

THE VERDE PAPER



Latino Perspectives on Conservation Leadership



La Madre Tierra



FOREWORD



Marce at Tuna tank, courtesy of Azul

I like to say that I used to sell the fish, and now I save them.

Growing up blocks from the US-Mexico border AND the Pacific Ocean has a way of staying with you. Looking back on this, it's no surprise that I ended up working for an international seafood company at the start of my career. Despite not having grown up with specific dreams of becoming a fishmonger, this job farming Bluefin tuna in the open ocean offered exciting professional opportunities. Also on offer? A front row seat to the growing problem of overfishing. Scrambling daily to come up with hundreds of tons of fresh sardines to feed a dwindling number of Bluefin tuna tends to make a person question business as usual. When a study came out in 2006 predicting an almost empty ocean by the year 2048, I realized I needed to change course.

Long months of soul searching and research brought me over to marine conservation. What I didn't expect, as a first-timer in the nonprofit sector, was to step in to a field

where I was often the only person of color at the table, and where the groups working to protect the environment often struggled to engage the communities on the front lines of environmental challenges. Demographic changes in California have provided the imperative for change, but the predominantly white conservation movement seems unsure how to create a more inclusive culture.

In 2008, I was appointed to a citizen advisory group convened to help map out underwater parks off the coast of Southern California. This group was meant to represent the region's diverse population, but I was the only Spanish-speaking stakeholder. And, while the statewide planning process was designed to facilitate broad public participation, there were no Spanish language materials. I undertook the task of translation. My work trying to bridge the gap between the environmental movement and Latino community started there, but it quickly became evident the issue was much bigger than simply needing to translate informational materials. New to the field of conservation advocacy, and yet thrown in way over my depth, I frequently dealt with what I now recognize as symptoms of inequality, privilege and even in some cases, racism.

"Mexicans are too poor to care about the environment," "Go find some Mexicans to help diversify this photo/video/public comment section," and actual racial slurs are just some of the things I heard on a regular basis from partners, decision makers, colleagues and the public. People of color in NGOs are often placed in situations with vague or insurmountable goals, scant resources and little leverage. They are asked to speak for their community,

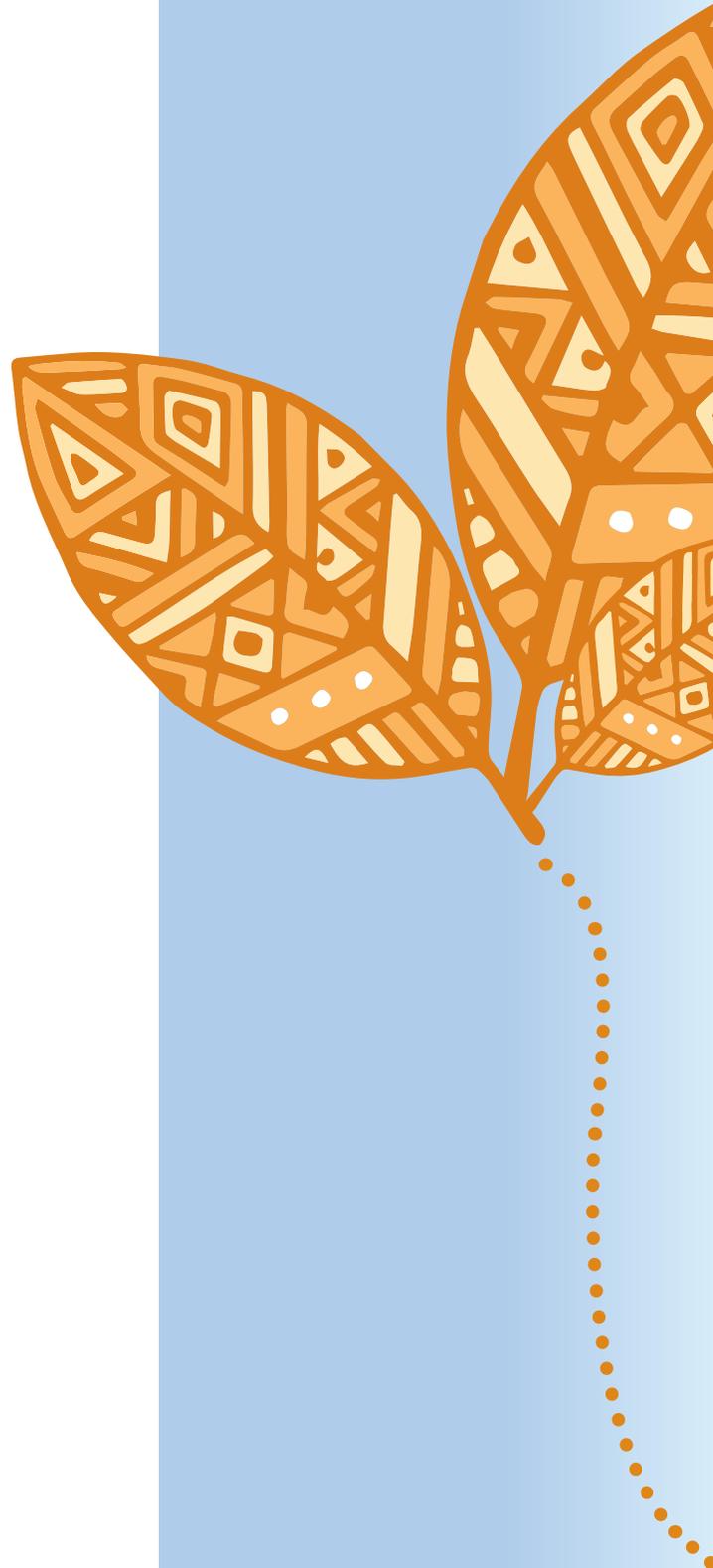
mobilize their community, and assimilate seamlessly into the dominant culture all at the same time. The pressure is tremendous. Often, these pioneers burn out and leave.

