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Environmental Social Activism in the San Diego-Tijuana Transborder Region

A Thesis
Presented to
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B.A. in Environmental Studies
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Abstract

This paper examines the obstacles and opportunities social activists face when attempting to fight environmental injustices in the San Diego-Tijuana transborder region. The study undertakes a case study of the Environmental Health Coalition (EHC) - the leading environmental justice organization in the region, which operates on both sides of the US-Mexico Border. The analyses conclude that despite a strong rhetoric of binationalism employed throughout border activists' campaigns, the strategies that are utilized on the ground have been vastly local and short-term in focus. While activist organizations like the EHC demonstrate a keen awareness of the binational implications of environmental injustices and tout the benefits of a binational approach to addressing these problems, discrepancies are present due to obstacles that are economic, political and perceptual in nature. Ultimately, perceptions about the existence of environmental injustices as well as their character affect whether communities engage in local, short-term strategies to address immediate health concerns, or binational, long-term strategies that address the paradigmatic structures that underlie and perpetuate injustices. Key variables that shape community members' and activists' perceptions of environmental injustice include the economic situation that dictates individuals' priorities and their ability to affect political decisions, as well as jurisdictional inconsistencies caused by the physical and political nature of the border. These findings contribute to a relatively sparse body of literature on the dynamics of transborder environmental justice activism by demonstrating the strategic shortcomings that perpetuate a true lack of binational collaboration in the San Diego-Tijuana region.

WORD COUNT: 244

Introduction

A nearly 80km long stretch of water originates in East San Diego County, carving through rocks, mountains and one of the most significant political borders of modern history. This hydrologic system is called the Tijuana River Watershed and its binational reach ends with the Tijuana River contributing a yearlong flow of water and pollution into Imperial Beach, California. The Arroyo Alamar is a 10km tributary of the Tijuana River and flows directly South of one the largest industrial parks of the entire region, placing this water body at a critical crossroads where many U.S. owned maquiladoras dump enormous amounts of untreated pollution directly into this water, while attracting unsustainable quantities of immigrant workers who develop irregular settlements on the riverbed. This exponential population growth in

combination with the lack of infrastructure on the Mexican side of the border contributes raw sewage, trash, and various other pollutants to the arroyo rendering it unsuitable for human contact. The Mexican government's proposal to channel this water body has successfully encased in concrete approximately 7.5km of the Arroyo. This has resulted in increased mobilization from activists on both sides of the border who are concerned with the health and wellbeing of the environment and affected communities. Binational organizations like the Environmental Health Coalition are mobilizing in an effort to save the remaining natural river environment as a vital resource for the local community and mitigation for increasing pollution that channelization brings to California.

For over half a century, U.S. citizens have worked hard to advance civil rights by dismantling the discriminatory framework through grassroots activism, citizen participation and direct political protest. As activists slowly succeeded in taking down many paradigmatic structures of exclusion, segregation, neglect, and dehumanization, the civil rights framework expanded to include environmental harms. The U.S. Environmental Justice Movement (EJM) that emerged focused specifically on how social problems raised by traditional environmentalists disproportionality burden communities of color, through what has been termed "environmental racism." Community activists are challenged to not only address the direct effects of pollution, but also broader structural factors, including transnational economic policies. A locally focused grassroots orientation defines activist organizations that narrow their scope to direct impacts and immediate solutions. An internationally focused, structural orientation characterizes activism that expands their scope to systemic injustices and long-term solutions. The border setting creates two unique but related frameworks for environmental justice, bridging local movements into a binational framework allowing for cross-border collaboration. Binational non-governmental

organizations (NGOs) working together with communities on both sides of the border are merging these frameworks in order to achieve environmental justice both locally and globally, present and future.

Key themes from EJM literature in the United States provide a background for understanding the historical goals of this movement as well as the different contextual perceptions of injustices as local in the U.S., local in Mexican communities, binational or border issues, or global. A “local” perception of environmental justice addresses the communities most directly affected by the problem and seeks to help this community cope on a day-to-day basis, often through education about the issues present. A “binational” perception addresses the entire border region as one community with the same experiences and goals. This perception encourages cross-border collaboration and solidarity in achieving those goals through political, economic, and/or emotional support. A “global” perception addresses decision makers in order to enact structural changes in foreign policy, thereby mitigating institutional racist and discriminatory policies and practices. Maintaining the distinction between local, binational, and global perspectives is vital in understanding activists’ intended audiences, the type of changes they wish to enact, and the strategies they use to achieve such changes. The existing literature of environmental issues on the border is dated and incomplete regarding a qualitative analysis of social and cultural implications. Where social movement literature does exist, it is often contradictory in its theoretical assumptions. The environmental justice literature that contributed to this study synthesizes key themes from the U.S. EJM, border environmental justice movements, and international approaches to environmental justice. Since the 1990s momentous changes affecting the border have occurred, including the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the continued spread of capitalism into Global South, the

shift toward a democratic system of governance in Mexico, as well as problematic power plays between government officials and drug cartels, and finally, the wave anti-immigrant nationalism that has swept the US in the decade after 9/11.

By examining local U.S. and Mexican environmental justice activism as well as trans-border mobilization concerning the Arroyo Alamar, this study seeks to identify the obstacles the border presents for social activists, the strategies employed in order to overcome those obstacles, and what, if any, unique opportunities for collaboration are present. A qualitative analysis of obstacles and opportunities faced by the Environmental Health Coalition (EHC), one of the transborder region's most successful NGOs, as well as other grassroots activists in Tijuana, will provide a comprehensive analysis of successful strategies used to address environmental issues that transcend the border. This analysis also includes the shortcomings of environmental activists that result from economic, legal and jurisdictional obstacles in the transborder region. The proposal to channel the Arroyo Alamar is relevant for understanding how global issues of modernization and imperialism have local effects that are part of a dynamic political environment and that environmental racism on the border not only affects Mexican citizens, but rather affects the entire transborder community. The primary purpose of this study is to reveal obstacles facing transborder social activists and successful strategies used in overcoming these obstacles. Perceptions of environmental injustices and binationalism, as well as strategies employed by these transborder activists will be disclosed through a review of press releases and social media content, participant observation, and interviews with field experts and EHC staff members. This study further reveals how San Diego-Tijuana water quality issues are illustrative of other environmental injustices, which have resulted from the "treadmill of destruction" that follows the spread of capitalism. Although the border presents a complex set of obstacles, I

propose that environmental social activists have identified ways to create positive opportunities for collaboration within the border community. Furthermore, I propose this collaboration will be the catalyst for merging local, binational, and global perceptions of environmental injustice, creating more inclusive and far reaching strategies and solutions. By investigating the Environmental Health Coalition's perceptions and strategic initiatives, this project rather reveals a lack of perceptual unity in the border environmental justice movement and only a few instances of truly binational collaboration. Therefore, the border environmental justice movement is inefficient regarding resource sharing, perceptual unity, and the strength that would result from cross-border mobilization and support.

This project serves to update the literature regarding transborder cooperation in environmental justice activism. By analyzing the Arroyo Alamar Campaign as a case study, this research reveals how social activists' strategies are employed to not only to address the unique environmental problems faced on the border, but also broader systems of political and economic inequality. I argue that the unique strategies employed, the scale at which the problems are addressed, as well as the potential for cross-border collaboration are dependent upon whether the activists view environmental injustices as inherently local, binational or global in scope. I ultimately conclude that social activists in the transborder region are fundamentally dependent on the concept of a binational community, even though this sense of community does not exist on the ground yet. I also conclude that popular education and community awareness are the primary strategies of fostering solidarity and collaboration when addressing transborder issues. These prove to be the most effective strategies for gaining a broad base of citizen support and funding in order to promote both local, global, short-term and long-term solutions environmental

injustice. Yet the EJM along the border continues to struggle maintaining a united front through coalition building, as social activists and other actors remain skeptical of working together.

