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Examining and Developing Environmental Stewardship Funding Networks in Los Angeles: A Research Proposal

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Introduction

Similar to other types of non-profit funding, environmental grants have a continuing history of being inaccessible to the groups that could benefit from them the most. While many environmental stewardship organizations are in need of funding for community projects, Los Angeles lacks a clear network of environmental funders that is accessible to all potential actors. This project is a proposal to study existing environmental funder coalitions as well as philanthropic trends in Los Angeles. The findings from this research will ultimately be used to compile a database of environmental grant sources in Los Angeles detailing both funders and their grant programs, and will finally lead to the creation of a preliminary funding network model. The funding network and database will be accessible to the general public and will provide thorough, intentional grant information in hopes that stewardship organizations will be able to experience a more efficient, transparent process when pursuing funding.

Background and Objectives

Because environmental philanthropy, defined as private action for public welfare within the environmental sector, is a key contributor to shaping communities and ensuring equitable development, it is critical to understand how philanthropic organizations, particularly grantmakers, function in collaboration with public actors and to be able to identify gaps that hinder the efficiency of these networks. This is especially important in cities that have a history of struggling with philanthropy, a major example being Los Angeles. In one 2003 study, researchers Brown and Ferris concluded that LA residents reported lower levels of philanthropic activity across all measures than the national average. One specific finding asserted that 41% of Angelenos did not make contributions to any cause in the last year, a statistic 10% higher than

the national average (2003). Since this study, total giving in the city has declined by $1 billion (CCF and UCLA). Furthermore, in the last twenty years, donations of over $1 million ("mega-gifts") to organizations in the city have become exceedingly rare and large donations almost exclusively go to high-endowment or outside organizations (CCF and UCLA). However, these findings do not necessarily point to a lack of private monetary resources in the city, but instead may suggest both a underinvestment in social capital as well as inefficiency in resource distribution that come partially from poor network structuring in the greater community sphere (Brown and Ferris 2003).

More positively, the state of California shows a significant amount of diversity in private foundation interests and investment levels (Delfin and Tang 2000). This points to a high potential for sustainable and equitable grantmaker-ESO networks, which currently lack literature in Los Angeles. Environmental stewardship has also become much more of a priority in public programs in the last few decades, making (hypothetical) formal network development much more feasible and visible (Allison 2018). As a result of the worsening climate crisis, many grantmakers, public and private, are also placing an increased emphasis on climate resilience and environmental justice in their grant programs and investments, which will be two relevant areas of focus in conducting this study.

Though there is no existing network analysis on environmental funders/grantmakers in Los Angeles, there is some prior research on ESO networks such as a preliminary STEW-MAP of LA County created by Loyola Marymount University's Center for Urban Resilience. STEW-MAP "seeks to inventory, characterize, and geographically map the activities and relationships

of environmental stewardship organizations in given areas" ("LA County STEW-MAP" 2017). The project resulted in the production of a final inventory of 140 ESOs and turf descriptions of 115 organizations, and will serve as a seed list for this study's final product.

There are also pre-existing collaborative databases that exclusively connect grantmakers such as Southern California Grantmakers, The Funders' Network, and Environmental Grantmakers Association. Though such coalitions are expansive, some connecting hundreds of organizations, they rarely have public member directories and almost always sit behind substantial membership fees. They are often opaque and inaccessible to nonprofits, solidifying the disconnect between funders and potential grant recipients. In most cases, without a paid membership to one of these coalitions, ESOs are forced to pursue funding on their own. This is often unfeasible as grant-seeking is a time and energy intensive process with no guaranteed success. Locating grants can already be very difficult if an organization has no preexisting supports/network knowledge, but the application process is even more challenging because of the inconsistent nature of submission requirements across organizations. Some funders also have little to no Internet presence that would allow ESOs to access information for their grants, and others only accept solicited proposals without any explanation of how to qualify. Additionally, because ESOs and other nonprofits often struggle establishing a strong foundation of initial resourcing, they tend to severely underinvest in their administrative and overhead costs (including securing new funding). This leads to a "starvation cycle" where the organization starts their work already underfunded, creating immediate obstacles when trying to fulfill organizational goals, in turn making it more difficult to pursue and successfully obtain grants independently (Gregory & Howard 2009).

