah Cameron Sunde](#), socially-distant gathering of civic leaders at the South Street Seaport Museum, and local events across the region, advocates, educators, and electeds sound the alarm to stay ahead of crisis

New York, NY — Nearly eight years after Hurricane Sandy devastated New York and New Jersey, and just six months after the first local Coronavirus case was diagnosed, advocates, artists and outdoor educators in dozens of communities across the region hosted events to mark the 13th annual City of Water Day—with urgent grassroots calls to action to recognize the threat of climate in the wake of COVID-19, another catastrophe that brought our region to a standstill.

The region-wide climate awareness day kicked off with the reopening of the South Street Seaport Museum’s Tall Ship *Wavertree* to the public and the launch of an outdoor, multimedia art exhibition, [‘Art at the BlueLine,’](#) in the Seaport District—featuring diverse artworks by award-winning artists Justin Brice Guariglia, Kamau Ware, and Sarah Cameron Sunde—warning of the realities of climate change and the need for systemic change and investment.

The day was the first for Waterfront Alliance’s new CEO, Cortney Worrall—an experienced environmental activist and nonprofit leader responsible for several landmark campaign victories as an executive with the National Parks Conservation Association, including President Obama’s designation of the Stonewall National Monument and congressional passage of critical funding for national parks in the Great American Outdoors Act.

“Every year, we use the City of Water Day to benchmark how much progress we’ve made towards the resilience of New York and New Jersey,” said **Cortney Worrall, new President and CEO of the Waterfront Alliance**. “This year finds us in a very different place—struggling against the tide of a global pandemic and once again acutely aware of the vulnerability of our region to the unpredictable and catastrophic. COVID, like 9/11 and Hurricane Sandy, should be a warning shot to all of us; what once seemed far away feels suddenly real. We must prepare our region for climate change—to protect the homes and businesses, the physical and cultural infrastructure that makes our region unique and helps ensure the safety and well-being of our residents.”

The day’s anchor event was held on the South Street Seaport Museum’s Tall Ship *Wavertree*, briefly open to the public on free select days in September for the first time since the COVID crisis shut it down in March. Despite its importance in telling the story of the economic history of our city, built by and for



immigrants, the museum is at risk; few institutions in New York have experienced the gauntlet that it did over the past two decades, with 9/11, the 2008 financial crisis Hurricane Sandy and now COVID; infrastructural planning is sorely needed to keep the museum the waterfront cultural icon it is today.

“The South Street Seaport Museum is one of the best, and unfortunately most devastating examples of the critical need for regional resiliency planning,” said Captain Jonathan Boulware, South Street Seaport Museum President and CEO. “This museum does so much for New York—connecting our residents to the city as it was, a port city built and made prosperous by immigrants to the New York that is, a world port metropolis—but the museum's future is in jeopardy. As a cultural institution downtown at the water’s edge, we’ve experienced catastrophic hardships over the past two decades. We need investment in our infrastructure on the BlueLine to keep institutions like ours literally and figuratively afloat.”

An outdoor art exhibition also in the Seaport District, sponsored by Howard Hughes, to confront passers-by about the realities of climate change and the need for infrastructural investment will run until September 27 as part of an elongated celebration of City of Water Day in the new context of COVID-19:

New Jersey-native [Justin Brice Guariglia](#)’s solar-powered LED warnings about climate change flash across highway traffic signs with messages that challenge viewers to think ecologically and stimulate conversations about the environment, while seaport-based visual storyteller [Kamau Ware](#) of Black Gotham Experience explores how people of color have been erased from our local history through an exhibit of four flags symbolizing the connection between the Indigenous people of New York and the Africans from the Congo and Angola in the 17th Century on the island of Mannahatta.

A multimedia video installation work by New York City-based [artist Sarah Cameron Sunde](#), “36.5 / A Durational Performance with the Sea” is being projected onto the Tall Ship *Wavertree* itself, on four nights (September 12, 17, 25 and 26) from approximately 7pm to 10:30pm. The piece includes nine site-specific works created in locations around the world that are threatened by climate change, from Bangladesh and the Netherlands to Brazil and Kenya.