In 2011, I started a project called Azul, to focus on empowering Latinos as marine conservation leaders in order to continue this work without the baggage that large organizations had brought before. I later teamed up with Resource Media to amplify and leverage my efforts through our joint project, La Madre Tierra. I stepped into an exciting and challenging time at an organization in the middle of its own learning journey around equity and inclusion.

Over the past two years, I have been traveling the West to meet Latino conservationists creating parks, fighting for clean air and water, and battling fracking and natural gas plants. We have lifted up these stories on a web platform called La Madre Tierra, which aims to bring Latino representation to discussions about climate policy in California, funding for outdoor access in Congress, and leadership development. My experience working with people of color focused on environmental justice activism while housed within a predominantly white organization has been challenging.

I want to share what we have learned and heard over the past two years to help spare the next generation of Latino activists some of challenges we have encountered. At the same time, I hope that those leading established foundations and nonprofit organizations will work to evolve their institutions to be more equitable and inclusive. In the end, cultural competency and welcoming spaces will only make our conservation campaigns more effective, and that, we can all agree on.

Marce Gutiérrez-Graudiņš



BACKGROUND

When Resource Media first opened its doors in 1998, we focused our energy on shaping the public conversation on the environment, which remains at the core of our mission. Over time, however, we realized that it is not possible to achieve sustainability when it is walled off from countless other challenges and opportunities. The environment is not “out there.” It is a place where people from many different backgrounds and life experiences work, raise families and strive to realize their dreams. Today, we understand that advancing our mission requires an acknowledgement that there can be no meaningful sustainability without equity, fairness and economic opportunity.



Shooting an interview with Rod Torrez

In 2013, with support of the Hewlett Foundation, we began Resource Media’s first program dedicated to engaging Latinos on conservation issues; particularly public lands issues in the West. We set out to chart a path that was different from traditional advocacy. We didn’t seek to tell Latinos how they should think or what they should do. Instead we sought to celebrate what Latinos already think and what they are already doing. We spent the first year listening, learning, and collaborating with other individuals and organizations working on similar issues. Some of those we worked alongside were well-established national

conservation organizations trying to expand their political power base. Others were grassroots organizers working on a shoestring to fight for the health and wellbeing of their families and communities.

What began to emerge over many conversations and collaborations was a sense of deep wariness amongst Latino activists, and concern that the traditional conservation community was attempting to coopt or use them in token ways to support a predetermined policy agenda. What they wanted was to be part of the agenda setting conversation. Recognizing this dynamic as a real gap between communities fighting for the same values, we launched the La Madre Tierra project mentioned above. Our goal with this online community has been to help Latino advocates connect with one another, tell their stories, and show the world how conservation advocacy is a vibrant part of Latino cultural identity in the West.

As projects and relationships developed over the last 18 months, we began asking ourselves what we were learning that might be of value to the broader conservation community. This paper is the result of asking hard questions of others and of ourselves, with the goal of sharing those reflections with others who may be asking similar questions. The paper is certainly not the first of its kind, and deliberately does not offer a simple prescription or road map. A “to-do” list would be presumptuous and a disservice to the complexity and nuance that are hallmarks of any struggle to embrace and promote equity. We are hopeful that as the United States continues to reach demographic milestones, the mainstream environmental community can make a more intentional and sustained effort to embrace Latino conservation leaders. In the pages that follow we highlight some of the success stories we have come across, elevate commentary from practitioners in the field, and distill a few key takeaways for consideration as we all work towards building a more inclusive movement.



“As we think of ‘mobilizing’ the Latino community, we must take a step back and rather than simply asking them to take action, we must invest in authentic, respectful, proactive education, training, and development of grassroots Latino advocates and communities - and also offer them to the chance to take action. Too often, conservation campaigns start with the latter, and forget that what matters in growing a vine is making sure it takes root. Future generations depend on it.”