According to Cause IQ, ESOs in Los Angeles rank 17th out of 25 in number of organizations, with 705 registered nonprofits, while ranking only 20th out of 25 in funding ("Los Angeles Area Nonprofits"). In an attempt to mitigate the historic lack of priority put on environmental stewardship and continuing problem of environmental injustice, in October 2022, Cal EPA allocated $96.2 million to 10 disadvantaged California communities to support their stewardship and community resilience projects. This plan is part of the larger Transformative Climate Communities (TCC) program, which has allocated $230 million to community organizations since 2016 and makes up a critical component of the Governor's $54 billion California Climate Commitment to further environmental justice in the state. These grants intend to develop community climate resilience by funding projects that prioritize "affordable housing, transit access, energy efficiency, building electrification, water and waste management, green infrastructure, air quality, workforce training, anti-displacement programs..." (Office of Governor 2022). With the rolling out of these funds in the coming years, research on efficient and sustainable network-building will grow to be even more critical as many communities become eligible for larger funding for the first time.

Another major policy program that will change the landscape of environmental philanthropy in Los Angeles is the EPA's Environmental Justice Thriving Communities Grantmaking Program. This program was created to fulfill the goals of the Biden Administration's EO 140088 and EO 13985, and generally aims to increase the efficiency and accessibility of environmental justice grant application processes. In 2023, the EPA will receive its federal program allotment of $550 million to select 11 eligible organizations to become Grantmakers. Grantmakers are tasked with

designing a competitive grant application process that prioritizes addressing barriers to funding in their communities. This program is projected to become a milestone for ESO-Grantmaker network strengthening across the country.

To bolster the effectiveness of these policies and solidify ESO funding connectivity in Los Angeles, we propose in congruence with original research on this topic, to create a preliminary database that a. links communities to funding opportunities (in all sectors) in a highly transparent, user-friendly way and b. uses network modeling to visualize results of the study and show where there are gaps between ESOs and funders. The resource (part A) section of the deliverables seeks to provide ESOs with a single location to access grant information such as eligibility requirements, proposal/application guidelines, allotment ranges, etc. This will streamline information so that ESOs can manage their resources more efficiently to maximize their funding and feel a greater sense of efficacy in their community roles. Meanwhile, a network model will allow stakeholders to gain a visual understanding of how to create more sustainable connections in the community and strengthen funding networks as they relate to their organization.

Data Collection / Approach

In order to be comprehensive, this database will require data to be collected from hundreds of ESOs and funders serving the City of Los Angeles area. To obtain this data in a way that maximizes its reach across all types of organizations, this project will employ a mixed methods approach of Google searches, network analysis via organization websites, and combined

structured interviews and surveys of ESOs and funders. In the initial web searches, search entries

will look like: "environmental funders in Los Angeles", "environmental

grantmaking/philanthropy in Los Angeles", "environmental stewardship organizations in Los

Angeles", and "environmental funding networks in Los Angeles". Many of the ESOs can be

initially identified through the LA STEW-MAP data and can be used as base points for the initial

network modeling and funding research. To locate funders is much more difficult. When looking

at an ESO's website, they occasionally will have a "partners" or "donors" section, but this is not

a consistent practice. Using sites like GuideStar or CauseIQ can be an additional way to access

groups or individuals that fund non-profit ESOs. IRS Form 990s also occasionally have

information on specific funder contributions. Still, there is not a single, consistent way to find

this information, making direct methods like interviews and surveys highly valuable in filling in

the gaps.

From the list of ESOs and funders identified in the initial search, the next step will be to survey

these organizations through a Qualtrics link sent to their organization emails. The questions in

the survey and interviews will help evaluate connectivity among and between the two categories

of actors. This survey will take about 15 minutes to complete and will ask questions such as the

following:

1. How large is your organization?
2. How many people do you serve annually?
3. Are positions in your organization mostly paid or unpaid?
4. How much time do you spend pursuing grants?
5. How many grants do you receive a year and for what amounts?
6. Who are your top funders?

