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An investigation of the environmental participation of Latinos in Chicago

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In this research I explored Latinos' environmental participation, motivations and barriers to participation, and how Latinos believe their participation fits in the larger environmental movement. I aim to share the results of this research with others in the environmental field to help incorporate more Latinos into environmental projects. Hopefully, it will help others better understand the motivations and barriers to Latino participation in environmental projects and organizations. Four questions guided this study:

1. In what ways do Latinos in Chicago participate in environmental projects or organizations?
2. What motivates Latinos in Chicago to participate in environmental projects or organizations?
3. How do Latinos in Chicago participating in environmental projects or organizations perceive the impacts of their efforts on the environment?
4. How do Latinos in Chicago participating in environmental projects or organizations perceive their efforts in relation to the mainstream environmental movement?

In order to answer these questions, I conducted 12 qualitative interviews to obtain in-depth understanding of the experiences of the Latinos interviewed. I purposefully selected individuals that met the following criteria: 1) self-identify as Latino, 2) reside in the Chicago-land area, and 3) participate in an environmental project or organization.

Results

Types of Projects

Interviewees participated in a great variety of projects and organizations, which fell into 5 major categories: Restoration, Gardening, Environmental Justice, Academic/Research, and Networking. Within these categories, projects differed based upon their scope and were at the community level, regional, national, or global.

Impacts of Projects

Although each of the projects impacted the environment, all interviewees also focused on the impact on their communities, such as improving the quality of life of the area, increasing knowledge around environmental issues, or motivating individuals to take action by providing more opportunities within the community.

Definition of Environment and Nature

Participants generally shared definitions of the environment that include all living and non-living things; however, with respect to nature, individuals either believed the terms 'environment' and 'nature' were interchangeable or that 'nature' has a more narrow focus on distant non-human areas.

Cultural Influence

Some participants' experiences with the environment in the United States conflicted with their experiences in their countries of origin, which contributed to their environmental participation. Some individuals identified specific values relevant to their environmental work that came from their culture. Only one individual felt that their culture did not influence the way they viewed or interacted with the environment.

Motivation

With regards to why interviewees participated in environmental activities, some individuals were motivated to enter environmental work by injustices with regards to food equality, health, and nutrition. Other interviewees entered environmental work due to a professor or teacher that introduced environmental issues to them as a youth. One participant discussed participating due to a concern for the next generation.

Environmentalist

Two major definitions of an environmentalist emerged from interviewees' responses. The more prominent being that an environmentalist is an individual who is aware about environmental issues, cares about the environment, and does something about it. The other was a more stereotypical definition of a radical Caucasian individual that takes action without fully understanding the problem or its implications. Despite these two very different definitions, all but three participants considered themselves to be an environmentalist according to their own definition. Of the latter, two of these individuals believed that they were working towards becoming an environmentalist, but were not yet active or knowledgeable enough. The last interviewee believed that they were an environmental justice advocate as opposed to an environmentalist.

Perceptions of Mainstream Environmental Movement

Participants defined the "Mainstream Environmental Movement" in various ways, which could be categorized within three main concepts. Most respondents described the mainstream environmental movement as constituting large national organizations or projects. Others attributed the movement to activities currently popular in today's society, such as buying organic food. Finally, several interviewees identified mainstream environmentalism with upper-class actions and participation to improve the environment.

Despite differences between these perceptions of the mainstream environmental movement and participants' own work, all but one interviewee considered their work to be a part of the mainstream environmental movement. As one interviewee explained, it is easy to see their own connection to the movement, but other environmentalists may not acknowledge that work as a part of the same movement.

Experiences with Mainstream Environmental Movement

Participants spoke about two types of experiences with the mainstream environmental movement. The first experience dealt with partnerships with other organizations or projects. Individuals working with large organizations were interested in collaborating with local communities on projects. Many participants, whether with large or small organizations, had partnered with another organization or project. However, not all of these experiences were positive. Some individuals felt that the larger organizations did not spend enough time in local communities in order to instill permanent change.

The other area some interviewees spoke about was a feeling of isolation and tokenism in the environmental movement. They felt that because they were Latino they were often deemed responsible for translating or acquiring a Latino constituency in addition to their other goals. Additionally, a few interviewees felt isolated as a minority within their organization and felt responsible for representing the Latino community's viewpoints as a whole.