- Maite Arce, CEO, Hispanic Access Foundation



Señoras reviewing petition, courtesy of Little Village Environmental Organization

METHODOLOGY

For the last 18 months, La Madre Tierra has met, collaborated with and learned from Hispanic conservationists across the Western United States.

We have traveled from our home base in San Francisco to San Diego via the Central Valley, Central Coast, Inland Empire and Los Angeles. We ventured north to Oregon, east to Colorado, and crisscrossed New Mexico, meeting activists in Las Cruces, Albuquerque, and Los Alamos. We met leaders in their homes, at their places of work, and in the White House for the Leaders of Change awards ceremony last year. We spoke with professional organizers and grassroots community leaders, elected officials and volunteers.



Juntos en el Rio, courtesy of Latino Outdoors

“We’re talking about growing the whole tree here. We need to have strong roots from the ground up, rather than just sticking a pole in the ground and calling it a tree. The grassroots means it takes time and an investment in its nurturing and growth. Otherwise it is just like sticking a bunch of green poles in the ground and say this is how we get a forest, without putting the seeds in the ground”

- José Gonzalez, Latino Outdoors

The lessons shared in this paper come from our work and experiences, as well as that of colleagues with long track records of environmental wins within and with the Latino community. Over the course of 2014 and 2015, we interviewed:

- **Maite Arce**, Hispanic Access Foundation - Washington D.C.
- **Elisa Batista**, Moms Rising / Mamas con Poder - Berkeley, CA
- **Cesar Campos**, Central California Environmental Justice Network - Fresno, CA
- **Yahaira Carrillo**, cultural organizer - Oakland, CA
- **Tony DeFalco**, Verde - Portland, OR
- **Jenny De la Hoz**, Oregon State University - Corvallis, OR
- **Erica Fernandez**, Proyecto Itzaes - Oxnard, CA
- **Juan Flores**, Center for Race, Poverty and the Environment - Delano, CA
- **Robert Garcia**, The City Project - Los Angeles, CA
- **Stacey Gilmore**, Environmental Learning for Kids - Denver, CO
- **Jaime Gomez**, Escuela Tlatelolco - Denver, CO
- **Antonio Gonzalez**, William C. Velazquez Institute - Los Angeles, CA
- **José Gonzalez**, Latino Outdoors - Washington D.C.
- **Anna Gordon**, VERDE - Portland, OR
- **Luis López**, Latino Coalition Against Plastic Pollution - Los Angeles, CA
- **Robert Marquez**, International Center for Appropriate Technology and Indigenous Sustainability - Las Cruces, NM
- **Lupe Martinez**, Center for Race, Poverty and the Environment - Delano, CA
- **Pablo Martinez** - Las Cruces, New Mexico
- **Xiuhtezcatl Martinez**, EarthGuardians - Boulder, CO
- **Refugio Mata**, Economic Refugee - Los Angeles, CA
- **Robert Morales**, Sierra Club - Los Angeles, CA
- **Irma Muñoz**, Mujeres de la Tierra - Los Angeles, CA
- **John Olivas**, New Mexico Wilderness Alliance - Mora County, NM
- **A. Paul Ortega**, Mescalero-Apache Tribe - Las Cruces, NM
- **Bryan Perras**, Texas Environmental Justice Advocacy Services - Houston, TX
- **Angel Peña**, New Mexico Wilderness Alliance - Albuquerque, NM
- **Adrianna Quintero**, Voces Verdes - San Francisco, CA
- **Carmen Ramirez**, City of Oxnard - Oxnard, CA
- **George Sanchez-Tello**, San Gabriel Mountains Forever Leadership Academy - El Monte, CA
- **Rod Torrez**, Conservationist / Retired National Parks Ranger - Los Alamos, NM
- **Marcos Trinidad**, Audubon YES / Tree People - Los Angeles, CA
- **Irene Vilar**, Americas Latino Eco-Festival - Boulder, CO
- **Carlos Zegarra**, Sachamama, Los Angeles, CA

KEY TAKEAWAYS

“As Native, Indigenous and migrant peoples, Latinos in the U.S. have a long history of working in tandem with the environment. Before we were being sold all of the current eco-friendly products, our communities were making their own cleaning products and re-using or upcycling items around their homes and in their communities. There is a tendency to want to recreate the wheel and act like being eco-conscious is new but it fails to take into account the millions of people that have never seen themselves as separate from the world in which they live and move.”

- Yahaira Carrillo, artist and community organizer

LATINO COMMUNITIES HAVE BEEN SELF-ORGANIZING SINCE THE 19TH CENTURY

In the decades following the US-Mexican war, Mexicans and Californios formed mutualista associations for protection. Community leaders organizing around immigration reform, labor and other issues over a century later are following in their footsteps, and using many of the same practices in the same neighborhoods.