“Responding to the ecological crisis we face today is the moral imperative of our time. At this critical juncture, art must be used as a positive force for social and political change, and to help open our minds to new possibilities,” said **Guariglia**.

“This is an ideal time to have conversations about environmental resilience and social justice with new lenses that understand deeper,” said **Ware**.

“36.5 / A Durational Performance with the Sea began as a poetic response to Hurricane Sandy’s impact on New York City and it is a thrill to be able to project these video works outdoors and site-specifically at the South Street Seaport—onto the *Wavertree* and right by the water where the high water mark



reminds us how high the water came. I hope passersby take some time to pause and consider their current relationship to the sea, eight years after Sandy," said **Sunde**.

In addition to the anchor events in Manhattan, advocates, educators, and community organizers hosted more than 45 '[In Your Neighborhood](#)' events from every borough in New York, Westchester, across New Jersey, and online. *In Your Neighborhood* programming was organized and supported in collaboration with the New York & New Jersey Harbor & Estuary Program (HEP).

"Our waterfront neighborhoods are on the frontline for rising sea levels and coastal storms" noted **Robert Pirani, Director of the New York – New Jersey Harbor & Estuary Program**. "We are proud to be able to support community organizations and other partners in their efforts to engage people and build public understanding. But awareness will not be enough to meet the challenge. Collective action across the estuary will be needed to address this looming crisis".

From Coney Island and Flushing Bay to Hoboken, Elizabeth and Secaucus, participating groups found creative, engaging ways to showcase the 'BlueLine'—that is, the future high tide line marking the point at which sea level rise will wreak havoc on our infrastructure unless we move quickly to protect ourselves.

Local events included demonstrations in support of resilience featuring the voices of community members most vulnerable to future climate crises alongside recreational activations including a socially distanced tour of the National Lighthouse Museum, kayaking trips along the Bronx and Hackensack Rivers, a variety of family-friendly park-based experiences at the 3rd Annual Jamaica Bay Festival, an art installation in New Brunswick, beach cleanups and kayaking in Hoboken, a virtual multilingual climate justice film screening, and educational tours of waterfront parks.

"Along with our partners, we are excited to host the 3rd Annual Jamaica Bay Festival on City of Water Day celebrating the unparalleled opportunities and natural beauty of this urban tidal estuary," said **Alex Zablocki, Executive Director, Jamaica Bay-Rockaway Parks Conservancy**. "City of Water Day may look different this year due to COVID-19, but our love of the waterfront and desire to open up access to Jamaica Bay and educate the public about its importance continues. Jamaica Bay Festival partners are offering self-guided tours, kayaking, presentations and other programs throughout Jamaica Bay and online."

Elected officials from New York and New Jersey weighed in with support for this effort to put renewed attention on the impact of climate change in the economic aftermath of COVID-19:

Senator Brad Hoylman said: "The terrible wildfires raging along the West Coast are a sobering reminder that though we're focused on confronting a historic public health crisis, climate change continues to cause more severe weather events than ever before. Here in New York, many are unaware that their homes and apartments are increasingly threatened by rising sea levels and severe storms. I'm grateful to



the Waterfront Alliance for their advocacy on this critical issue and look forward to working together to pass our bill S.8439 to increase flood risk disclosures to tenants and homeowners."

"Every single community with a coastline around New York City is threatened by rising sea levels and climate change overall. Last year the New York City Council declared a climate emergency in our City bringing focus to this existential threat-this year as we embark on the long road to recovery from the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic we must not lose sight of the threat posed to our City by climate change. We are going to have to be a City that can multi-task and effectively deal with these two paramount issues simultaneously, " said **Council Member Ben Kallos**. Thank you to the Waterfront Alliance for hosting City of Water Day even in the face of the pandemic so that we could all pay more attention to the climate crisis at hand."

City of Water Day is a free harbor-wide day organized by the Waterfront Alliance and its partners to raise awareness about the risk we face from sea level rise and climate change—with lower-income communities disproportionately hit, including the more than one million people in the region living within the future 2100 flood plain. The day of action follows Waterfront Alliance’s launch of the climate advocacy campaign [Rise to Resilience](#) with partners earlier this summer.

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The [Waterfront Alliance](#) inspires and effects resilient, revitalized, and accessible coastlines for all communities.