How to Diversify the Environmental Movement

Interviewees talked about four main barriers that the Latino community faces when trying to be a part of the environmental movement. One was the limited access to green spaces in their communities or lack of transportation to nearby green spaces. Another was socioeconomic concerns. Some interviewees mentioned the conflict between money or resources and environmental participation. Another interviewee discussed a fear of gentrification in their community due to a focus on socioeconomic development. If environmental improvements occur in a Latino neighborhood, the cost of living and taxes may go up and force them to move to another community where they will not be able to enjoy the benefits that they worked for. Two respondents felt that Latino communities are often stereotyped by outsiders. These stereotypes not only apply to specific neighborhoods and communities, but also lead to a lack of concern or participation in traditionally Caucasian environmental actions.

Participants not only discussed barriers to Latino participation in the environmental movement, but they also proposed a variety of ways to overcome some of these barriers and include more Latinos and other minorities into environmental projects and organizations. Education and a focus on youth were the most common suggestions to diversify the environmental movement. Other interviewees believed that increasing the number of environmental opportunities available to all Latinos would be beneficial. Finally, participants focused on increasing a sense of interconnectedness within the environmental movement by establishing more collaborations between local and larger organizations and projects.

The Path Ahead

Something that is considered environmental participation for one group of individuals may not be the same for another group. We must acknowledge these differences when identifying environmentalists and find ways to collaborate across these differences in order to solve environmental issues. An environmental movement that only incorporates one type of individual will not go anywhere.

The voices and concerns of minorities should be heard because they not only care about the environment, but they also participate in environmental projects.

Several steps need to be taken to diversify the environmental movement. Mainstream environmentalists must incorporate knowledge about the motivations and barriers to Latino participation in their outreach and education programs. These efforts should include long-term community programs that focus on youth and also create more opportunities for local community members to become involved. Environmentalists also should identify and address similar barriers to participation for other groups such as low-income or African American communities. Finally, environmentalists need to find ways to connect local and national efforts to create stronger coalitions and collaborations that address environmental problems.

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INTRODUCTION

During my studies at Loyola University Chicago, I noticed that few minority students were studying environmental science. Not only did this apply to my classes, but also many of the examples and case studies that we explored focused on predominantly White efforts. I began to wonder where the minorities were in the environmental movement. As a Latina, I refused to believe that Latinos did not participate in the environment. Instead, I wanted to find out in what ways they did and discover if these were different from the “mainstream” efforts that we learned about in class. As a result, I decided to undertake this research. Through my review of prior research, I found that Latinos did care about environmental issues. For example from 1994 until 1999, over 70% of Latinos in California expressed “‘extreme concern’ about air and water pollution, protecting the environment, and toxic waste” (Whittaker, et. al., 2005, p. 441). Of three racial/ethnic groups (Latinos, African Americans, and Whites), Latinos had the highest percentage of concern in the study.

Unfortunately, the environmental participation rates of Latinos do not reflect these concerns. According to research by Johnson, Bowker, and Cordell (2004), a significant difference exists between Whites and U.S.-born Latinos with respect to two areas: “environmental group joining and nature participation” (p. 177). Whatever the reason for this difference, the study confirmed my observation that minorities like Latinos appear to be missing from the environmental movement. But what is deterring Latinos from participating in environmental issues? Is it that the types of participation that these researchers investigated did not reflect the types of projects that Latinos participate in? For example, is there a difference between the likelihood of Latino participation in local rather than national organizations or projects? In order to begin to answer these questions, I designed the following study to investigate the ways in which Latinos participate in the environment, their motivations to participate, and their experiences and perceptions related to the environmental movement.

RESEARCH GOALS AND QUESTIONS

As a part of the Latino community, I wanted to better understand the motivations and barriers to Latino participation in environmental projects and organizations. I also aimed to share the results of this research with others in the environmental field to help incorporate more Latinos into environmental projects. From these goals, I developed this study to address the overarching question: How do Latinos active in environmental projects and organizations in Chicago understand their environmental participation? Several related questions also guided this study:

1. In what ways do Latinos in Chicago participate in environmental projects or organizations?
2. What motivates Latinos in Chicago to participate in environmental projects or organizations?
3. How do Latinos in Chicago participating in environmental projects or organizations perceive the impacts of their efforts on the environment?
4. How do Latinos in Chicago participating in environmental projects or organizations perceive their efforts in relation to the Mainstream Environmental Movement?