While the mutualista groups were responding to a rapidly changing society where Latinos found themselves displaced by new settlers—majority to minority thanks to the Guadalupe Hidalgo treaty—today’s journey for Latinos goes in the opposite direction—from minority to majority—but still under a dominant culture that favors those with access and resources. Community organizing is the equalizer that aims to meet the influence of large funds through the influence of large groups.

RESOURCE POLICY HITS CLOSE TO HOME FOR LATINO COMMUNITIES

Latino communities in the West and throughout the country are tracking natural resource policy discussions because they are disproportionately impacted by the outcomes. Many live in the shadow of dirty power plants and other existing and proposed industrial developments. From South Oxnard to Chicago’s Little Villita, this is ground zero for environmental justice. As Strela Cervas of the California Environmental Justice Alliance noted, “Latino and other communities of color have been on the frontlines of fossil fuel pollution for decades and now our neighborhoods are among the most vulnerable to climate disruption and extreme weather. That’s why we need to be on the frontlines of the solution: clean, renewable, local energy.”

LACK OF ENGAGEMENT WITH THE ENVIRONMENTAL MAINSTREAM IS SOMETIMES MISTAKEN FOR LACK OF ENGAGEMENT WITH THE ENVIRONMENT

Despite a now-yearly release of polls indicating Latinos’ overwhelming support for climate action and other conservation measures, many Latino leaders feel they are still working to overcome a perception that their community is disinterested or disengaged. Adrianna Quintero of Voces Verdes, which works under the Natural Resources

“I think Latinos are very much misunderstood because there are a lot of stereotypes and perceptions about who we are what we believe in, what we do and what we don’t do when it comes to the healing of la Madre Tierra.”

- Irma Muñoz, Mujeres de la Tierra

Defense Council umbrella, said: “For too long, there has been an assumption that Latinos don’t care about the environment. Over the past decade or so we have shown through our actions and work that this is simply not true. Our community cares deeply about environmental protection and we are ready to take meaningful action in our private and public lives.”

Often, the reason Latino leaders are less visible in conservation campaigns—i.e., not appearing at mid-day hearings at the state capitol or lobby days on the Hill—is because they lack access and resources. Community groups are often the last to learn about events, and have neither the capacity to coordinate attendance, nor the funds to cover time and travel expenses.

DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGES ARE FUELING A “GOLD RUSH FOR LATINO ENVIRONMENTAL REAL ESTATE”

With the renewed focus in the Latino vote brought about by demographic milestones, comes what was described to us as a “Gold Rush for Latino environmental real estate.” Robert Garcia, Executive Director of Los Angeles’ City Project, explains: “It used to be that the only groups doing conservation in East Los Angeles and the LA River were local. Now we have a rush of national groups running to open offices in these same areas.”

With new players comes added competition for the same pool of funding. Often, this is a zero sum game. Groups with more fundraising capacity edge out the local players, replacing the community organizing model with policy campaigns that align better with legislative sessions and grant cycles. These campaigns sometimes yield short-term wins, but they do not build durable power and relationships. This “parachuting in” actually alienates communities because there is no sense of investment or shared ownership.

TRADITIONAL PHILANTHROPY CAN PERPETUATE THE IMBALANCE OF POWER

Latino grassroots groups are told repeatedly that they are too small to be able to metabolize a large grant, and so the bulk of environmental funding goes to big green groups that have the desired size and infrastructure type, but lack the credibility and relationships to really mobilize Latinos.

This is a multi-pronged problem:

1. Internalized bias – Latino grassroots organizations are evaluated against a model that has failed to engage them.
2. Vicious cycle – Smaller organizations are passed over for grants because they lack sufficient infrastructure, and so are unable to scale up and build capacity.
3. Attrition – When community based organizations are crowded out, Latino conservationists often feel disillusioned and may leave the field.

“We see a built-in bias in money going to mainstream organizations versus going to a community of color led organization: foundations point out that traditional organizations have contacts in Washington and Sacramento, that they have media departments and development specialists, so according to this they will be able to put the money to better use. If we had the same level of funding, we could hire more people to do that same thing! It is a circular problem, a form of displacement and gentrification.”

- Robert Garcia, The City Project



A HISTORY OF BROWNWASHING AND TOKENISM HAS LED TO MISTRUST

Most Latino leaders are familiar with the 11th hour call from eNGOs, seeking support to give a campaign an appearance of greater diversity. This is more than just bad faith; it is bad strategy.

When people are used as window dressing rather than being invited to the strategy table, their support is likely to be superficial. Many elected officials can see through this ruse, and it leaves mainstream groups open to criticism. More importantly, every time we resort to tokenism, we chip away at the fragile relationships that do exist between the environmental mainstream and Latino conservation community.

“We have to kill transactional relationships once and for all – they are the source of environmentalist ineptitude that some call ‘outreach’ to low income neighborhoods and communities of color. You cannot first set priorities from a white environmentalist perspective and then approach communities of color to serve as props for your press conference. You cannot have the hearing at the City Council and call on allies two or three days before asking them to produce token people of color when you haven’t invested in developing meaningful relationships.”