7. How do you find funding opportunities?

8. Do you actively participate in any grantmaking associations?

9. How accessible has funding felt to your organization?

10. How connected are you to other ESOs in the Los Angeles region?

11. Who are your top partners in the area?

12. What is your biggest challenge as a nonprofit?

13. What could be improved in the environmental nonprofit sector? Anything specific to ESOs or grantmakers?

Interviews will be similar, but will provide additional information on the funder side. Instead of questions #4-7 and #10, questions would be more funding-targeted and open-ended to allow grantmakers to give more detailed insight into their funding practices. One such question might be, "Please provide a detailed account of your grantmaking processes and how you engage with other grantmakers as well as ESOs in the area."

We anticipate a 2-year timeline for this project. This period will be occupied with the following activities, some of which will be discussed further in the "Final Product" section:

- Conduct an extensive literature on environmental funding networks, environmental philanthropy, environmental justice, and ESOs in California and how the state compares to the rest of the country

- Interview both ESOs and grantmakers to identify current practices, existing and desired partnerships, organization limitations, and needs

- Collect data on funding programs that serve ESOs in Los Angeles --- ex: grantor name, funder sector, focus areas, areas served, total grant allotment, grant range, maximum individual grant, grant distribution term, program description, application cycles and

deadlines, headquarters, previous grant recipients (if applicable), headquarters location,

website link, and contact information

- Collect data on grantmakers that historically have funded ESOs in Los Angeles

- Create a network model of ESOs and grantmakers

- Map the distribution of grantmakers

Preliminary Analysis

Figures 1, 2, and 3 show the results of preliminary data collection on environmental funders

serving the Los Angeles area. As shown in the first graph (Figure 1), there is a significant skew

in grantmakers' funder sectors. Out of 18 organizations with identified sector data, the majority

are private foundations (n = 11). However, these organizations tend to have smaller grant

programs (some as low as $5000) when compared to government and public sector programs,

which can be in the millions per grant. Figure 2 gives a preliminary visualization of grantmakers'

distributions both in location and sector. A skewed distribution tells us that as we continue our

research, we may need to account for unexpected difficulties identifying and tracing networks of

relevant public organizations and programs. A potential reason for this may be how expansive

public organizations (government entities, community foundations, donor-advised funds, etc)

often are in both funding zones and focus areas, which causes them to slip through initial

searches. This finding emphasizes the importance of interviews in order to identify LA-serving

programs and organizations that currently experience lower connectivity, but are still very

valuable to environmental stewardship and community justice work.
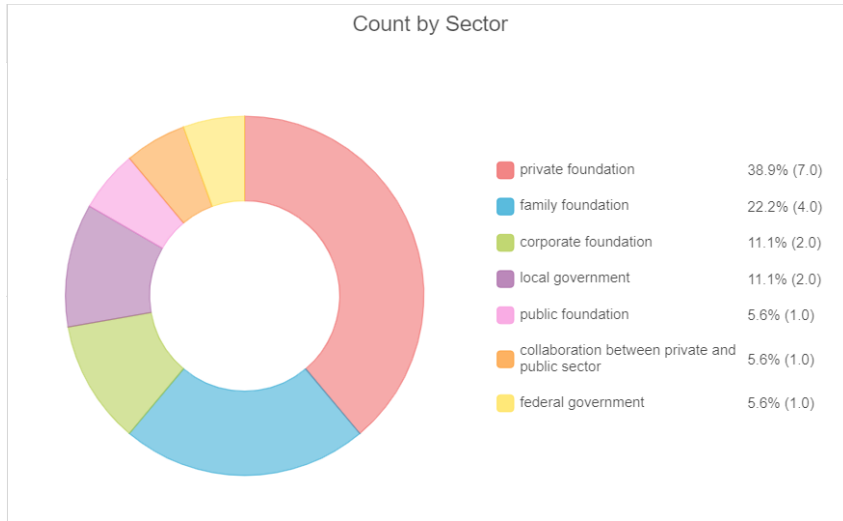
Figure 1: Breakdown of Grantmakers by Funding Sector.
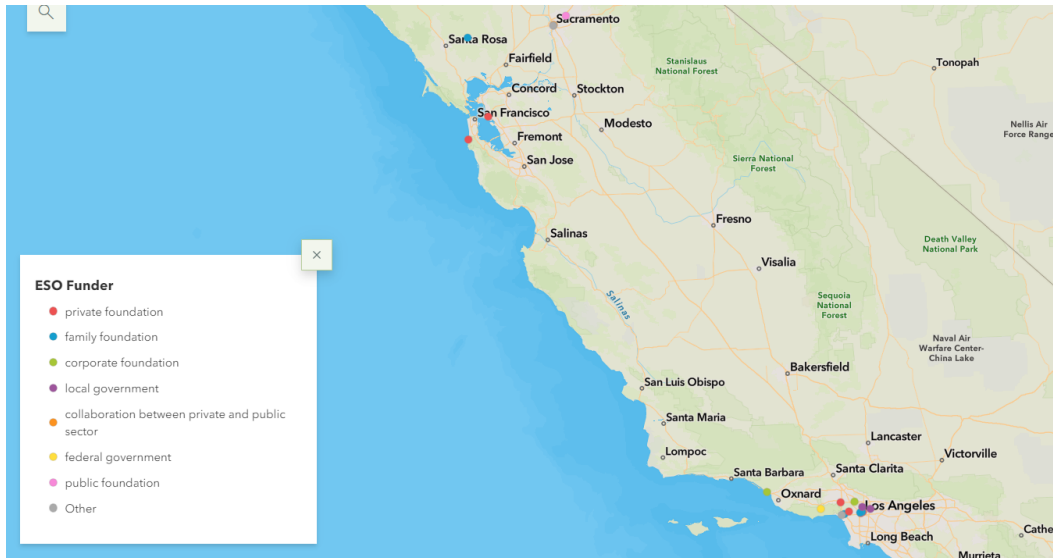
Figure 2: Los Angeles ESO Funders and Funding Sector Distributions (https://arcg.is/1uKnSb).