METHODS

With the intention of exploring Latino's environmental participation, I conducted qualitative interviews in order to obtain in-depth understanding about the experiences of the individuals interviewed.

Sampling

I conducted 12 in-depth interviews. I purposefully selected individuals that met the following criteria: 1) self-identify as Latino, 2) reside in the Chicago-land area, and 3) participate in an environmental project or organization. After conducting the interview, I then asked participants to pass along information about the study to others who met these criteria and might like to participate. I also asked participants to recommend other organizations that I could contact to identify more participants.

Data Collection

The interviews were semi-structured. This allowed me to ask the same questions across all interviewees, but also to tailor questions to each individual's specific work and experiences. I traveled to meet the interviewees at their project site or a café of their choice to conduct the interviews. With the consent of the participants, the interviews were audio recorded. The interviews included questions about the types of environmental participation, motivations for participation, impacts of their participation, cultural factors that may have influenced their work, their perceptions of their work in relation to the Mainstream Environmental Movement, and how to incorporate more Latinos into the environmental movement.

Data Analysis

I personally transcribed all of the interviews. For one interview conducted in Spanish, I translated it to English. I then reviewed the transcriptions and categorized different responses. These categories were compared across all interviewees to identify commonalities and differences in people's experiences and perspectives on their environmental participation. Through this process, I identified key themes from the data that will be discussed in the results portion of this report.

PROJECT DESCRIPTIONS

Before turning to the results, it is useful to know more about the organizations and projects in which interviewees participated. Below I provide brief descriptions of the organizations and projects with which interviewees were involved at the time of this study.

Audubon Chicago Region-Daniel Suarez

Audubon Chicago Region is a chapter of the Audubon society and also serves as the Illinois State office for the National Audubon Society. They focus mostly on habitat restoration and the

empowerment of individuals in conservation, while also working towards the National Audubon Society's mission of bird conservation.

Habitat 2030-Daniel Suarez

Habitat 2030 is a group of 20-30 year old volunteers that work on restoring forest preserves in Chicago. They mainly focus on the Northwest side near the North Branch of the Chicago River. Another of their objectives is to prepare the next generation of forest stewards. These forest stewards are the individuals most familiar with, in Daniel's words, "on-the ground operations on a year to year basis." Over time they hope to expand from a group focused on a single area to consist of several local youth groups that work to restore habitat in their communities.

Openlands-Gabriela Naveda

Openlands is a non-profit organization that was founded in 1963. As one of the oldest urban conservation organizations in the nation, they work to preserve watersheds, plant trees, develop community gardens, and understand how individuals interact with natural spaces. Openlands has helped protect more than 55,000 acres of land for public parks and forest preserves, wildlife refuges, land and water greenway corridors, urban farms, and community gardens. As Gabriela explains, they also want to "make the environment accessible to all people through different avenues, whether it's art or science or critical thinking or just fun." In their work focused on community gardens, Openlands helps to connect Chicago community gardens so that gardeners are able to share their experiences and insights with other gardeners in the region.

Northeastern Illinois University Community Garden-Ernesto Melchor

In the spring of 2014, a small group of students worked with the Peterson Garden Project to develop a community garden in an unused tennis court on Northeastern Illinois University's main campus in Albany Park. The community garden is not only available for students but also community members. Some of the food being produced from this community garden is donated to a food bank in order to help individuals that are food insecure in the city of Chicago.

ENLACE Community Gardens- María Herrera

ENLACE is an organization concerned with the economic and social development of the Little Village neighborhood. They have a total of four community gardens in the area: a small garden for monarch butterflies and three gardens focused on food production. The community gardens department of ENLACE focuses on the improvement of the residents' health in the Little Village community. They use gardens as a way to improve the mental health of the residents, improve the foods that they eat, and to teach youth how to sustain themselves through gardening.

Pilsen Environmental Rights and Reformation Organization (P.E.R.R.O.)-Rose Gomez

P.E.R.R.O. was formed in 2004 to fight the disproportionate amount of pollution in the Pilsen neighborhood. P.E.R.R.O. believes all people have the right to live in a clean and healthy environment, regardless of their race and class. Its mission is to spread awareness about this concept of environmental justice and make Pilsen a healthier place to live, work, and raise children. They maintain collaborations with the U.S. EPA and local organizations, such as LVEJO. One of their most recent projects is trying to prevent an additional metal shredder from entering the neighborhood across from a high school. They have been working to halt its construction through petitioning, vigils, and appeals to local government officials.