- Refugio Mata, conservation leader

THERE IS OFTEN A CULTURAL DISCONNECT BETWEEN LATINO AND MAINSTREAM CONSERVATIONISTS

Culturally competent communications does not just mean translating materials into other languages: it means evolving goals, messages and tactics to address the values of groups you hope to engage. Many interviewees shared stories of tone-deaf outreach efforts, from foundations wanting to reach Latino families that chose not to support a youth soccer league, to organizations with nature-centric agendas that create no space for human communities. Mono-cultural communications have no place in a multicultural world, and materials that ignore target audience’s cultural context are guaranteed to fall flat, regardless of language.



Earth Day, courtesy of William C. Velazquez Institute



“The environmentalist’s concerns come from an old paradigm, and that old paradigm is a very American interpretation of environmentalism which basically says, ‘humanity is bad, nature is good. Humanity is the problem, nature is the solution.’ I’d say our world view is much more like the rest of the world’s. Humanity is part of the natural world and humanity has to be at the core of the answer.”

– Antonio Gonzalez, William C. Velasquez Institute

THE PATH FORWARD

In our effort to learn from and amplify Latino voices for the environment, we dug deep in to complicated and often unfinished relationship histories. While we don't pretend to tie these up into a fairy tale ending, we do believe the demographic changes at hand provide opportunities to continue these productive engagements. As the U.S. electorate changes, many conservation leaders that were previously skeptical or indifferent about the need to diversify the movement are now taking a fresh look at the issue. At the same time, this shift has provided communities of color with a spotlight to shine on their decades of work and leadership in this arena. It is important to note that the surging political influence and demographic trajectory of Latinos in America do not by themselves equalize the imbalances of power and resources that have historically defined these relationships. They do, however, offer an opportunity for a renewed commitment and a refined approach to authentic engagement with diverse communities.



Highland Park community members support California plastic bag ban, courtesy of Azul

“In order to bring a broader group of voices to the environmental movement, we need to represent the realities and concerns of diverse communities. The power of Latinos is rooted in values, spiritual traditions and culture and resources must be directed to organizations that know and understand their common background and are able to provide them with information targeted specifically to their needs.”

– Carlos Zegarra, Sachamama

We have conscientiously chosen not to reduce decades of experience into a simple prescriptive tip sheet. Doing so would not serve our commitment to advancement. Prescriptions do not typically provide context, and, without a deep understanding of our shared history, future efforts to engage Latinos in conservation campaigns could fall into unproductive patterns from the past.

In our research and listening, we noticed a few key elements that were consistent across efforts that gained real traction in the Latino community. Below, we highlight six of these common themes.



A FOUNDATION OF AUTHENTIC RELATIONSHIPS

As the saying goes – the best time to plant a tree is 20 years ago. The second best time is now. Solid relationships are built on mutual trust. Conservationists that want to build relationships with Latino groups should start by being a good ally. Showing up in community to listen and learn, and giving before they get. Sharing power, resources and the reins of a large project can be difficult for experienced conservation campaigners, but it is one of the most effective ways to build trust with community based organizations. In the campaign to block a natural gas terminal in Oxnard California, it was community members, led by a young woman named Erica Fernandez Zamora, that spearheaded the effort in conjunction with a local civic organization, Alliance for a Sustainable Economy. The Sierra Club played a supporting role.

“The community of Oxnard showed BHP Billiton that a united community is more powerful than money. We fought together for a better, safer and healthier environment. It did not matter how old or young we were, or the color of our skin, or how poor or rich we were, we were all fighting together for the same reasons. We needed environmental justice in Oxnard. We educated, we informed and we empowered each other to mobilize ourselves against this corporation. Si se pudo!”

– Erica Fernandez Zamora, environmental justice advocate

In this case, it was Erica’s and her colleagues’ local roots that enabled them to mobilize the community quickly. Residents of South Oxnard trusted Erica to understand the issue as well as their way of life, and more importantly, neighbors could immediately relate to her concerns about the health problems a pipeline could cause in their backyard.



CASE STUDY:

High School student rallies community to defeat world’s largest mining company



Oxnard rally, photo by Brett Miller

WHERE:

South Oxnard, California’s Central Coast

WHO:

Erica Fernandez Zamora, Carmen Ramírez, Farm workers, Mixteco Indigenous families, Central Coast Alliance for a Sustainable Economy (CAUSE) and Sierra Club

WHAT:

Australian company BHP Billiton, the world’s largest mining conglomerate, proposed the “Cabrillo Port” project in 2004 to build an \$800 million liquefied natural gas terminal 14 miles from Malibu. The project would have included a 15-mile long 36-inch pipeline snaking through low-income migrant communities in South Oxnard, emitting almost 300 tons of harmful pollutants into the air every year. Erica Fernandez Zamora, a High School student who had immigrated from Mexico a couple of years earlier, got involved in an effort to stop the pipeline upon learning about potential health threats her family and community would suffer.