The Environmental Health Crises of the Arroyo Alamar: Proposals and Consequences

Both physical and conceptual barriers separate the cities of San Diego and Tijuana, but the region is organically linked through its dependence on transborder natural resources like the Tijuana River. This river is actually an intricate network comprised of tributaries on both sides of the border with a watershed that spans approximately 1750 square miles and affects over 1.4million people and counting (EPA, 2013). The channelization and pollution of the Arroyo Alamar, a tributary to the Tijuana River, provide new binational challenges for water quality in the watershed (Kopinak, 2004; Michel, 2001; Ponce et al. 2004). This water body flows through the Colonia Chilpancingo, an irregular housing settlement, constructed to shelter the massive influx of migrants that came to the border in order to work in NAFTA produced maquiladora factories (Carruthers, 2008; Clough-Riquelme, 2006; UCSC, 2005; EHC, 2014). With this population boom and expansion of industrial factories, immense quantities of sewage, pollution and trash are destroying one of the only green spaces and natural resources left for the region. The pollution now present in the river threatens the health of local residents as well as downstream communities that receive these contaminants during rain events. Historically, the Arroyo Alamar was a riparian corridor, home to wildlife and native vegetation, and a vital resource for fishing, bathing, and even drinking (EHC, 2014). This type of natural capital is often referred to as urban greenspace and has been hypothesized to provide several physical and psychological health benefits to the population (Walker, 2012). Increased residential desirability would likely deter the expansion the irregular settlements, while bringing wealthier investors

willing to develop formal housing and improve the infrastructure (Michel, 2001). To Chilpancingo, the arroyo is a resource as fresh water, healthy living, and natural mitigation for pollution and flooding; to San Diego, the water is a resource for the Tijuana Estuary and local beaches. The local residents' understanding of the river's benefits to community health and empowerment is largely ignored by powerful American corporations whose perception of this resource as a "pollution haven" (Kopinak, 2004). The existence of massive quantities of pollution resulting from this type of economic imperialism and pollution exportation is threatening large populations in Tijuana that live within an incredibly close proximity to the arroyo and threatens their health on a daily basis. While U.S. citizens are impacted by the pollution this arroyo brings downstream, many live in impoverished minority communities and are unaware of the conditions facing their upstream neighbors. Due to physical complications the militarized border presents, U.S. citizens cannot visualize this pollution or empathize with Mexican residents (Bandy 1998). This disjuncture in perception of the importance of the Arroyo Alamar serves a source of contention and division in this region.

The dire situation of poverty and unemployment in this developing country served as a catalyst for the signing of NAFTA in 1994, believed to be a way to stimulate the economy and provide jobs. Companies based in the United States began developing maquiladora factories along the border, particularly near rivers, in order to dump and dilute hazardous waste, especially since pollution regulations are either absent or unenforced (Kopinak, 2004; Faber, 2009). This type of pollution exportation exploits underserved populations due to their lack of political and financial influence; a practice referred to as "environmental racism" by the Environmental Justice Movement (Barry and Sims, 1994). Bullard and Johnson attempt to provide a theoretical explanation for this racism by stating that, "The practice (of pollution exportation) is a

manifestation of power arrangements and a larger stratification system in which some people and some places are assigned greater values than others” (2009:73). Power structures provide an analytical framework for understanding the social inequalities that follow modernity and why a developing country would risk environmental health for the promises of economic prosperity from the United States (Szasz and Mueser, 1997). The maquiladora factories established along the border were set here specifically to avoid environmental regulations in the United States, meaning that workers could be exposed to more hazardous substances on the job and that hazardous waste would not require expensive treatment before being disposed of into the natural environment (Kopinak, 2004; Faber, 2009). Tijuana has become the world’s largest manufacturer of products such as televisions and other electronic products that require many hazardous chemicals and metal substances (Guidotti, 1984). The border population continued to explode throughout the 1990s with the majority of residents migrating from all over Mexico, desperately seeking work provided by the maquiladoras, regardless of the poor working conditions there. Francisco Lara-Valencia argues that the negative consequences of NAFTA are not an isolated incident and that “traditional cross-border relationships are business based and serve selfish interests while contributing to overcrowding, environmental degradation and health hazards” (2002: 9).

While the U.S. has a history of international economic agreements that exploit developing nations lack of financial and political capital, NAFTA and the maquiladora factories pose a unique threat to the United States. The Arroyo Alamar, as a tributary to the Tijuana River, drains directly into the Pacific Ocean at Imperial Beach, California (Lara-Valencia, 2002). Therefore, the idea of using the border as a pollution haven has backfired and San Diego residents are ultimately exposed to this hazardous waste as it makes it way downstream. This

channelization process has removed all natural sediment and riverbanks and replaced the area with trapezoidal concrete lining, which forces the water through a small trough at the base of the structure. The proposal to channel the Arroyo Alamar has come from the Mexican federal government agency, the National Water Commission (CONAGUA). Whiteford and Meville criticize this agency for restricting influence from state and local government influence, not allowing local residents and local concerns to influence federal proposals (2002). CONAGUA has already completed two-thirds of the channelization project, under the claims that channeling the river will reduce local flooding, the construction of a freeway along the channel will bring an expansion in economic opportunities and greater infrastructure, and illegal development along the river will be removed and stopped (Gibson, 2012).

The EHC, a San Diego based Environmental Justice organization, is addressing this issue as part of their border justice campaign. Their website lays out the direct consequences of channelization including: habitat loss, species endangerment, loss of surface and groundwater, increased erosion, exacerbated local flood events, and augmented pollution concentrations (EHC, 2014). Suzanne Michel points out several flaws with the tradeoffs of channelization, noting that this type of development increases flood events downstream, removes surface water and ground water recharge from the local area, transports larger quantities of pollutants that are not filtered through the ground, and degrades the value of the land by removing greenspace (Michel, 2001). Community based activism has become a popular response to the inefficiencies of international working groups, like the Commission for Environmental Cooperation (CEC), whose decisions are highly influenced by political power and financing rather than the concerns of the affected communities (Bandy, 1998; Lee, 2005). Ultimately, the Alamar case study identifies a lack of unity between activists' binational rhetoric and locally based strategic initiatives. This perceptual

tension perpetuates inefficiencies revealing the importance a binational approach that can address multiple levels of environmental injustice.

International Economic Development and the Environmental Justice Movement

In order to understand how the EJM is concerned with the specific case study of the industrial pollution and channelization of the Arroyo Alamar, it is paramount to first understand the global capitalist paradigm that is the driving structural force behind such occurrences. The United States has an infamous history of economic expansion at the expense of less powerful nations under the guise of mutually beneficial economic policies. NAFTA was the agreement that allowed American companies to develop hundreds of export processing factories along the Mexican side of the border (Barry and Sims, 1994; Faber, 2009). The “treadmill of destruction” describes the cyclical need for increasing development and industrialization regardless of environmental degradation and socially destructive impacts in what can be called a “race to the bottom” (Faber, 2009; Sze and London, 2008). This treadmill can be seen in the San Diego-Tijuana region due to the maquiladora factories present that producing toxic waste and leaching harmful substances into the environment. These heavy pollution-producing factories are supported by the Mexican government, in exchange for jobs due to the unemployment crisis in Mexico in the 1990s (Bullard and Johnson, 2009). This example of economic blackmail has threatened the health of the environment and thousands of migrant workers through exposure toxic chemicals and hazardous waste in factories and the local Arroyo Alamar.

