

the  
new  
environmental  
activists

Fighting  
Pollution,  
Poverty,  
and Racism  
by Building  
Natural Assets

Despite toxic emissions, children play near chemical plants along the Mississippi River. *Photo by Paul Orr*



# what are natural assets

the **land** on which we live and grow our food

the **water** we drink and use to irrigate crops,  
generate electricity, and dispose of wastes

the **air** we breathe, into which we emit wastes

the **fish** in the ocean and the **trees** in the forest

other **animals and plants**, wild and domesticated

the **atmosphere** that envelopes our planet

**ores, minerals, and fossil fuels**

On these pages, you will meet some of America's  
most passionate environmentalists. . .

## the new environmental activists

*Fighting Pollution, Poverty, and Racism by Building Natural Assets*

**Miriam H. Zoll**

**James K. Boyce**

editorial directors

**Claudia Palmira**

designer

special thanks

**Simon Doolittle**

**Vernice Miller-Travis**

**Liz Stanton**

**Diane Harris**

**Peter Montague**

**Maria Pellerano**

**Sadler Publications Specialists**

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For hard copies, write to

Political Economy Research Institute

Publications

Thompson Hall

University of Massachusetts-Amherst

Amherst MA 01003

FAX 413 545 2921

[peri@econs.umass.edu](mailto:peri@econs.umass.edu)

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# foreword

## **IN THE SPRING OF 2001, A DIVERSE GROUP OF AMERICANS GATHERED IN BATON ROUGE, LOUISIANA FOR A THREE-DAY**

environmental conference. These men and women, mostly from low-income neighborhoods and communities of color, traveled from urban housing projects and suburban neighborhoods—from the bayous of Louisiana, the coalfields of West Virginia, and the deserts of Southern California. They came from abandoned mining towns in Idaho, agrarian regions of the South, and traditional Native American villages in New Mexico.

Like you, many of these men and women grew up playing in our nation's rivers, streams, and ponds. They rode their bicycles after school and ran races at high speeds, inhaling deeply the air that surrounded their homes, parks, and neighborhoods. They lived off the land, climbed mountains or played in city parks on swingsets and baseball fields—activities and places that epitomized the greatness of life in America.

Sadly, many of these Americans were coming to Baton Rouge as witnesses to report stories of corrupt governmental officials trading their communities' rights to clean air, water, and land for corporate payoffs and political favors. Others told how long-held family lands, or half-acre subdivision lots bought with life savings, were being ravaged by mining power and waste-disposal businesses. We heard how violations of the federal Clean Air and Water Pollution Control Acts were hurting America's economically poor children, including children of color. How municipal officials kept secret from the public that water sources were contaminated with rocket fuel or high levels of mercury or aluminum. How young children suffer from chronic nosebleeds and asthma as a result of poisonous particulate matter in the air.

The Baton Rouge conference was organized for two reasons. One was to unite these heroines and heroes of modern America—those who are working to free future generations from the environmental degradation that has cast shadows on their lives. The other was to introduce a new tool into their strategic plans for restoration and prevention—a concept that could help them reclaim their democratic right to a clean environment and enable them to build economically sustainable and environmentally friendly community infrastructures.

This new tool is the natural assets movement, a radical notion that seeks to simultaneously reduce poverty and protect the environment. This new movement is predicated on the notion that poor communities and communities of color have wrongly been blamed for the environmental degradation plaguing their urban or rural settings. Rather than viewing the environment through a human vs. nature lens, natural-asset-building strategies regard the problem as human vs. human, and in many cases, as wealthy humans vs. poor humans.

Since the rise of industrialization, government officials and corporations have often viewed economically poor communities and communities of color as politically and economically weak and therefore easy prey. For three decades, the environmental justice movement has argued that the disproportionate siting of hazards in communities of color and poor neighborhoods reflects a cold-hearted calculation based on the unlikelihood of effective resistance by residents. Today, hundreds of thousands of individuals and families around the nation are countering this perceived vulnerability by organizing in their homes, schools, and communities.

Through the lens of natural-assets–building, the potential strength of resistance a community can offer may be measured by the level of assets, or capital, it can use in its defense. Communities with less economic or political power are learning how to strengthen their “social capital”—their bonds with each other and bridges to others—by organizing effective strategies in large numbers.

Through the lens of natural-assets–building, government and corporate polluters who escape from or bribe their way out of paying the full costs of cleanup or restoration are guilty of appropriating capital that belongs to the public. Normally, when someone embezzles or steals financial capital from the public, society imposes penalties, including disgrace, monetary fines, and imprisonment. But when U.S. or global polluters depreciate and degrade natural assets that belong to the public, they are often allowed to walk free and unscathed. They continue to claim that we must sacrifice our environment and trade our rights to clean water, air and land in exchange for paychecks and a strong industrial economy.

But we know from experience that this is not the only option. We understand that new technologies can replace outmoded polluting factories and manufacturing plants while reducing harmful emissions. We also know that the health and sustainability of a community’s natural resources and its economy depend on who is managing them. As participants at the Baton Rouge Conference proved, local residents are often the most qualified and motivated stewards of natural assets because they often reap the most benefits from sustainable management.