WHAT WORKED:

Working with CAUSE and the Sierra Club, Erica joined the effort to create a Latino campaign against the pipeline. A young teenager of only 15, she started with sit-ins and protests at the local Billiton office, then was trained and mentored by local community organizers, taking her campaign from laundromats to schools and churches, eventually helping to rally 2000 people at the State Lands Commission meeting where the permit was up for review.

WIN:

On April 12, 2007, following a marathon 12 hour meeting where Erica's stirring speech was just one of many from the community, the California State Lands Commission denied Billiton the 30 year lease of state waters that they sought. That May, the California Coastal Commission denied permitting, and Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger expressed his disapproval of the project via a letter. That June, the US Maritime Administration issued disapproval, ending the project's prospects.

“How did it happen that this dirty, dangerous and completely unnecessary project was defeated? The people organized in a very strategic way, with the help of tireless civic leaders, grassroots organizations valuing social, economic and environmental justice. At the final hearing which changed everything, over 2000 individuals showed up, including youth, farmworkers, environmentalists, seniors, and some great electeds all of whom had the health of the people and the planet in mind. People power won the day and our environment was saved at least that time. We know that it is a constant effort and we must be vigilant about future threats. But what a lesson and an inspiration which tells us that “yes, we can win, si se puede! if we work hard enough.”

- Carmen Ramirez, Mayor Pro-Tem, Oxnard, CA



TRUE COLLABORATION

True collaboration means co-creating goals and pursuing them together. Be mindful of power dynamics when working in partnerships or coalition. As Rod Torrez said, “When we reach out to other organizations, we want them to know that we want to be equal, and that we are equals, at the table.” Timing of engagement is key—inviting community based organizations to join a campaign at the start, before strategy is determined, signals that they are valued peers. This sets up a much more productive dynamic than a last minute ask to sign on to pre-conceived messages or show up “with diverse constituents.”



CEJA Congreso, photo by Brooke Anderson Photography, courtesy of CEJA

In the case study below, mainstream environmental groups worked with environmental justice and community based organizations to run advocacy, communications and outreach campaigns. Latinos were able to articulate the problems with fossil fuel pollution in their communities more effectively than outside advocates, and their concerns garnered support from decision makers in districts with similar demographics and health hazards.



CASE STUDY:

Latinos take the lead in creating California’s trailblazing climate policy

WHERE:

California – from San Ysidro to Sacramento

WHO:

Governor Jerry Brown, Senate President Pro Tem Kevin de Leon, California Environmental Justice Coalition, CAUSE, Pacoima Beautiful, Leadership Counsel for Justice and Accountability, The City Project, NRDC, Sierra Club, Audubon California, Environment California, etc.

WHAT:

Innovative and extensive statewide coalition works with first Latino Senate President Pro Tem to pass trailblazing climate policy in California. Building on the legacy of California’s landmark Global Warming Solutions Act of 2006, advocates and decision makers took on moneyed fossil fuel interests (including opposition from fake “grassroots” groups) to further establish California as a climate action leader. The final bill was amended to remove a gas use reduction clause that came under fire from fossil fuel interests and the lawmakers that love them (led by Latino elected officials from some of the most polluted districts in California). While it was still a great advance for Californians, stronger and broader participation from diverse civic groups might have helped counter the assault from well-funded industry groups that deployed community, farm-worker and working family voices to spread their narrative.

WHAT WORKED:

While the effort was conceived by a fairly traditional coalition of established conservation organizations, environmental justice and equity groups later took the lead given their longstanding work and connections to the bill’s legislative sponsor, advocating through grassroots actions, community organizing and a large rally held weeks before

the end of the legislative session in Sacramento. This collaboration garnered overwhelming public support for the policy despite millions of dollars spent by fossil fuel behemoths in misleading advertising throughout the state.

WIN:

While the law lost a key provision in the legislative negotiations at the end of term (reducing oil use in California by 50%) the authentic voices that supported this climate plan throughout effectively achieved victory in this David vs. Goliath battle. Senate Bill SB350 will double California's current goals for energy efficiency in buildings, while increasing renewable energy from 33 percent in 2020 to 50 percent by 2030.



CULTURAL FLUENCY

A culturally fluent campaign speaks to deeply held community values, while also recognizing and addressing barriers to participation. The groups working to turn a toxic waste dump into a park in Northeast Portland modeled this approach. Tony DeFalco of Verde said, “One of the defining characteristics of Let Us Build Cully Park! is the direct community involvement in designing and building the park. That has meant providing stipends, childcare and translation for community members involved in testing the site, going into the schools with technical resources like a landscape architect to assist youth in designing the community garden and play area and being present in the community to identify individuals to work on construction.”