Economic imperialism is most evident through the concept of pollution havens. American companies use Mexican land and water as a dumping ground for toxic waste due to the Mexican governments inability to effectively establish and enforce strict environmental regulations

(Bullard and Johnson, 2009; Kopinak, 2004). According to Faber, “some 87 percent of maquiladoras use toxic materials in their production processes” (2009: 187). Even agreements such as the La Paz Agreement, which stated maquiladoras would ship hazardous waste back to the U.S. for treatment and disposal were only signed due to the knowledge that it would not be enforced (Herzog, 2000; Lara-Valencia, 2002). This economic imperialism is referenced in environmental justice literature through the phrase “environmental racism,” explaining the uneven distribution of environmental burdens and benefits on communities of some disadvantages status (Walker, 2012). Mexican workers face political disadvantages of government secrecy, inability to contact political officials directly, inability to take time off work and engage in activism, lack of institutional memory, and lack of government accountability to constituents (Kelly, 2002; Fox, 2008).

This concept of environmental racism falls under the theoretical umbrella of the environmental justice paradigm. Environmental Justice theory seeks to explain the underlying social, ethical, and political causes for the uneven distribution of environmental burdens and benefits in order to advocate for policies and practices that prevent health concerns and environmental degradation before it occurs (Bullard, 2001; Walker, 2012). The EJM was born as environmentalists began to expose links between the location of environmental burdens like landfills and toxic waste disposal sites and minority communities. The United Church of Christ (UCC) study conducted in 1987 was a landmark case supporting this theory with empirical evidence that minority communities did seem to be at higher risks of toxic waste exposure (Taylor, 2002). As the traditional environmental movement was entirely eco-centric, the EJM emerged as a response to this limited view and to the particular grievance of uneven burdens placed on minority communities. This new vantage point gave community activists a framework

of justice in which the environment is irrevocably linked to cultures, economics, politics, and public health (Bullard and Johnson, 2009; Sze and London, 2008; Kada and Kiy, 2004). The entire border environmental justice movement has developed as a way to incorporate local experiences and perceptions into social and environmental activism (Carruthers, 2008).

Strategies and Frameworks of the EJM

While community based social activism has become a popular strategy in the San Diego – Tijuana transborder region, it is important to understand traditional strategies of resistance employed by the environmental justice movement. Political lobbying including the financial backing of electoral candidates is one traditional strategy adopted from the environmental movement as a way for disadvantaged communities to gain some form of representation and voice in a procedural setting (Sze and London, 2008; EHC, 2014). Protests have also been another traditional strategy adopted from the civil rights movement in order to force political attention on social issues. For example, EHC members recently met for several protests against local propositions in the city of Barrio Logan as well as protests marching along the Arroyo Alamar to publicize community outrage against political decisions (EHC, 2014; Clough-Riquelme, 2006). Due to tight control government and industry leaders maintain over research studies and data, grassroots movements were forced to come up a strategy that would validate their arguments. Thus, activists developed a strategy advocating for a more interdisciplinary approach, engaging in their own research, working with universities, and other NGOs in order to overcome the historical dominance government and industry officials held over technical studies and research. (Clough-Riquelme, 2006; UCSC, 2005). This approach championed by the EJM is often referred to as praxis, or the “crossroads of social movements, public policy, and academic research” as “grounded in the lived realities of actual people, places, and problems” (Sze and

London, 2008:1331,1347). While this traditional academic partnership with community activists has been an defining part of the EJM in both the U.S. and Latin America, authors such as Joe Bandy provides ample critiques of this method as self-serving, imperialistic, and exploitive of the community (Bandy, 1998). The dichotomy of the theoretical concept of praxis, argued as both necessary and detrimental towards achieving organizations' goals, demonstrates a major obstacle for activists attempting to identify best strategies.

While praxis is a defining characteristic of the EJM, other multi-stakeholder approaches to environmental justice have been employed by community activists in this region as well. Due to the complex nature of environmental justice, it is vital that activists address social and economic injustices as well, as these provide the framework for environmental injustices to become present (Alliance Healthcare Foundation, 2013). Community activism in the transborder region has developed as a popular strategy because it seeks to educate and empower those most disadvantaged by existing racist and imperialist paradigms (UCSC, 2005; Austin, 2010; Carruthers, 2008). This approach to social activism also allows for solidarity to emerge amongst community members on both sides of the border. By addressing a variety of stakeholders, community activists have solidified the functionality of the binational community as a place to share ideas, resources, momentum, and success (Bandy, 1998). Author Michael Bell argues that:

The bottom (in a bottom-up approach) represents social activism, the citizen pressure that indicates that change is desired and therefore ultimately possible. But without the participation of the top (patterns of social organization based on government, economy, technology, etc), the bottom will find it hard to coordinate its activities in the ways it desires" (2004: 234).

This merging of strategies is seen as a way to include a variety of stakeholders' interests and thereby working towards justice solutions that maximize benefits to the community (Bell, 2004; Michel, 2001). By focusing environmental justice efforts on education, dialogue and trust within the border community, this form of activism has become a critical method for achieving cross-border solidarity and redefining cultural preconceptions of the border in order to rectify the ongoing environmental crisis on the border (Bandy, 1998).

Due to the interdisciplinary nature of environmental social activism and the strategies used to achieve environmental justice, the border region has become a popular subject amongst academics looking to deepen their understanding of environmental racism in both a local and global context (some examples include Bandy, 1998; Sparrow, 2001; Barry and Sims, 1994; Austin, 2010). In a global context, economic imperialism and the toxic waste dumping resulting from NAFTA and the maquiladoras dominate the border environmental justice literature. According to Picou, "substantial sociological evidence exists to suggest that toxins in the environment contaminate more than the air, water, or soil; they also damage the social fabric of a community, its neighborhoods, its families, and its residents' self esteem" (as quoted in Kopinak, 2004). This observation links local effects of personal health and deteriorating community health to such global paradigms as globalization, modernization, and industrialization. These terms typically invoke a vague sense of progress and prosperity enjoyed by the First World, yet according to Szasz and Mueser, social inequalities are an inevitable and even fundamental part of the process of modernity (1997). A local perception of environmental justice advocates for equity of minority status citizens in order to prevent discrimination and uneven burdens placed on specific disadvantaged populations. This view addresses specific issues that residents face each day, and the challenges they can overcome in order to avoid hazards in the present.

Environmental justice in a global context seeks to uplift the majority of the population living from an impoverished Third World status with long term objectives, including the restructuring cultural, political, and economic traditions in order to a more environmentally just global environment. The Environmental Health Coalition is one of the most influential and persistent social activist NGOs based in San Diego with a strong foothold in Tijuana through their affiliate group, the Colectivo Chilpancingo (EHC, 2014). The unique dynamic of the border community creates many obstacles and opportunities for the social activists to engage in both traditional and community based strategies using local and global lenses, to achieve both short-term and long-term goals.