The preliminary data also supports prior observations that environmental funders are shifting to prioritize climate resilience and environmental justice projects, as shown in Figure 3, which quantifies specified focus areas given in the descriptions of environmental grant programs. We

also found that funders place a strong emphasis on pollutant-related work. Pollution mitigation projects align especially closely with climate resilience and environmental justice work, as historically disadvantaged communities are most susceptible to adverse outcomes from climate change, and continue to suffer the effects of toxins being dumped into their communities via air, water, or ground. Because pollution mitigation improves health outcomes, these projects fall under the larger themes of both climate resilience and environmental justice.
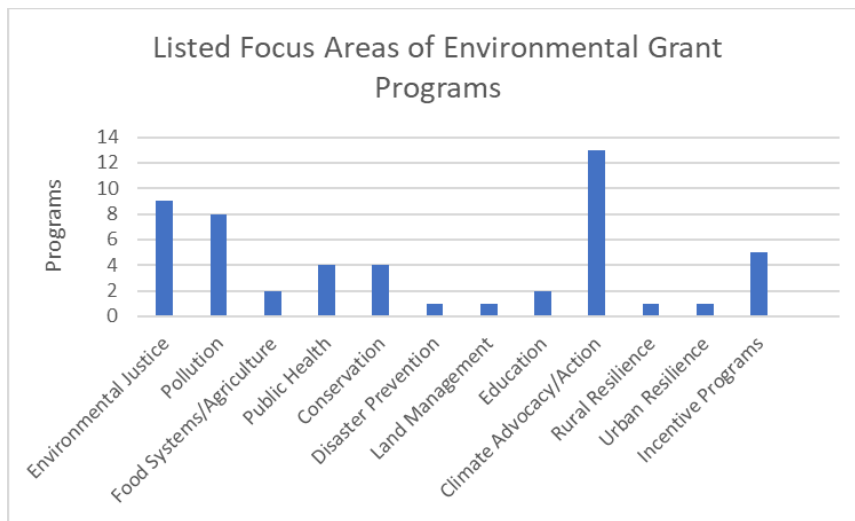
Figure 3: Focus Areas of Environmental Grant Programs. Focus areas were identified through program descriptions provided on the organization's website.

## Anticipated Final Products

At the deliverables stage of this study, we will produce a complete list of both a. specific grant programs and b. organizations that have a history of serving Los Angeles ESOs. From this list, we will create an interactive map through ArcGIS that allows users to filter programs and grantmakers by focus area, grant size, and application cycle/deadline. We will finally create a network analysis model that will give novel insight into existing environmental funding networks in Los Angeles, and reveal any gaps or inefficiencies in these networks.