CASE STUDY:

Portland community champions one of a kind neighborhood park

WHERE:

Northeast Portland, Oregon

WHO:

Verde, Hacienda, Latino Network, OPAL, Native American Youth and Family Center, et al

WHEN:

2008-Present



Crew working on Cully Park, courtesy of Verde

WHAT:

Cully is one of Portland’s most diverse neighborhoods, and, until recently, it lacked green space. In 2011, a group of 17 community organizations, led by a local group called Verde, came together to build a park on the site of an old gravel mine that was later turned into a landfill. The groups worked with the city to clean up the site, and engaged neighborhood residents in the design of the 25-acre park. The park’s features will include a community garden, a huge play area designed by local youth to meet the needs of young people in the neighborhood, including disabled youth, and an Inter-tribal gathering garden. The park will also feature a “green-street” designed to slow and filter stormwater while providing habitat for birds and other wildlife. The partners are working with the city to measure community health indicators like sidewalk coverage, how safe and secure residents feel walking at night, access to fresh fruits and vegetables, and opportunities for culturally relevant activities.

WHAT WORKED:

Construyamos Cully created an innovative community led design process that the City of Portland will incorporate into future projects. The park will provide much needed green space for the neighborhood while embracing cultural and traditional uses. The design of the park provided paid apprenticeships for local students and training opportunities for neighbors, while the construction of the park is been providing business and investments to local social enterprises as well as local minority and women-owned contracting firms.

WIN:

The Cully neighborhood overcame institutional neglect and funding issues to build a park in their neighborhood, incorporating learning and work opportunities at every step of the process while creating a new framework for the city. The park project laid the foundation for ongoing community development, including a crowdfunded campaign to turn a strip club into a community plaza.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR LATINO LEADERSHIP

As George Sánchez Tello of San Gabriel Mountains Forever Leadership Academy notes, “Our communities know best what our communities need. Our communities know best what needs to be addressed and what are the solutions, whether it is access to public space, exposure to toxic waste or ensuring a healthy future for our children and their children... We need to create leadership opportunities and offer community organizers funding and support to execute projects in their own communities that benefit them and coalition efforts.”



Leadership Academy graduates, courtesy of the San Gabriel Mountains Forever Leadership academy



CASE STUDY:

A community supercharges a National Monument designation

WHERE:

San Gabriel Valley, East Los Angeles, CA

WHO:

Community members of El Monte, San Gabriel Mountains Forever Coalition, Sierra Club, Wilderness Society.

WHEN:

Summer 2011 - present

WHAT:

A coalition of well established legacy conservation groups come together to facilitate the creation of a leadership academy in the San Gabriel Valley. The academy is a service-learning, dialogue based model, inspired by community organizing training programs. It provides participants with a stipend, as well as a \$1000 grant to implement projects conceived during the program. It has graduated 63 students since 2011, and they have executed 28 projects across the region. Nearly 80 percent of the graduates identify as Latinos, approximately 60 percent are youth, 60 percent are women and 60 percent are immigrants or first generation.

WHAT WORKED:

The San Gabriel Mountains Forever Leadership Academy is a model for authentic engagement of urban communities of color. It addresses the long standing problem of lack of diversity in the environmental mainstream head on, and helps a community empower and grow its own leaders by providing them with training and resources. The academy doesn't set the agenda: it provides a framework for the community to design, direct and implement their own projects.

WIN:

The students and graduate network of the Leadership Academy were crucial players in securing National Monument status for the San Gabriel Mountains. When President Obama traveled to the site in October 2014, he shared only one local story, that of Brenda Kyle, a resident and graduate of the academy. More importantly, the alumni are already hard at work in conservation locally, and in some cases, creating more culturally relevant training spaces like the Asian American Environmental Leadership Academy.

SHARED VALUES AT STAKE

At the heart of all these projects lies a common interest in protecting public health and the environment, but the way these goals are articulated may vary depending on the audience. In the case of a Chicago campaign to shut down dirty and outdated coal plants, conservation groups like Sierra Club and Greenpeace took their cues from community leaders, and emphasized the health concerns associated with the plants. The overarching message of the Chicago Clean Power Coalition working to shutter the plants and put new controls in place was about the right to breathe clean air. The environmental groups lifted up stories from the nearby neighborhoods of Pilsen and La Villita, where pollution from the two plants had caused asthma and other health problems for decades. By focusing on health, the campaign was able to build a broad coalition that included frontline communities, claim the moral high ground, and shift the discussion away from an economic argument used by the coal industry.



CASE STUDY:

Chicago community campaigns to shut down dirty coal plant

WHERE:

La Villita and Pilsen, Chicago, IL

WHO:

LVEJO, Pilsen Environmental Rights and Reform Organization (PERRO), Latino communities in Pilsen & La Villita, Rising Tide Chicago, Greenpeace, Sierra Club

WHAT:

Community members in the largely Latino Southwest Side neighborhoods of Pilsen and La Villita suffered health problems for decades from the pollution caused by nearby the Fisk and Crawford coal power plants. Starting in 2002, LVEJO and other groups embarked on a 10-year fight that culminated in the Chicago Clean Power Ordinance that shuttered the plants.