Obstacles to Binational Community Activism

Economic Obstacles

Environmental injustices occurring in this transborder region affect both U.S. and Mexican communities, yet the asymmetrical economic situation of those communities alters their perceptions of the existence and extent of the injustices. Physically, the region shares an environment, watersheds, pollution, economic partnerships, industry, health concerns, pollution, and other environmental and social factors (Barry and Sims, 1994; Herzog, 2000; Sparrow, 2001; Guidotti, 1984; Bandy, 1998; Lara-Valencia, 2002). The physical division of the border is also dissolved by the personal connections of those whose work requires them to commute across the border or those with family residing on both sides. The historical setting that has resulted in the present economic situation of Tijuana reflects the long standing tradition of governments to perceive economic and development decisions in terms of short-term benefits. In the case of Tijuana, NAFTA resulted in several promises made including “new jobs, lower prices for

consumer goods, improved public health, improved environmental quality, [and] reduced migration from Mexico to the U.S.” (Garcia and Simpson, 2004). This type of government propaganda supporting short-term economic gains is responsible for the overpopulated and transitory nature of communities in Tijuana, and is a major obstacle for combating the current channelization of the Arroyo Alamar.

One major obstacle facing environmental social activism in the transborder region results from qualitative differences in the economic situation and lived experiences of communities on each side of the border. Authors Clough-Riquelme and Bringas Rabago explain that on the Mexican side, residents focus on daily needs such as creating the infrastructure of a sewer system so that they can have a toilet and sewer pipeline connected to their houses instead of hand dug waste trenches (2006). This focus is in contrast to American citizens, even marginalized and disadvantaged communities, who rarely face such economic struggles as irregular housing, sewage infrastructure. U.S. community activists instead focus on achieving justice by fighting the intentional locating of landfills and toxic waste plants in low-income minority neighborhoods and other racist institutional and structural paradigms (EHC, 2011; Taylor, 2002). Strategies employed by social activists regarding this disconnect in perception include changing perceptions of development from something that is degrading but necessary, to something that can be sustainable and a positive part of the community (Barry and Sims, 1994). While some activists believe this change of perception regarding development is a positive change, author Joe Bandy provides the critique that sustainability can be seen as a front of global capitalism that echoes the same imperialistic economic incentives responsible for the existing perceptions of distrust (1998). The social disparities across the border also contribute to differences in perception regarding the scope of the issues. Since Mexican residents are focused on the needs of

their every day lives, social activists on this side of the border tend to focus on popular education strategies in order to educate residents on the ways their health is put at risk by this type of pollution. Popular education is advocated for on the grounds that “people learn when their personal experience is the basis of their education...[they] pay attention when they are participating in a discussion...and [they] are empowered when they are on equal footing working collectively to find answers and define action” (UCSC, 2005:2).

Political/Jurisdictional Obstacles

Physical obstacles to collaboration exist due to the political border established in order to separate American and Mexican governing bodies and legal jurisdictions. Community activists are challenged to overcome jurisdictional inconsistencies that occur across the political border as “policies and social behavior toward the environment tend to be jurisdictionally bounded, creating ineffectiveness and transboundary externalities” (Lara-Valencia, 2002: 218). In the case of the Arroyo Alamar, the power to affect change regarding CONAGUA’s decision remains solely within the local Mexican government’s jurisdiction. Since U.S. corporations or agencies were not involved with this project, they are barred from influencing political and economic decisions regarding the Arroyo Alamar. Persisting historical tensions, regional stereotypes, and physical barriers must also be overcome in order for truly successful collaboration to occur (Alston and Brown, 1993). These existing barriers to binational cooperation include the militarization of the physical border, exploitive partnerships, lack on institutional memory in the Mexican government, asymmetries in priorities, and distrust in government agendas (Sparrow, 2001; Lara-Valencia, 2002; Kada and Kiy, 2004; Bandy, 1998; Kelly, 2002).

Aside from the obstacles of perception presented by the dual local and global nature of environmental justice, the border presents several other obstacles requiring innovative strategies for collaboration and change. As a country struggling to rise from their Third World status, infrastructure and employment have dominated Mexican government priorities while NGOs continue to fight for recognition of their importance. Because these organizations receive little if any government support, they are forced to focus efforts “on short-term funding for survival than on long-term programmatic objectives” (Cloughe-Riquelme, 2006: 11). Government priorities on both sides of the border tend to focus on short-term economic benefits of projects as well, exacerbating environmental injustices that require long-term thinking (Bullard and Johnson, 2009). While ecology may transcend borders, public policy, culture, and perceptions are fundamentally divided in this region (Lara-Valencia, 2002; Sparrow, 2001). Policies such as Right-to-Know Legislation, intended improve industry transparency and public education regarding contaminants community members may be exposed to. In Mexico, similar legislation was enacted but has been an obstacle rather than opportunity due to noncompliance and lack of policy enforcement by the government (Fox, 2008). Jurisdictional inconsistencies that inhibit policies from being uniformly enacted on both sides of the border, reveal a key obstacle from transborder activism and the inefficiencies linked to political and legal strategies within this movement.

Social activism is a mode of organization that seeks to increase the social power and influence of a group through bottom-up pressure strategies as well as top-down collaboration strategies (Bell, 2004). This community-based approach has resulted in a variety of collaboration strategies including community-service learning programs in universities, technical community-university partnerships, and community-based research (Austin, 2010). These strategies

emphasize the EJM's tradition of praxis by utilizing a multi-stakeholder and interdisciplinary approach to issues of environmental health, which are technical environmental issues with broad social implications (Austin, 2010; Sze and London, 2008; Lee, 2005; Herzog, 2000). Community centered strategies like these employ various techniques to achieve social justice, largely focused on instigating dialogue between other NGOs, academics, and policy makers, and citizens regarding research and policy decisions (UCSC, 2005; Lara-Valencia, 2002; EHC, 2011). This type of multi-stakeholder collaboration is also referred to as "coalition-building," describing the broad web of linkages social movements develop in order to "exchange information and experiences, provide mutual support, have at least a partially organized social base, and engage in joint strategic campaigns" (Bandy and Smith, 2005). Authors Bandy and Smith expand on this strategy as one that is particularly useful for transborder and bicultural regions for overcoming diverse agendas by recognizing individual differences while emphasizing unifying issues and concerns (2005: 244). The success of such binational community-activism and coalition building suggests there is a need for a unified perception of the communities' understanding of the transborder issues as well as solid stakeholder linkages in order to overcome jurisdictional inconsistencies that inhibit political collaboration across the border. Until communities on both sides of the border adopt a unified binational perception of environmental injustices and a tangible binational community is realized, activists' priorities and strategic plans will remain inconsistent lacking the strength and efficiency to enact real change.

Perceptions that Derive from these Obstacles

Inconsistencies in the economic, political, legal, and jurisdictional settings across the border pose certain obstacles to community activists, but these inconsistencies permeate into the

consciousness and perceptions of their respective communities. Differences in perceptions become embedded in the minds and understanding of communities, creating a more pervasive and complicated obstacle to overcome. While residents on both sides of the border are directly affected by the pollution, U.S. groups who face more long-term effects of this injustice, focus on a combination of direct and indirect strategies. (Sze and London, 2008). This focus is in contrast to the economic experiences in Tijuana that dictates a necessity to live and work in hazardous conditions and activism that addresses only immediate concerns.