Little Village Environmental Justice Organization (LVEJO)- Jenn Ortega and Karen Guadarrama

LVEJO is a small, non-profit organization in Chicago's Little Village neighborhood focused on improving not only the lives of individuals that live in Little Village, but also the environmental quality of the neighborhood. They have worked on campaigns to close a power plant, open a park, increase access to public transportation, and increase the amount of green space in the community. They work closely with community members to transition the industrial neighborhood into a more environmentally, socially, and economically stable community for its residents.

Earth Force- Karen

Earth Force is a nation-wide collaborative program that provides youth an opportunity to investigate a topic of their choice and take action that will address that topic. Interns at LVEJO are working with the Field Museum to research bike riding in the Little Village neighborhood. They will educate themselves on the bike laws and the practices of people in their community in order to try to make life easier for the bicyclists in their community and encourage more bike riding in the neighborhood.

Loyola University Chicago

Urban Agriculture Internship-Gabriel Fuentes

The Urban Agriculture Internship is one of several environmental science internships available at Loyola. This internship focuses on the maintenance of Loyola's Winthrop Garden, the planting and growing of food, and the sale of food at the Loyola Farmer's market held from May until the end of September. Any excess food that is harvested and not sold is donated to food banks and food pantries in the Rogers Park area, such as A Just Harvest and St. Ignatius.

Human Ecological Footprint: Waste Audit-Juan Robles

The Waste Audit project was initiated by Juan Robles, an Undergraduate Provost Fellow at Loyola University Chicago. He designed a project with a professor around the amount of waste on campus. A single class was broken into groups and conducted simultaneous waste audits of different buildings on campus. The students collected items placed in

the trash, recycling, and compost bins. They sorted and weighed the items in order to assess the amount of material diverted to reuse versus the landfill. Some groups also investigated the efficiency of informational flyers on the percentage of waste recycled.

Mammal Biodiversity Research- Noé de la Sancha

Noé performed post-doctorate research around the effects of deforestation on small mammal diversity in Paraguay. During his work in Paraguay, Noé mentored several university students in related research. He recently started a position at Chicago State University, where he hopes to create a program to take students out to Paraguay to continue his work. He also assessed the biodiversity in coffee farms in Kenya.

Environmentalists of Color (EOC)-Raquel Garcia Alvarez

Began in May of 2013, Environmentalists of Color is a network of minorities from the Chicago land region that work in the environmental field. They identify as a “network for and by people of color.” The group meets every few months. They aim to provide support for one another, allow networking opportunities, and also motivate youth to enter the environmental field.

RESULTS

Types of Projects

There was great variety in the scope and type of projects and organizations that the interviewees were a part of. The 12 projects and organizations fell into 5 major categories: Restoration, Gardening, Environmental Justice, Academic/Research, and Networking. Within these major categories, the programs or projects differed based upon their scope. Projects were either on the community level, regional, national, or global.

Impacts of Projects

Although each of the projects had an impact on the environment, all interviewees emphasized the impact on the communities that were near or involved in the environmental projects or organizations. This sense of community could be the local geographical community, the cultural community, or the scientific community that the participants were a part of.

The emphasis on community came across most strongly with the Environmental justice groups, where participants directly observed improvements in the community. For example, one interviewee shared, “...They closed the power plant...we got an extra bus route which was needed...we got a park because there was only one in the whole community...” Another individual stated, “I feel like in a way we are the voice for the community...”

Other interviewees helped educate the community through their education and outreach programs. For instance: “... [We] provide access to education and awareness to allow the communities to help themselves. So, I think it’s more about providing them environmental education opportunities, experiences, and activities...”

The final impact on the community present in several interviews was the creation of new opportunities for the people their organization serves. Especially in low-income areas, the environmental work provided an opportunity for jobs, internships, fellowships, etc. as illustrated by the following reflections:

“...a lot of these guys that I worked with...are getting their PhD’s and Masters’...”

“...I’m creating advocates... [We’re] helping them, [volunteers], find their niche, helping educate them, but helping them have a good enough knowledge where they can become leaders within a short amount of time...”

Most interviewees believed that their project impacted their community by influencing the knowledge around an issue, motivating individuals to take action, and/or improving the quality of life of the area.

Definition of Environment and Nature

Participants expressed varied definitions of the environment and nature; however, the following quotes reflect common sentiments.

“Everything in the world is nature....It’s living things interacting with other living things and living things with non-living things.”