To ensure that the product of this research efficiently serves the communities it's designed for, we will lead a public workshop for community members to test a prototype of the resource. After data analysis from the survey and interviews are complete, ESOs and funders will receive a link to the database with a video explaining the purpose and providing use instructions. After they access the resource, they will be asked to fill out a community feedback survey, which will be tailored to the type of respondent. For example, an ESO would be asked simply what could be improved to make the resource more helpful to their grant seeking practices, and if they find themselves more likely to pursue grants with a full version of the interactive map. Meanwhile, a funder would be asked if they felt that their programs were represented accurately in the map and if access to the network model impacted their understanding of their role in environmental philanthropy within LA communities.

 At the conclusion of this study, grantmakers (and ESOs) will have a better understanding of the funding networks that they engage in, as well as insight into how their participation in the funding network can be improved to be more efficient and equitable. ESOs also will have access to a public database that streamlines grant program information, so that grant-finding is more accessible and user-friendly to nonprofits that are especially lower in social-philanthropic connectivity. Grants are critical to nonprofit functioning, and environmental justice cannot progress without equitable investments in the entire process, starting at the abilities of organizations to effectively locate and pursue funding sources in a way that optimizes, not exhausts, existing resources.

Once the prototype of the database is refined after community feedback, the ideal owner and

maintainer will be the City of Los Angeles, which has the resources to not only keep information

up to date and accurate, but ensure that it remains public and free. With more development, we

assert that the Common Grant Application (which requires all funders to organize their eligibility

requirements similarly on one common application page) would collaborate well with the City to

push the project's results one step further. The Common Grant Application model, when

supplemented with resources from the City, can ensure that ESOs not only can more efficiently

gain information on funding resources, but can complete and manage applications in a more

streamlined way as well. This supplementary collaboration would be a highly effective way to

solidify this project's goals on the funder's side to increase equity and efficiency in both

grantmaking networks and practices in order to better serve ESOs.
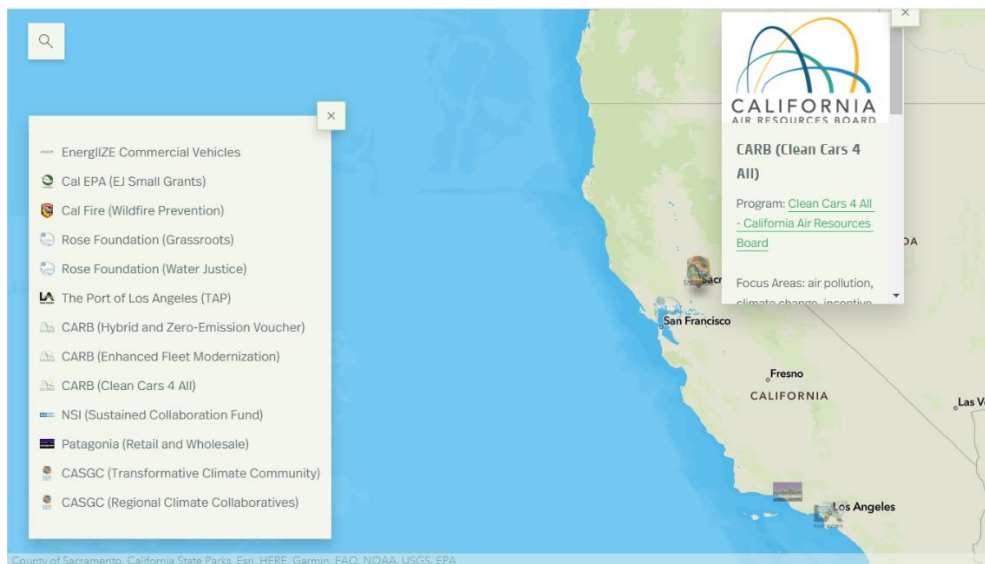
Figure 4: Open Application Environmental Grant Programs Serving Los Angeles ESOs. This map is the main product of the study and will be a resource that is free and open to the public. It will provide ESOs with basic grant information and reduce the time it takes to search for funding sources.

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