Mexican citizens' local perception of injustices presents a conceptual barrier to cross-border collaboration as it is too narrow in scope due to the immediate and disproportionate affects felt by this community. On the other hand, the American perspective fails due to the tendency to address global or binational environmental justice issues as international human rights issues. The physical divide of the border, which has become increasingly militarized and difficult to cross in the post 9/11 world, has contributed to hostile perception towards the border. Immigration on the U.S. side and post NAFTA overpopulation of migrants in Tijuana uninterested with the plights facing the region due to the transitory nature of much of the population (Kada and Kiy, 2004; Kopinak, 2004; Bandy, 1998). Thus it is difficult for many Americans to comprehend the short-term health implications those in Tijuana face and the Mexican migrant community has little long-term investment in the environment. This tendency then faces the obstacles of general bureaucratic inefficiency of international agencies, the lack of interest and funds by local governments, and the selfish interests of corporations (Lara-Valencia, 2002; Kopinak, 2004; Bandy, 1998). Therefore, this paper seeks to identify social activism strategies that address these complex perceptual obstacles as well as economic, political, and jurisdictional discrepancies.

Research Methods and Analytical Strategy

Understanding the strategic and collaborative dynamics of environmental social activism in a transborder region requires the examination of several levels of data. Primary sources, consisting of participant observations, official documentation, press releases, media publications, and interview data were used to reveal discrepancies and consistencies between the social movement literature and the activism currently taking place on the ground. The data reveals the way binational activism is conceptualized by activists and other stakeholders, as well as the strategies employed used to address environmental injustices. Media and publication data was collected from non-profit organizations' websites, radio interviews, and both San Diego and Mexican newspaper articles. Participant observation data was collected from an artist's reception and a community meeting, both put on by the EHC, and a citizen's forum facilitated by the International Water and Boundary Commission (IBWC). Interview data was collected from a key informant with regional experience in activism, international politics, and academia; two community leaders from the EHC; and an environmental expert source from the Tijuana River National Estuarine Research Reserve (TRNERR).

This data was collected in order to focus on the strategies community activists employ to overcome obstacles and optimize opportunities that exist in this unique transborder region. In the border context, community activists are challenged by not only addressing the direct effects of pollution, but also the broader structural factors, including transnational economic policies that transcend the border. This project seeks to answer the following key research questions: 1) what obstacles exist for transnational EJ activism?; and, 2) how are they addressed both discursively (activists' framing) and strategically (what is actually being done on the ground)? Before analyzing the data, I created general codes corresponding to themes I expected to find when

answering these questions. General codes constructed from the literature overview include the environmental justice movement, activist strategies, praxis, obstacles, globalization, stereotypes of binational activism, border culture, scope of activism, and short-term and long-term strategies. These codes were systematically applied to all levels of data to reveal economic, political, jurisdictional, and perceptual obstacles activists face due to the transborder nature of these injustices. After reviewing the literature and data, subsequent codes were created to address new themes revealed in the field data. In order to organize differences in perceptions, discursive dynamics of activists' framing of the issues were coded as: local, binational, and global. These codes include strategies of capacity building, multi-stakeholder approaches, political lobbying, coalition building, popular education, and media presence. Once these codes were applied to all levels of data, a comprehensive analysis of environmental social activism of the border region was constructed that provides insight into the discursive and strategic methods employed by community activists in overcoming social, cultural, economic, political, jurisdictional, and physical obstacles.

Findings and Discussion

Perceptions of Environmental Injustice

With the knowledge of long-term negative consequences of channelization, it is imperative for community activists to understand how residents and stakeholders on both sides of the border perceive issues of environmental justice and river channelization before developing strategies for change, because varying perceptions pose major obstacles for collaboration. The data presents varying perceptions regarding awareness of the environmental injustices. The asymmetrical priorities with the EJM across the border derive from the American perception of

justice as improving standards of living while Mexican perceptions of justice are entirely centered on obtaining basic survival needs (Kelly, 2002; Clough-Riquelme and Bringas Rabago, 2006; Bandy, 1998). Improved standards of living in American refer to the ability to influence city plans and fight against new hazardous development in low-income, minority communities. Basic needs in Mexico refer to the need for infrastructure and indoor plumbing so that raw residents are not at constant risk from hazardous waste from where they live and work. In terms of the Arroyo Alamar, government agendas are influenced by the Mexican government's perception of justice as economic opportunities and infrastructure development, regardless of long-term consequences of injustice. Public knowledge and concern varies due to the population's general acceptance of environmental conditions as permanent. Cross-border collaboration varies due to individuals' perceptions on the scope of activism, as some community members want to tackle global structures, while others want to remain focused on their daily struggles. According to Eduardo* a community organizer from the EHC and head of the Arroyo Alamar campaign, environmentalism in Mexico has rarely used the term "justice" as a focal point of activism and work at the EHC is "not just getting [decision makers] to make the decisions that we want on environmental justice, but it's them realizing that environmental justice is something they should be looking at" (Interview, July 8, 2014). Roberto, a campaign organizer at the EHC, expands this thought by noting that community members, on both sides of the border, tend to perceive environmental injustice as something to be accepted as the way it is (2014). The data reveal that the environmental justice movement along the border faces a key obstacle in fostering awareness about the right to environmental justice and environmental health within the affected communities.

The data provides discrepancies in the community members' short-term and long-term understanding of the environmental injustices connected to the pollution and channelization of the Arroyo Alamar. Eduardo claimed that:

Originally, it was very tough to get anybody to care about... the Alamar. Most residents... when they would think about the Alamar, all they would think about was the irregular housing, all those constructed on top of there. So they didn't see a value in protecting it. (Interview, July 8, 2014).

The Arroyo Alamar project he leads has a blog titled *Alamar Sustentable*, which reflects this sentiment in a publication explaining the channelization in terms of government claims, problems with channelization, and suggested alternatives. Below the title "We Shall Save Arroyo Alamar (Cottonwood Creek)!" italicized text states, "*Alamar is much more than squatter settlements and contamination*" (Alamar Sustentable, 2012). The emphasis on this statement reinforces the idea that many community members perceive the area as unimportant to be concerned with or have migrated to the region post-channelization and therefore have no reference for understanding the benefits of a natural river. This is in direct contrast with a statement from a member of Jovenes Pro Justicia Ambiental, a youth group in Mexico affiliated with the Colectivo Chilpancingo and the EHC, who stated in an article by CBS that, "We all see benefits in saving the Alamar for everyone to enjoy" (CBS, 2013). Margarita Diaz, an activist with the Proyecto Fronterizo Educacion Ambiental (PFEA), in Tijuana, states that neither community members nor the Mexican government truly perceive the benefits of this resource. In an article by the San Diego Reader she states that:

Tijuana is a coast city. We're a river city... But the [Mexican] government doesn't see it that way, and even we don't see ourselves as a river city. I tell people that we have a river running through the middle of our city. That's not a river, they say. That's a tunnel. (As quoted in Good, 2012).

These perceptions of the irregular housing and the river channel reveal the local communities' single frame of reference for the arroyo as part of an urban landscape. With the majority of the river channeled, those migrating to region for work perceive the manmade river as a permanent structure. Those living along the last remaining natural banks of the arroyo perceive the water as a health and flooding hazard rather than an important resource, and therefore channelization appears to be a reasonable solution. Eduardo from the EHC states that changing this perspective is one of his main goals of activism by arguing that "Tijuana needs to have an understanding that there is such a thing as sustainable development" (Interview, July 8, 2014). This understanding will allow for people to understand there is a pollution issue present with the water, but their frame of reference of channelization is not the only solution for pollution and flooding mitigation.