“I consider the environment everything around us which includes the air we breathe, the water we drink, the land we walk on, the ground that we walk on, and it all has an impact on our quality of life.”

Some interviewees distinguished between the environment and nature:

“They are intertwined. I don’t see humans being in the definition of nature, but I see nature as being a part of the definition of the environment.”

“Every single thing makes up the environment...Nature... It’s a big made up thing that allows us to create this duality between us and out there...people forget that even though you live in a city, you are still a part of this larger scheme and larger cycle...”

There was an overall consensus around the definition of the environment, an encompassing definition that includes all living and non-living things; however, with respect to nature, individuals either believed the terms ‘environment’ and ‘nature’ are interchangeable or that ‘nature’ is narrowly focused on non-human areas separate from where we live.

Cultural Influence

Many of the interviewees compared their interactions with nature in their countries of origin as opposed to here in the United States. For example:

“...my Latina heritage has influenced my interest in the environment because in Ecuador, I remember riding horses, and the mountains. So I supposed that as a child I was nurtured by natural spaces and I remember when I migrated here...I looked around I remember...thinking where are all the mountains and feeling really abandoned...that really influenced my perspective to see it as something important and relevant to my life.”

Other interviewees shared similar sentiments: “There’s always that connection to nature. To more natural systems that are less disturbed I guess would be the best way to put it...”

Another element of culture discussed were specific values that participants obtained from their Latino culture. As one respondent noted, “It’s always having a value in providing for all and providing abundance for all.” Another said, “...take what you need from the environment, just be wary because other people need it as well and give back in any way you can...probably with food in general, don’t waste food.”

Finally, one participant did not believe that their culture influenced their perceptions or work with the environment. “I don’t feel like my culture reflects who I am. I reflect who I am.”

When considering the influence of Latino culture on participants’ actions, interviewees’ experiences with the environment in the United States conflicted with the experiences of their countries of origin. Some individuals identified specific values that came from their culture, but only one individual felt that their culture did not influence the way they viewed or interacted with the environment.

Motivation

When asked about why they participated in environmental activities, individuals spoke about experiences that either sparked their interest in the environmental field or resulted in their subsequent participation in environmental activities. Their responses reflect what motivated them to enter into environmental work.

Some participants who had always been interested in nature were motivated by the desire to work in an area that they enjoyed. As one noted, “I grew up loving animals, I think every child does, but I just never outgrew it. It just kept getting stronger...”

For others, awareness of environmental injustice motivated their environmental participation. For example: “In Juarez, Mexico...you would see people at stoplights begging for food...every day...THAT’S what really got me back then because I had seen first-hand people starving and begging for food or just anything...and to see these [people] throwing away stuff away when it was a perfectly good thing...” Another interviewee also described food disparity as a motivating issue: “We have a city like Chicago, pockets within the city would be considered food deserts...” Like these interviewees, another interviewee focused on the importance of health and nutrition in Latino communities.

Others mentioned a professor or teacher that helped make them more aware about environmental issues, which led them to want to work towards addressing these: "...in my AP Chemistry class...we tested the mercury and lead soil samples from the emissions from the coal power plant...During high school it was mind blowing...and that's what inspired me to come into the science field..."

Still others participated in environmental work out of a concern for the next generation: "...I do it for my son you know. I don't want to leave a bad environment for him and his kids..."

In summary, many individuals were motivated by injustices with regards to food equality, health and nutrition. Several interviewees entered environmental work due to a professor or teacher that introduced environmental issues to them as a youth. Finally, one participant discussed participating to make a better world for the next generation.

Environmentalist

I asked individuals what their definition of an environmentalist was. I wanted to see if there was a difference in their definition and the definitions presented in literature that I have read. I also wanted to see if these individuals considered themselves to be environmentalists.

With the exception of one individual, interviewees shared similar descriptions of what constitutes an environmentalist. This sentiment is captured well by the words of an interviewee who was very succinct in their definition: "...an environmentalist is someone that is educated and aware of environmental problems and issues. Someone who is an activist for improving on those problems and issues, and someone who is just willing to educate others about those problems and issues." This idea of caring about the environment, being knowledgeable about the environment, and doing something to address environmental issues was common among almost all participants. Another interviewee clarified what constitutes taking action with regards to the environment: "Something big, something small just as long as you are doing something about it."

