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## Let's Add Some Color to the Greening of America

By Mick Dumke  
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### [CHICAGO](#)

For some people, "going green" is more than just a trendy cause, a way to score points on the campaign trail or a means to achieve the abstract goal of preserving nature for future generations.

For neighborhoods such as Chicago's Little Village, it's a matter of survival.

Standing on an abandoned railroad bridge over the Chicago Sanitary and Ship Canal, Lilian Molina points to a mechanical claw scooping coal from a barge. A conveyor belt drops the coal into a nearby energy plant that will provide power to homes across the city. But it also spews nitrogen oxide, sulfur dioxide and mercury, which eventually turn to toxic smog and soot and taint waterways.

Those who live in this mostly Latino neighborhood also have to worry about the steel-drum reprocessing facility around the corner. It emits glycol ether, which causes eye and skin irritation, anemia and birth defects. Another empty lot is a federal Superfund site, and another has an old oil-storage tank buried in contaminated soil.

Molina works for the Little Village Environmental Justice Organization, a nonprofit that raises awareness of and lobbies to eradicate environmental health hazards. "What we do isn't the same as environmental conservation -- we don't chain ourselves to trees," she says. "What we're really doing here is telling people, 'Our health is not disposable.' "

These days, the country seems to be experiencing a rebirth of environmental awareness, prompting discussion about climate change and corporate responsibility and passionate debate about the pros and cons of bottled water. But if a new and different "green revolution" is underway in America, it's not liberating everyone.

If you drive a [Prius](#) and buy tofu at [Whole Foods](#), going green may be a lifestyle choice. If you live in a poor neighborhood near a toxic factory, going green is a human rights issue. The movement has been slowed by a divide that is visible in everything from local recycling policies to the complexions of environmentalists. On one side are mostly white middle- and upper-class populations with plenty of money and political clout. On the other side are minority and low-income communities with little of either.

The tragedy is that the communities that are left behind often have the most at stake -- and the most to contribute. Because not only is environmentalism a human rights issue, it is also an economic opportunity.

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Many of the best-intentioned environmental activists assume that poor and nonwhite communities aren't interested in environmental issues. Poor folk, they seem to reason, don't have the time or energy to worry about pollution and global warming because they're struggling to make ends meet or just aren't educated enough to "get it."

Take recycling, one of the simplest ways that households can conserve natural resources and reduce pollution. It has now caught on in thousands of middle-class communities nationwide; nearly every suburb and midsize city offers curbside recycling. There is an initial outlay for the effort, but in the long run, recycling saves tax money that would have been spent on shipping and landfills.

In contrast, many of the country's most dense and diverse urban areas have been slow to adopt recycling programs. Recycling officials I've spoken with in several rust-belt cities have blamed cultural gaps, saying they just can't stoke environmental interest in working-class, minority neighborhoods. In response, environmental organizations have tried new approaches, such as "buy-back" programs that pay residents and community groups for their recyclable goods, in poor, isolated communities in Chicago and [Detroit](#). But others have given up.

They shouldn't. History shows that low-income communities have always been among the nation's most active recyclers. They've had to be. [New York](#)'s sanitation department reports that low-income areas generate the lowest recycling rates in the city but also produce among the smallest amounts of waste -- partly because residents reuse items more often and do more of their own recycling.

Even now, in my mixed-race, mixed-income neighborhood in Chicago, scavengers prowl the alleys and dig through dumpsters in search of aluminum cans, steel scraps and appliances that they see as repairable and salable.

And a series of studies over the past decade in [New Jersey](#), [California](#) and [Scotland](#) has confirmed what grass-roots groups around the United States already knew: When people understand how an environmental program works, how it benefits them and how they can join in, they recycle -- regardless of their ethnicity or economic status.

Stereotyping has also hampered other parts of the environmental movement. People of color make up only about 15 percent of the staffs of government environmental agencies and mainstream environmental organizations, according to a recent study by [University of Michigan](#) sociologist Dorceta E. Taylor. "It's this running stereotype Black people aren't interested in the environment," she says. But it's simply not true.

Taylor also found that minorities account for more than three of every four staffers of environmental-justice groups such as the Little Village. Often run on a shoestring budget, these organizations focus on the ways that pollution and lax enforcement hit poor and minority communities the hardest.

Let's be frank: The people most affected by environmental degradation aren't white or well-off. Fifty-six percent of the 9.2 million people who live within 1.86 miles of the country's most serious hazardous waste sites are people of color, according to a 2007 report for the [United Church of Christ](#). Seven in 10 people living near clusters of toxic waste sites are minorities, the report found. Moreover, doctors believe that environmental factors may be partly to blame for the higher rates of asthma, cardiovascular disease, birth defects and cancer found among people of color and low-income whites, according to several studies.

[United Nations](#) scientists have reported that unless climate change is countered, it is likely to cause

ecological emergencies and dire food shortages, particularly among the world's poorest. If that's not alarming on a moral level, it should be on a political one. Social chaos breeds political chaos, and we've seen how rogue leaders can set up dangerous shops in lawless corners of the world.

Still, we are far from doomsday. In fact, our environmental challenges may offer the best opportunity since the decline of U.S. manufacturing to create jobs in depressed parts of the country.

Recycling offers a great example again. While the practice may have started as environmental activism, it's now a powerful economic force. More than 1 million people are employed by recycling firms, which generate more than \$236 billion in annual revenue, according to a 2001 study by the National Recycling Coalition.

Or, consider the urban areas pockmarked with "brownfields" -- plots of formerly industrial, abandoned land that can't be reused until they have been cleared of pollution. There are close to half a million of them across the country, mostly in poor, minority neighborhoods, according to the [Environmental Protection Agency](#).

Each brownfield costs an average of \$500,000 to \$600,000 to clean up, according to the Northeast Midwest Institute. That's a hefty tab for state and federal governments to pick up, but consider the return on this investment: Every acre of brownfield redevelopment saves 4.5 acres of undeveloped land, and every dollar invested generates \$4.50 to \$10 in economic benefits. These benefits include new business development, tax revenue and jobs, according to a forthcoming report by the institute.

Turning brownfields into parks or gardens would also have social and economic benefits. [University of Illinois](#) research shows that violence decreases when neighborhoods are greener, probably because trees, flowers and gardens create a greater sense of community and make people feel more relaxed.

The benefit of tackling environmental woes is one of the ideas inspiring Michael Howard, a burly former construction contractor who formed a nonprofit development organization with his wife 16 years ago on Chicago's South Side. At the center of their work is Eden Place, an environmental-education center that Howard built on what had been a vacant lot used for illegal dumping.

Nestled between an elevated freight-train track and blocks of working-class homes, boarded-up buildings and empty lots blanketed in old lead-paint dust, Eden Place stands out almost shockingly, 3.5 vibrant acres of color and natural life. It boasts a large vegetable garden, flower beds planted by neighborhood youth and seniors, a wooded area, a swath of prairie grass, a bustling chicken coop and a composting center.

Howard likes to take troublemakers from the nearby grade school and have them work in the garden until they're exhausted. He has taught unemployed men and women how to plot and plant throughout the neighborhood.

"Most of our ancestors were part of the great migration of African Americans from the South," Howard says. "When we left, we left the land. One of my dreams is to reconnect people to the land. If you're growing on that land, you're not going to abuse it."


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