Aside from Mexican government's statements that the project is for "flood control," Dr. Jeff Crooks from the Tijuana River National Estuarine Research Reserve reveals underlying economic motivations for channelization by noting, "you can keep the river a narrow little channel; you can build right up to the edges of it so there's more space available; you can sell more land" (Interview, July 15, 2014). While flood control and increased development are undeniable short-term benefits of channelization, environmental experts now agree that the long-term consequences negate all such benefits by resulting in increased flooding, increased sedimentation, increased quantity and velocity of downstream flow, inability to recharge groundwater aquifers, and inability to naturally filter pollutants through soil (Herzog, 2000;

Michel, 2001; Jeff Crooks Interview, 2014). Oscar Romo, a key informant, activist and scholar in the San Diego-Tijuana region, has developed a non-profit called Alter Terra to address issues of environmental degradation and sustainable development in Tijuana; one unique project recycles tires into retaining walls, seats, and other useful items (Alter Terra 2014). Dr. Jeff Crooks explains that tires are a binational pollution problem in the Tijuana Estuary and in San Diego because Tijuana residents attempting to build irregular settlements often use tires as a level foundation for housing, even though rain usually washes away these homes and brings the tires downstream (Interview, July 15, 2014). This represents a huge diversion in perception, as San Diego residents understand tires as pollution to be removed, while Tijuana residents see them as a fundamental building tool. This just one example of how different standards of living shape communities' perceptions of social and environmental injustices. These varying perceptions about the importance of the Arroyo Alamar has shaped the community activism in the region by requiring a focus on community education in order to increase awareness that this water body is an important natural resource. According to a member of the Colectivo Chilpancingo, the EHC affiliate based in Tijuana, a march was held along the arroyo and "the goal of this event is that people know the Arroyo Alamar natural area still exists and that we have time to save" (Martinez, 2014). While alerting local residents of the existence of this important resource, the pollution and development of this water body is intrinsically of binational concern, yet discrepancies arise regarding the concept of binationalism as well.

Perceptions of Binationalism in the Transborder Region

Varying perceptions also exist within the border environmental justice movement on the importance and existence of a unified binational community. After examining the various the

data sources, asymmetries in how the transborder region was conceptualized and framed were revealed. These asymmetries exposed key differences in stakeholders' experiences with and knowledge of the Arroyo Alamar and its binational implications. The physical proximity has arguably created a binational community, united by unique experiences shared only by their location near the border. There is still ample debate on the existence of a "binational community" due to different lived experiences that influence community members' perceptions and priorities regarding environmental health. Authors Kada and Kiy argue that NGOs can act as "cultural connectors" as an intermediary that bridges the cultures and understandings between Mexican and American border residents in forming a connected or binational community (2004). According to a survey they conducted, "binational cultural fusion" was noted by members of the Tijuana community as one the greatest assets provided by the border (Kada and Kiy, 2004). Yet that same study revealed border communities also recognized several liabilities of the region including illegal immigration, official corruption, racism, and a lack of respect for culture that prevent trust and solidarity across the border (Kada and Kiy, 2004).

Author Joe Bandy argues that a binational culture may not exist organically in the region, but transborder activism "constructs a broad culture of solidarity that educates, politicizes, and unifies a diversity of people" (1998: 226). While some may argue for an existing community of solidarity, author Glen Sparrow concludes that the interdependence in the region is motivated solely by economics and that overall there are negative perceptions of the border community on both sides due to lingering historical tensions and stereotypes (Sparrow, 2001). A major obstacle to successful binational cooperation is the historical perceptions of paternalistic American activists who believe they should come to Mexico and "save" a backwards or less intelligent people, often in a condescending manner, implying Mexican citizens are responsible for their

impoverished situation (Alston and Brown, 1993; Bandy, 1998). This disenchanting view of Mexican citizens has only been exacerbated in a post 9/11 world where Americans have become increasingly anti-immigration and xenophobic (Bandy, 1998).

American perceptions of Mexico create large barriers to the existence of a binational community, but the barriers exist within the Mexican community as well. The transitory nature of the Tijuana population, as migrants continually pour into the city with the hopes of one day reaching the United States, their perceptions of the environment and irrevocably short-term, as they intend their residency to be temporary. This relative apathy and lack of investment into the local environment by Mexican communities is a major factor that inhibits the creation of a binational community with a shared investment and interest in the region. Eduardo from the EHC characterizes this unique border culture as the “frontera community...that mostly exists on the south side of the border” (Interview, July 8, 2014). Studies on pollution in the Alamar reveal it presents a health hazard resulting from this frontera community that builds irregular housing settlements polluting the river with sewage and works in the maquiladoras that pollute the river with toxic waste (Good, 2012). A short-term perspective on this pollution is therefore seemingly hopeless since both pollution sources are aspects of surviving that cannot be compromised. But by expanding this long-term vision of the region, the Alamar presents an opportunity to increase property values, increase economic prosperity, naturally filter pollutants increasing health and quality of living, and improve water quality downstream in San Diego, creating a border community unified by a clean river and useful resource instead of pollution and sickness. Lack of long-term strategic visions presents another obstacle to social activism as short-term solutions remain local in focus, while this type of long-term strategy incorporates communities in the entire binational region.

Transborder environmental literature often invokes the term “binational” when referring to the physical watershed, international policies, and collaboration between NGOs, yet relatively few scholars explicitly reference a binational community or culture as a force for political and social solidarity. Glen Sparrow’s article concludes that any cultural connectors in the San Diego-Tijuana region are driven by economics and historical tensions and stereotypes persist and deter true solidarity (2001). Authors Kada and Kiy present a nuanced version of this conclusion by interviewing residents from both San Diego and Tijuana and having them list both assets and liabilities about living the border region. Their results noted “binational cultural fusion” as an asset by Tijuana residents and “cultural richness” as an asset by San Diegans, yet Tijuana residents also noted a “lack of respect for our culture” as a liability (2004). This absence of an organically existing binational community, yet the desire for one was also reflected by Eduardo Mendez of the EHC, who states one of his main goals of activism is that “we understand ourselves as region...yes, there’s that border there, but that doesn’t divide us” (Interview, July 8, 2014). The data suggest a yearning and idealization about the existence of a binational culture, yet it remains more a symbolic framework. In reality, there is little evidence of tangible characteristics on the ground for how such a binational community might actually operate to increase the success of the border environmental justice movement.

Unfortunately this goal has not been realized and divided perceptions currently exist within governments, activist organizations and community members residing on both sides of border. Dr. Michel Boudrias comments on how a lack of binational culture affects the strategies these stakeholders rely on to enact change due to emphasis on governmental, academic, or civic action (Cavanaugh and Walsh, 2009). The data reveals that community members in Mexico tend to view instances of environmental justice in a short-term framework, while academics, field

experts, and environmental justice advocates tend to view these issues in terms of long-term costs and benefits. Social and environmental justice activists therefore employ a variety of strategies to address local communities' immediate concerns, but face several obstacles in addressing global institutional inefficiencies and unjust legislative action. These obstacles arise from the lack of long-term perceptions within Mexico as well as the lack of a tangible binational civil society. The strategies activists employ to navigate these realities focus on education and awareness in order to overcome the short-term focus of economic development present in Mexico as well as raising awareness in the U.S. that injustices like the Arroyo Alamar are truly binational environmental problems.

Strategies of Border Environmental Activism

Binational Strategies

Given the focus on binationalism by activists, it is surprising majority that the vast majority of strategies are local in focus. Localization of issues has resulted in successful education campaigns and awareness of individual impacts of instances of injustices. While education is an important aim of the environmental justice, local strategies are too narrow and inefficient in solving the structural and perceptual obstacles allowing injustices to persist in this region. Where binational strategies have been attempted, they are often piecemeal and inefficient. The failure to merge binational discursive framing with local strategic initiatives prevents social activists from overcoming the obstacles presented by the border region.