The one interviewee that did not share a similar definition of an environmentalist believed that "...it's more of a luxury to be an environmentalist" because they deal with issues such as conservation and "...less urgent issues." Other interviewees also distinguished between what they considered to be an environmentalist and what the stereotypical definition of an environmentalist is. "I think when you say environmentalist, people assume this radical tree hugger, chain yourself to a tree, don't chop down trees, but people can be environmentalists in their own little ways." Another interviewee indicated other connotations of the term environmentalist: "I think of white people in the...60s and 70s...Caucasian"

Thus, there were two major definitions of an environmentalist. An individual that is aware about environmental issues, cares about the environment, and does something about it. While the other was a more stereotypical definition of a radical Caucasian individual that takes action without fully understanding the problem or its implications.

Despite the two different definitions of an environmentalist, all but three participants considered themselves to be an environmentalist according to their own definition. Two interviewees felt that they were working towards becoming an environmentalist, but they did not feel active enough or knowledgeable enough in the area to be considered an environmentalist: "...there's a lot of self-discipline involved and planning so that is a work in progress..." The other individual identified as "an environmental justice advocate" as opposed to an environmentalist. This person believed that there is a difference in these movements with Environmental Justice more focused on "helping out the people that are being affected..."

Perceptions of Mainstream Environmental Movement

In addition to a definition of environmentalist, I wanted to explore Latino participants' perceptions of the current environmental movement in the United States. I wanted them to provide their own definition of what constituted the "Mainstream Environmental Movement" and then discuss whether or not they felt that their work was a part of this movement.

A wide variety of responses arose when defining what constituted the "Mainstream Environmental Movement." Among the most popular were large corporations, upper-class actions, and what is trending now or a fad, as the following excerpts illustrate.

"Sierra Club, Green Peace, a lot of national organizations, a lot of national issues that they deal with..."

"...like putting pressure on groups like lobbyist groups or the government to reduce fracking methods..." and "a lot of them tend to be Caucasian"

"...hippie, middle-class, stereotypical suburban person who advocates about 2—3 things, usually not well informed...total disconnect...a very pompous perception of what needs to be done."

"A lot of these perceptions of the environmental movement in the United States are very middle-class and very money expensive..."

"I'm calling it a fad. Not in a negative way, but, something that's popular as a collective to people, as a nation...the most popular...environmentally inclined action people are taking..." "What comes to mind for me is the bandwagon jumping on...like you should buy green stuff...reusable bags... recycling...organic...."

Thus, the Mainstream Environmental Movement was usually associated with large national organizations or projects, a stereotypical definition of upper-class actions, or projects and activities that are currently popular in today's society.

Despite these perceptions of the environmental movement, all but one interviewee considered their own environmental work to be important to the Mainstream Environmental Movement.

“I think definitely. I think...environmentalists... overlook urban gardening...”

“...for the community, WE are the Mainstream Environmental Movement.”

“We are doing such a specific thing, but it has such broad implications...”

“It’s something that impacts everybody. Sooner or later it will impact us because we are all connected....maybe not as directly, but it does have an impact mainstream somehow...”

Despite differences between these perceptions of the Mainstream Environmental Movement and participants’ own work, all but one interviewee considered their work to be a part of the Mainstream Environmental Movement. As one interviewee explained, it is easy to see their own connection to the movement, but other environmentalists may not acknowledge that work as a part of the same movement.

Experiences with Mainstream Environmental Movement

Participants spoke about two areas with regards to experiences that they had with the Mainstream Environmental Movement. The first experience dealt with partnerships. Individuals working with large organizations were interested in collaborating with local communities on projects. Many participants, whether with large or small organizations, had partnered with another organization or project. However, not all of these experiences were positive. Some individuals felt that the larger organizations did not spend enough time in local communities in order to instill permanent change. As one interviewee noted, “To them we are dispensable. We don’t matter to the whole picture so much so they use us...” This person continued, “...we are limited on what we can do, and we are kind of dependent on them and at the same time we have to remain independent...that is a very tricky balance.”

Another area spoken about by interviewees was a feeling of isolation and tokenism in the environmental movement.

“...the issue is that people say that there’s only one person that’s in the environment and it’s usually you. If you don’t know anyone else it sort of makes that statement true....[I] kind of felt isolated within [my] own organization or within the environmental movement... you feel as though the minority voice is missing, but then there is an expectation of you representing all of the minority voice...”