LVEJO City Hall, courtesy of Little Village Environmental Justice Organization

WHY:

The decade long fight was a textbook campaign built on a community organizing model. LVEJO organizer Kim Wasserman became involved after her newborn son's asthma attacks prompted an informal survey of the area that revealed widespread asthma problems in the community. Not long after, a health study published by Harvard's School of Public Health linked the power plants to dozens of deaths and almost 3000 asthma attacks annually. This report kick started a campaign that included public demonstrations and community based organizing.

WIN:

Working among the largely immigrant Latino population, community based organizing proved to be a catalyst to mobilize non-traditional and first time environmental justice advocates to lobby for the approval of a Clean Power Ordinance that negotiated a shut-down schedule. In 2012, the power plant operators closed the plants a year ahead of schedule.

"If we don't mobilize, our communities will continue to be sacrifice zones for our people, our communities and our mother earth. As Latinos we understand how we are being impacted and more importantly how to solve the climate crises. We need to be leading the movement and not just being poster children for it." -- Kim Wasserman Nieto, the Goldman Prize winning Executive Director of the Little Village Environmental Justice Organization (LVEJO)

CONSERVATION Y CULTURA

Conservation values are not only expressed through policy fights and advocacy campaigns. For many Latinos conservation is intimately connected with other core concerns, including family, community, faith, arts, and recreation.

“Latinos and their Latin American extended families bring to the conservation table extraordinary cultural diversity and shared values embedded in reverence for mother earth. Respect for our God given natural resources has been the backbone of the indigenous peoples of the hemisphere for more than 20,000 years. Today it still drives the DNA and spirit of the Americas of the South and reverberates for generations in the families migrating to the North. These preservationist and protectionist values resonate in our religions, our social structures, our agricultural practices, and our arts and crafts. The biggest ingredient of the richness and diversity of Latino culture is the emotional and intimate connection it exudes. This Latino cultura animates society through movement, closeness, color, and the indigenous and the sacred, expressing our humanity in ways that are rapidly disappearing.”
-- Irene Vilar , Americas for Conservation + the Arts



CASE STUDY:

Americas Latino Eco Festival celebrates Latino conservation leadership

WHERE:

Boulder and Denver, Colorado

WHO:

Irene Vilar, Americas for Conservation + the Arts; Carlos Zegarra, Sachamama; Mark Magaña, Greenlatinos; Dulce Saenz, Conservation Colorado; Andrea Delgado, Earthjustice

WHAT:

A grassroots festival launched in 2013 to celebrate Latino conservation and cultural leadership and foster collaboration to better tackle environmental problems from many angles. The festival was a hit from the beginning, reflect-

ing a genuine desire among Latino leaders to connect across geography, disciplines and perspectives. Now in its third year, the festival has outgrown its original Boulder home and moved to Denver, thanks in part to the support and collaboration of mainstream organizations like Earthjustice, NextGen Climate, Conservation Colorado, Climate Reality Project, The Nature Conservancy, National Wildlife Federation, League of Conservation Voters, EDF and others that helped to bolster its reach and impact.

WHAT WORKED:

Highlighting the interconnectedness between conservation and culture throughout the Latino community creates an inclusive space for Latino leaders to invite mainstream conservation advocates to support priorities and objectives defined by Latinos.

WIN:

The rapidly growing festival serves as an empowering affirmation for Latino conservation advocates, community, and allies to celebrate wins, explore intersectional collaborations, and rally on the road to new victories. Increased collaboration and financial support from mainstream conservation organizations models a good approach to building long term relationships based on common purpose: Latino advocates set the project goals and objectives in an authentic cultural context grounded in shared values, while mainstream organizations provide resources, expertise and participation that can focus the connection back to traditional conservation policy advocacy.



America's Latino Ecofestival kids, courtesy of Irene Vilar

RESOURCES AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We hope this paper inspires its readers to engage the grassroots groups working in Latino organizations around the country, and have created a list of such groups at www.lamadretierra.org/resources.

We would like to thank the colleagues and partners who generously trusted us to share their stories and perspectives (full list on page 7). Countless cafecitos and meals shared in homes, offices, schools and parks from Las Cruces to Delano and Denver gave us a view into the heart of authentic grassroots Latino movements for the environment.

We would like to thank our close collaborator, Jose Gonzalez, who connected us to valuable voices and journeyed to interview them. We also want to recognize Jade Begay, Resource Media's Sustainability and Justice Fellow, who trekked all over New Mexico to capture the images and videos of our interviews.

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¹ Organization names provided for identification purposes only—does not imply endorsement.