Environmental injustices along the San Diego- Tijuana transborder region exist as a microcosm of global economic imperialism and racism, yet very few binational strategies are, utilized for overcoming these institutional structures of injustice that challenge environmental

social activists. Asymmetries in economic experiences, jurisdictional authority, and community priorities between the two countries prevent a global focus for being conducive between both countries. Historically, attempts to implement policies across the border, such as the environmental regulations created to gain activists' support of NAFTA and Right-to-Know legislation, have failed on behalf of the Mexican government (Fox, 2008; Barry and Sims, 1994). According to Roberto from the EHC, although a large part of the organization's work centered on political lobbying, "we can't even start to imagine how we would do any of that in Tijuana" (Interview, July 8, 2014).

Different political systems, jurisdictional inconsistencies, and government priorities present a major obstacle for activist groups like EHC, whose major focus and successes in the U.S. center around political lobbying. Policy advocacy has been an integral part of the Environmental Health Coalition's core strategies since its inception. The EHC's most successful binational campaign, *Metales y Derivados*, demonstrated collaboration between U.S. financial responsibility for the existence of the injustice, and Mexican government prioritization that actually resulted in a toxic site clean up, restoring a more just environment to the community (EHC, 2011). An article in The San Diego Union Tribune describes a PAC affiliated with the EHC and describes it as the "biggest little PAC in San Diego...[with] a \$30,000 budget...the PAC spends its time conducting one-on-one outreach to the 35,000 voters of color registered in its core communities" (Cadelago, 2012). This political focus stems from the EJM's historical recognition of "the necessity of engaging at the state level to effect change in policies, programs, and decision-making that largely determined the economic, environmental and social conditions facing neighborhoods" (Matsuoka, 2003:1). In a citizens' forum for the International Boundary and Water Commission, Margartita Diaz, a community activist and architect from PFEA, stated

that community collaboration with government officials was the first strategy employed for the Arroyo Alamar development and a solution titled “Proyecto Emblematico” was agreed upon ensuring the restoration of the river (IBWC, July 10, 2014). According to an article in the San Diego Reader, Anibal Martinez from the EHC “feels baited and switched by [this] Mexican subcommittee that initially agreed with environmentalists to restore and preserve the open space, but instead razed everything in sight and filled the arroyo with steel and concrete” (Good, 2012). Binational cooperation becomes severely limited in political decisions like the Arroyo Alamar since “the arroyo is completely decisions being done by the city of Tijuana, the state government and the federal Mexican government; there’s actually no decision the U.S. can make about it” and “because of that, it kind of lowers the attention to it on this side of the border” (EHC Interview, July 8, 2014). Because of this political barrier to cooperation, legal action, legislation and other political processes have remains local in focus, even though, in the case of Alamar, it has remained unsuccessful.

Local Strategies

NGOs fighting for binational environmental justice have developed a variety of locally based strategies for overcoming these barriers of collaboration and fundamental differences in experience and understanding. Strategies of education, awareness and empowerment are most commonly employed to overcome the asymmetrical experiences that divide economic and political perceptions and priorities. Due to the historical failure of binational citizen participation in international working groups like the CEC, environmental social activists now engage in more locally focused strategies of “capacity building” that promote community empower and self-sufficiency (Whiteford and Melville, 2002). Failed attempts at such global change in other EHC

campaigns has resulted in the localization of strategies regarding the Arroyo Alamar instead of strategies of binational community building. Methods of providing a voice to the affected community include testimonials, leadership workshops, education about environmental issues and individual rights, and corporate targeted strategies to transfer responsibility onto those producing pollution and other social injustices (Bandy, 1998; Sze and London, 2008).

Although the EHC's Arroyo Alamar is currently working hard to stop channelization, other campaigns by this organization have provided successful examples of binational activism. The SALTA program developed by the EHC is an example of a successful popular education strategy that informed San Diego and Tijuana community members about toxic household chemical products and the industrial processes present in their community developing these chemicals. This education program incited community empowerment and action that led to members taking part in leadership workshops, speaking in front of government councils, and understanding their rights to speak up against injustices and enact change (UCSC, 2005; Lee, 2005; Alliance, 2013). This type of education program is also used in the Arroyo Alamar project, as Tijuana residents are educated about the various sources of river pollution, the environmental services this resource provides and how to voice their opinions about stopping channelization. While this sort of education has been successful on both sides of the border, social activists have advocated for policies like the aforementioned Right-to-Know legislation, but this has had different results in each country. In Mexico this legislation showcases government inadequacy and lack of industry cooperation, while the same policy in San Diego has been immensely successful providing constant access to information like the Toxic Release Inventory to community members on the contaminants present in different areas (Guidotti, 1984; Carruthers, 2008). If this legislation could be implemented in the same manner on both sides, residents in both San Diego

and Tijuana would have a better understanding of the contamination of the Arroyo Alamar and would therefore have a more solidified understanding of this transborder issue. While some strategies are more effective on one side of the border, successful transborder activism utilizes a combination of these strategies in order to achieve justice, empowerment, and models for future change. It is by understanding the obstacles the border creates, and the strategies and opportunities utilized to overcome these obstacles, that social activists might be able to obtain environmental justice for the binational community in this transborder region.

While education and capacity building are the main local strategies employed, recent political action has resulted in the creation of a local group called “La Mesa Tecnica” or the Alamar Technical Committee. The technical committee is a local working group in Tijuana, focused on bringing various stakeholders together at one table, in response to activists’ calls for a dialogue. This collaboration achieves a major goal of the EHC and other environmental justice activists, by giving those impacted by government decisions a say in those decisions (Interview, July 15, 2014). Margarita Diaz, from PFEA, echoes this sentiment when discussing the need for the technical committee by explaining that government officials refused to meet with community members or show them blueprints, claiming that they would not have the educational background to understand the information and it would therefore be a waste of time (IBWC, July 10, 2014). This technical approach, utilizing the EJM’s core strategy of praxis between academics and activists, works to unite community members and government officials around one table to change the conversation from complaints about wanting channelization to stop, to collaborating on a sustainable development comprise that addresses the technical issues of water quality, irregular housing, the freeway, and local health (EHC, 2011; EHC Interview, July 8, 2014; IBWC, July 10, 2014). A professor from San Diego State University is quoted as saying,

“If I ran a few tests on Rio Alamar and a few on the Tijuana River... that could cost 10,000 dollars” (Good, 2012). Tijuana residents and organizers do not have the funds for this type of collaboration, but understanding the scientific ways in which a natural waterway can mitigate pollution, decrease flood events, and exist as a community resource, gives a validity to rallies against channelization (Jeff Crooks Interview, 2014; Dedine, 2009). Since this technical committee is in the process of renegotiating sustainable development with Mexican authorities and spreading technical information to community members, it is unclear whether or not this type of praxis of government, experts, and local community members will be successful. This project thus reveals that although the literature suggests binational partnerships and a global perspective on the issues is the dominant driver of strategies such as coalition building and the praxis of academia and activism, in the case of the Arroyo Alamar, strategies and solutions are framed with a local perspective.