“I actually forget I’m Latina until I find myself in situations where I have some sort of understanding. Whether it’s some sort of cultural reference...or I can speak the language...I’m Latina and I can understand what this person is saying and you can’t, so let me be the bridge...”

“...you’re the Spanish speaker, and you do the outreach...you’re Latina, you’re now going to bring the whole Latino constituency with you. It doesn’t work...”

There was a mix of positive and negative experiences with regards to individuals' involvement within the Mainstream Environmental Movement. There were negative experiences about not having a voice and feeling used by larger organizations; however, some groups found healthy collaborations to be helpful for their respective communities as well.

How to Diversify the Environmental Movement

Interviewees talked about barriers that the Latino community faces when trying to be a part of the environmental movement.

One barrier to Latino participation is limited access to green spaces. For example, forest preserves are usually far from Latino neighborhoods. "There's only a few that are actually in the city and not even all of those are accessible with public transportation." Aside from forest preserves, there also may not be many other green spaces available. There may be only a single park in a neighborhood, or several brown fields and empty lots.

In addition to access to natural spaces concern also exists about socioeconomic issues.

"...people don't have the resources or they don't know about organizations like this. They don't have time....everyone is low income. They have to work..."

"I usually buy the cheapest thing that I can because I just don't have the money right now..."

"There's no incentive for people to go away and come back because there's not jobs..."

Perceptions of Latino communities also act as a barrier because they are stereotyped by others.

"...certain people have a certain perception of you even within the community. People have a perception of oh the streets are dirty and you are like violence or gang affiliated..."

"I think that for Latinos, African Americans, and other minority groups it's going to be different from [the stereotypical environmental actions] because we're not Caucasians...we're not already in the system. It [is] like a closed community...trying to appeal to corporations that were owned by other white people and working within those kinds of circles..."

Another interviewee discussed a fear of gentrification in their community due to a focus on socioeconomic development. "We do help the environment, but there's always that fear of people taking over and gentrifying..." This person continued, "...because of that property taxes might go up in the long-run...it [urban greening] improves the community and makes people want to come...They [the existing residents] don't get to enjoy what they worked for so hard..."

Thus, participants identified barriers related to access to green spaces, socioeconomic issues, stereotyping, and the fear of gentrification. Despite these barriers, interviewees also discussed

ways in which Latinos could become more involved in the movement. They offered a variety of answers for how to incorporate more Latinos and minorities into environmental projects and organizations. To begin:

“...the best thing for environmental groups to do today is to become informed on methods to recruit individuals from other cultures, from other ethnicities, from other walks of life to get this movement where it belongs....”

Some commented on a need for more collaboration, a sense of interconnectedness, and working together:

“We are all connected with the environment and need to realize...recognize that...”

“...having those networking connections you know, oh this person might be able to help with this campaign, or oh we can bring in this person from the EPA to help us work with this...”

“Not a single person can educate someone about the environment. You can’t do that. Nobody knows everything about the environment...”

Others spoke about a need to address people’s values through education:

“...people have blinders because they don’t want to see it because it is inconvenient for them, but it doesn’t matter if it’s inconvenient or not, it’s the truth...” “[It’s] not easy to tell people or societies or humans to change the way they are wired. I think that it does require some rewiring, and that requires education...”

“...a lot of environmental related questions do require a little more education than the average person...”

“...when you educate people...try to go for stuff that is relevant to that individual that doesn’t really know as much about the environment...”

And most of the interviewees identified education involving youth as a key to change:

“If the seed could be planted in the schools...then I think that would make a huge difference because kids are smart...”

“Youth are very important...if they have a view as young people, and follow through...then as an adult [they’ll] be able to make those changes in society when [they’re] at some type of position and stuff...”

“Specifically for Latinos...I know a lot of them don’t go to college...if they had a mentor to spark their interest and they could go to college and they could tie the environment with it...”

Not only is education important, but more opportunities for participation and employment should be available for Latinos.

“Sometimes people don’t realize that they like doing something because they aren’t exposed to it and they’re not open to it. But if you’re not necessarily forcing them into it because they choose to be in an internship...they learn that they like it and that ends up being their career...”

One interviewee specifically believed that opportunities should be focused on local projects and problems.

“...you should be invested in what’s happening on your local level and see what’s impacting your community. Because I believe that you are able to become a better advocate if you are able to say things from experience.”

Overall, education and a focus on youth were the most common ways suggested to diversify the environmental movement. Other interviewees also talked about increasing the number of environmental opportunities available to Latinos, increasing the collaborations between local and larger projects or organizations, and increasing a sense of interconnectedness within the environmental movement.