We hope that this publication, much of it written by conference participants, will serve as an informative introduction to the viable applications of natural-assets–building strategies in the environmental justice movement. We would like to thank the Political Economy Research Institute at the University of Massachusetts–Amherst and the Ford Foundation for their support in creating this publication and sponsoring the Baton Rouge Conference.

Penny Newman (Center for Community Action and Environmental Justice, Glen Avon, California)  
Dr. Florence Robinson (Southern University, Baton Rouge, Louisiana)

# *Environmental Protection of the People, by*

## **ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION IS NOT JUST ABOUT PROTECTING NATURE FROM PEOPLE.**

It's also about protecting humans from other humans.

When forests and oceans are defiled, it is not only fish and other aquatic life that suffer. The life-threatening consequences of poisoned air and water reach far beyond wildlife and the natural environment. Current and future human generations also bear enormous costs in the form of sickness and chronic illnesses, endangered neighborhood environments, and diminished livelihoods.

Human interaction with nature can create positive as well as negative results. Most of the foods we consume originate from crops and domesticated animals whose very existence is the culmination of millennia of positive connections between our ancestors and the natural environment. Today, however, by investing in ecological restoration—reforesting hillsides, rebuilding soils, and cleaning our air, rivers and lakes—we can repair environments that have been degraded by past misuse.

Once we recognize the possibility of such investment in “natural capital,” the alleged incompatibility between economic growth and environmental protection disappears. Instead, we find that environmental protection is itself a prerequisite for sustainable growth.

### ***The Right to a Clean and Healthy Environment: Excerpts from state constitutions***

Constitution of the state of Hawaii

**“Each person has the right to a clean and healthful environment.”**

Constitution of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts

**“The people shall have the right to clean air and water.”**

Constitution of the state of Montana

**“All persons are born free and have certain inalienable rights. They include the right to a clean and healthful environment.”**

Constitution of the state of Pennsylvania

**“The people have a right to clean air, pure water, and the preservation of the natural, scenic, historic and esthetic values of the environment.”**



Uniting the desire to protect nature  
with the need to protect people.

# *the People, for the People*

## **THE NATURAL ASSETS MOVEMENT**

Across the United States, communities are confronting the twin challenges of economic development and environmental sustainability. In older urban areas, many companies have departed, leaving high unemployment and abandoned toxic sites in their wake. In rural areas, decades of environmental abuse have depleted the natural resources that communities rely on to sustain their livelihoods.

Low-income communities and people of color bear a disproportionate share of the costs of this environmental decay. Instead of a “trade-off” between economic wealth and environmental health, we see a twofold environmental injustice: those who are poor and lack power face the heaviest burdens of pollution and resource depletion, at the same time receiving fewer economic benefits from nature’s wealth.

The natural assets movement is a response to this challenge. Rooted in the democratic belief that all citizens have the right to clean air, water, and land, community-based organizations around the country are turning mainstream environmental theory on its head. Rather than focusing simply on protecting nature from humans, these individuals and families are demonstrating how we can unite the desire to protect nature with the need to protect people. They are doing so by capitalizing on natural assets to build strong, healthy, and sustainable communities.

“Income supplies the necessities of life, while wealth represents a kind of ‘surplus’ resource available for improving life chances, providing further opportunities, securing prestige, passing status along to one’s family, and influencing the political process.”

—Melvin Oliver and Thomas Shapiro  
*Black Wealth/White Wealth: A New Perspective on Racial Inequality* (1995)

# Fighting Poverty by Building Natural Assets

## TODAY THERE IS A GROWING RECOGNITION THAT POVERTY IS NOT ONLY A LACK OF

income. It is also a lack of wealth or assets. Typically, we define wealth as a means of generating income now and in the future. But assets also bring power, social status, security, and better access to credit markets and other economic opportunities.

Assets come in many different forms. Economists conventionally measure wealth as financial holdings in the form of bank accounts, stocks and bonds, and the ownership of housing, land, and other real estate. But other types of assets can be just as important:

- **Human capital in the form of skills, health, and education plays a key role in determining what people can earn for their labor.**
- **Social capital that bonds communities together and creates bridges to others makes it possible for people to obtain and share public goods that are beyond the reach of individuals acting alone.**
- **Natural capital—the wealth we draw from nature—is the ultimate foundation of human well-being and survival.**

Natural assets include the land on which we live and grow our food and fiber; the water we drink and use to irrigate crops, generate electricity, and dispose of wastes; the atmosphere that envelops our planet; the fish in the ocean, the trees in the forest and all other animals and plants, wild and domesticated; ores, minerals, and fossil fuels; and the energy of the sun that powers life on Earth.

Building natural assets is an important way to fight poverty while protecting our environment. When families own land and other natural resources, their chances of securing sustainable livelihoods increase. When communities have clean air and water, they experience better health, stronger earning power, and higher property values.

Across the United States, community-based organizations are initiating a wide range of strategies to build natural assets.

These diverse initiatives unite poverty reduction with environmental protection, laying to rest the myth that the two are incompatible.