Attempts to Address the Arroyo Alamar Binationally

The binational nature of the river pollution has incited attempts to address issues binationally through education and awareness in lieu of political lobbying or technical research. The data reveal that once again, a local focus dominates the environmental justice activism along the border. Popular education and capacity-building have manifested as the dominant strategies regarding institutional frameworks and specific initiatives that perpetuate injustice and hold transborder implications. The EHC holds many meetings in various San Diego communities to address their unique concerns, but leaders have come to speak to them about the Border Justice campaign and the work being done in Chilpancingo and the Arroyo Alamar. Roberto mentions that this type of public education really incites cross-border collaboration since community

members feel an immediate connection to these issues, possibly because they are from the area or have family around there (Interview, July 8, 2014). In my observations in a community meeting held by the EHC, a short overview of all EHC campaigns was given, but the bulk of the meeting was centered solely on issues local community members were facing in their every day lives on their side of the border. This presents further evidence of the aspirational binational nature of activism discourses, but practically, strategies employed on the ground remain local in focus. Other population education strategies used regarding the Arroyo Alamar campaign include a blog on the EHC's website, another blog called Alamar Sostenable, and other media outlets such as archived press released on the EHC's website (EHC, 2011; Alamar Sostenable, 2012). Alamar Sostenable and the EHC both utilize blogs as their main source of community information since they can easily be kept up to date and are easily accessible with Internet, which is widely available in the poor communities on both sides of the border. Blogs are an effective forum for producing information and educating communities by using colloquial language, and in the case of these two blogs, written in Spanish to cater to Mexican community members rather than binational leaders.

Media is also utilized to publicize advocacy or fundraising events in order to encourage local community participation. The EHC's largest community event held to address the issue of the arroyo was called "Yo Soy El Alamar" and was a march along the river, a press conference explaining the government's decision of channelization and the proposed sustainable alternative, and an art event (Martinez, 2014). These events provide examples of community participation and reveal that key focus of environmental justice activists lies within the framework of capacity building. Capacity building is achieved through the empowerment of a community with the hope that "an empowered community is a community where you would no longer need an

organization there to talk about how to, how do they organize, because they're doing it" (Interview, July 15, 2014). The Colectivo Chilpancingo is the group of activists connected to the EHC, but work autonomously in Tijuana. Their work focuses on creating an even more narrow focus on community activism, since, according to Eduardo from the EHC, "a U.S. based company can't have influence over those things" in reference to stopping the Alamar channelization (Interview, July 15, 2014). Political differences across the border therefore present a major obstacle to binational collaboration, as activists' perceive these issues as impossible to transcend. The Colectivo and EHC both invite community members to educational trainings, speech writing workshops, leadership development classes in order to provide some global perspective, while remaining focused on how to enact change locally (City Heights Meeting, July 2, 2014). This localized capacity building may seek these long-term solutions, but it reflects a shortsightedness and neglect to tackle the institutional paradigms and origins of injustice. This project reveals how activist organizations, while addressing global and binational injustices, strategies to enact change remain largely local in focus due to physical, structural, and perceptual obstacles that prevent a truly binational community and social movement from being realized.

Conclusion

This project reveals the varying perceptions and strategies embodied by environmental activists in the San Diego-Tijuana transborder region. A fundamental problem with the concept of binationalism is revealed through the analysis of the border environmental justice movement and the Arroyo Alamar campaign. The study reveals that environmental activists embrace a long-term perception of environmental justice, the restoration of the Alamar, and the building of a binational community. Activists' discursive framing of environmental injustices stress the

binational implications and idealized solidarity between Mexican and American communities. While this perception allows for strategies that engage both communities such as popular education and capacity building to fight this injustice, the movement has yet to realize the potential mobilization strength that may result from this idealized binational community. The global paradigms that allow for environmental injustice to persist in this region cannot be changed as long as activism remains focused on solving individual community issues and neglects the issues facing the entire binational region. For the most part, local perceptions of the Alamar in Tijuana are driven by economic realities, which emphasize employment opportunities in the *maquilas*, the development of housing to accommodate the influx of workers, and the amelioration of the health issues that result from these daily tasks. Communities on both sides of the border are fighting for the same result, clean healthy communities with sustainable development and a good quality of life, yet their differences in perception provide a major obstacle for collaboration. To achieve this shared aspiration, the border environmental justice movement must develop more unified strategies that address both local concerns and underlying structural paradigms and accommodating both the short-term and the long-term goals of the communities.

A major shortcoming of transborder environmental justice activism is revealed within the local framework of strategies, since this narrow focus has resulted in a lack of unity among other organizations and activists with the larger border justice movement. Activists recognize the need for technical expertise, yet they lack the initiative to engage in the idea of praxis with academic institutions. This praxis can be offered as a model for multi-stakeholder, cross-border collaboration and the unification of academic, political, and local perceptions of injustices. Activist and scholar Oscar Romo advocates that locally focused strategies addressing community

apathy and perceptions of the river are unimportant because “perhaps people don’t really care about it, because they don’t know about it” and goes on to say that without scientific or academic validation of issues, activism is just seen as complaining (Interview, June 24, 2014). Praxis can provide activists with the resources and technical support to validate their claims in front of decisions makers. By linking together local stakeholders, academics, and policymakers from both sides of the border, this strategy can be offered as a model for truly binational collaboration. This model of praxis has been effective in more local environmental justice campaigns, such as a local EHC campaign to shut down and clean up a hazardous metal plant. EHC activists’ acknowledge the success of this strategy and claim, “It was really critical to have a facilitator in the early stages of the partnership” as well as stating this multi-stakeholder collaboration gives credibility to community concerns often seen as uneducated complaints by decision makers (Lee, 2005). Once all affected communities comprehend the big picture of how environmental injustice came to be, its immediate effects, and its long-term implications, a unified binational community can be realized. Structural obstacles such as jurisdictional inconsistencies will persist due to the political nature of the border region, but the existence of a binational community does not necessitate total uniformity, rather the willingness to understand the lived experiences of the population and learn from the successes and failures of separate institutions. For example, in the case of channelization, a truly binational community would borrow from the experiences of southern Californian river channelization, due to Los Angeles’ recent attempts to re-naturalize the riverbanks as they acknowledge the long-term detriment this infrastructure has caused. The border environmental justice movement would greatly benefit from this type of experience sharing that realizes allowing Mexico to repeat historical mistakes not only disadvantages their local population, but communities that exist with the intrinsically linked border region.

Continued analysis of the border environmental justice movement is vital for understanding the feasibility and opportunities for binational cooperation in overcoming the obstacles identified for such collaboration. It is unclear whether there are legal restrictions for U.S. activists' influence on Mexican political decisions or whether this a perceptual barrier in which the U.S. fears input on politics will be seen as paternalism or imperialism, therefore perpetuating historical stereotypes that bar collaboration and solidarity. Discursive frameworks that employ the rhetoric of binationalism require further investigation to understand why this concept is so heavily idealized within the realm of activism. Does this idealization result from a yearning for solidarity within the community or is the lack of a binational community indicative of a resistance from community members to adopt a unified identity? Extending this research to include a deeper analysis of the obstacles for multi-stakeholder cross-border collaboration as well as the realization of a binational community, the capability of the environmental justice movement to overcome physical and perceptual obstacles presented by the border region will be revealed. Ultimately these findings demonstrate that social activists in the transborder region are challenged to redefine their strategic initiatives in a manner consistent with their discursive binational framework in order to solidify and strengthen the border environmental justice movement and subsequently achieve revolutionary feats of transborder environmental justice.

EndNotes

*All activists' names have been changed in this paper.

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