DISCUSSION

Despite my initial observations at school, Latinos *are* participating in environmental projects or organizations. I initially believed that these individuals would only be participating in small, community-based projects. Although that was the case for some interviewees, there was in fact a wide variety of projects with regard to scale and their focus.

Although some Latinos cannot afford the stereotypical environmental choices, such as organic foods or hybrid vehicles, they do consider themselves to be environmentalists based upon their own definition: any individual that is knowledgeable of an environmental issue and taking some type of action to address that issue. No distinct pattern emerged with respect to Latino cultural values and environmental participation across the interviewees; however, many did relate their ability to interact with nature to stories about their country of origin.

Additionally, regardless of how they defined the Mainstream Environmental Movement, almost all of the interviewees believed that their work was a part of that movement. They see the connections between their own work and that of the environmental movement, but outsiders may not necessarily see the relation. This needs to be taken into consideration when trying to collaborate or diversify the environmental movement. What is considered environmental participation for one individual or group of individuals may not be the same as another. We must acknowledge these differences and find ways to collaborate and work together across these differences on environmental issues.

An environmental movement that only incorporates one type of individual will not go anywhere. We cannot assume that Latinos and other minorities do not hold environmental values and thus should be cast aside. Their voice and opinions also matter in the direction and approach that is taken by the environmental movement. Excluding their voices is another form of environmental injustice. Most environmental projects are a result of problems identified by Caucasian individuals. This sentiment has been true for quite some time, “the environmental and livelihood concerns of the dominated are often ignored if not undermined by the conservation and environmental programs of the dominant” (Lynch, 1993, p.118). Minority voices should be taken into account when deciding on what environmental issues need to be addressed and the solutions to these problems. Their participation is essential not only to action for the environmental cause, but also to improve their quality of life. Furthermore, long-term collaborations and programs should be set up rather than intermittent programs that disappear before the benefits to the community can be realized.

The first step in developing these types of collaborations is giving mainstream environmentalists and organizations insight into the motivations and perceptions of a minority group, such as Latinos. This will allow mainstream environmentalists to better understand how to appeal to these groups, for example by working on projects that minorities deem high priority. Mainstream groups should also consider ways to tie large-scale goals with local ones such as clean air, socioeconomic development, etc. Additionally, environmentalists in general need the ability to identify and address barriers to participation. These may not only apply to Latino groups, but perhaps other low-income communities or minority groups. We as a movement should work towards overcoming some of the barriers to participation identified by Latinos in order to progress in diversifying the environmental movement. Beginning with an understanding of the problems and opportunities at a local level is important before attempting to address diversification at a national one.

Some of these steps require understanding where to concentrate outreach efforts. From interviewees’ experiences, the most effective areas for outreach are education, presentation of environmental opportunities, and a focus on youth. Individuals seeking to expand the environmental movement should focus on exposure to environmental topics at an early age, provide more long-term environmental programs in minority communities, and find ways to tie the environment to other local concerns. Finally, environmentalists need to find ways to connect efforts across scales. Whether it is a network, a coalition or an organization, environmentalists should not have fragmented environmental projects. Instead we should work on collaborations across projects and organizations to increase their impact.

CONCLUSION

Latinos do participate in the environment in a variety of different ways and believe that the work that they do is a part of the environmental movement, connects to larger issues, and contributes to solutions to these issues. Even though these individuals participate in environmental activities, it seems that the environmental movement as a whole does not display this diversity, which can lead to feelings of isolation and tokenism. In order to address these issues, we must work towards further diversifying the environmental movement to be more inclusive of a wide variety of individuals’ perspectives and experiences.

Additionally, environmentalists must work on creating stronger long-term collaborations between environmental projects and organizations. The environmental movement is similar to a human body. One interviewee relayed a thought from a co-worker, “you have these veins that aren’t connecting with each other. How is the body going to stay alive?” (G. Naveda, personal communication, August 4, 2014). If all of these projects and organizations are working independently of one another, the body, the environmental movement will die. When we have many little pockets of local action, the larger movement will not move forward unless these groups are tied together in some way. We need to find ways to connect these local actions and efforts with larger efforts and organizations that serve interests of both parties in order to create a healthy and effective movement. If we are able to accomplish this, then we can make significant changes with regards to the environment and environment related issues as a whole.

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