These strategies are:

- **Investing** to add value to the natural assets they already own. Examples include reforestation and soil and water conservation.
- **Redistributing** natural capital from the wealthy to the poor. Examples include land reform, not only in rural areas but also in the reclamation and redevelopment of urban “brownfields.”
- **Rewarding** environmental protection services provided by natural asset stewardship. Examples include public policies to compensate land owners for watershed protection and “green certification” to allow consumers to support environmentally friendly products.
- **Appropriating** their right to clean air and clean water. Examples include campaigns waged by people of color and low-income communities that bear the brunt of the nation’s pollution.



*Photo courtesy Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund*

Not all humans have pursued short-term gains at the expense of long-term environmental costs. Instead, many have invested in natural capital.

# life's web

**Alaska Community Action on Toxics  
Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund  
Citizens for the Chuckwalla Valley  
Association of Family Fishermen**



People have always relied on nature for sustenance and shelter. Over the course of thousands of years, as nature shaped human societies and civilizations, humans in turn reshaped nature by guiding the evolutionary processes that created our wealth of crops and domesticated animals. At times, however, human activities have harmed the environment, particularly with the rise of industrialization in the last two centuries.

Each of us can point to dozens of examples of how human decisions and actions have damaged the environment. We can attest to soil contamination from military installations, polluted air from smokestack emissions, and chemical toxins dumped into our rivers and streams. Yet not all humans have pursued short-term gains at the expense of long-term environmental costs. Instead, many have invested in “natural capital” by restoring degraded ecosystems and cultivating the biodiversity that our forbearers helped to create.

This section introduces communities that are demonstrating a deep love for and commitment to the natural worlds in which they live and earn their livelihoods:

- In Alaska, Native Americans and their allies are fighting the spread of military poisons that have afflicted their health, diminished traditional food sources, and muddied the waters and lands of their ancestors.
- In the rural South, black farmers are challenging racist agricultural policies and working to retain their land in the face of economic hardship and competition from industry and developers.
- In Riverside County, residents are fighting plans to turn desert lands adjacent to the Joshua Tree National Park into the world’s largest garbage dump—and advocating alternative local economic strategies based on their natural assets.
- In coastal Louisiana, fishing communities are defending the aquatic resources of the bayous and the Gulf of Mexico against threats posed by polluters and developers.

People in communities like these are often the most ardent defenders of nature because their livelihoods depend on it.



Annie Alowa, a Siberian Yu'pik elder from St. Lawrence Island in the Bering Sea, worked for 25 years to bring attention to the military's hazardous-waste site near her community. *Photo courtesy Alaska Community Action on Toxics*

# *Ancient Traditions, Modern Desecration*

## **TRADITIONAL FOODS PROVIDE THE CULTURAL AND SPIRITUAL FOUNDATION FOR THE WELL-**

being of the indigenous peoples of Alaska. Although pilots deliver coffee and other special foods when they fly the mail to remote villages, Alaska's natives still depend on fishing, hunting, and wild foods for subsistence.

Alaskan tribal governments want healthy resources and a sustainable future for their children. Many are worried about increased rates of cancer and other disturbing health problems. They turn to Alaska Community Action on Toxics (ACAT) with their concerns about contaminants in their traditional foods. Pollution from military installations and resource-extraction industries such as mining, petroleum, and timber also threatens their way of life.

Surveys and focus groups with Alaskan voters indicate the desire to establish alternative technologies



and economies based on Alaska's natural beauty and renewable resources. They are eager for a sustainable fishing industry, and for ecotourism, wind energy, and organic farming.

ACAT works against the unsustainable economic practices of powerful forces in Alaska, specifically the U.S. military, resource-extraction industries, and the state government's dependence on the exploitation of resources for its operating revenues. ACAT's diverse programs address military toxins, contaminants, pesticides, and water quality.

Alaska has nearly 700 military installations covering an area the size of Kansas. ACAT's Military Toxics and Health Program holds the military accountable for the cleanup of contaminants and works to prevent additional environmental damage from military activities.

Industries and farms thousands of miles away from Alaska produce pollutants that are carried by wind and ocean currents to the Arctic and sub-Arctic. This pollution contaminates the traditional foods consumed by people of the north. Our Northern Contaminants and Health Program works to eliminate sources of persistent bioaccumulative toxins, both transboundary and those produced and released within Alaska.

There are 4,581 pesticides registered for sale in Alaska, but there is no statewide system to track harmful pesticide use by the military, farmers, loggers, the oil industry, merchants, and private citizens. ACAT's Pesticide Right-to-Know Program aims to eliminate the use of harmful pesticides throughout the state.

We have identified over 500 sites with contaminated drinking water sources measured at the tap or in nearby monitoring wells. Our Alaska Water Quality Protection Program seeks to attain zero-discharge of contaminants that pollute the waters, habitat, and communities of Alaska. We also work to protect the health of people and the environment from hazardous chemicals already released into the air and water. ACAT provided technical assistance to workers and residents contaminated during cleanup efforts after the Exxon Valdez oil spill site in 1989.

# "I will fight until I melt."

—Annie Alowa

Our Special Project at St. Lawrence Island in the Bering Sea aims to promote self-sufficiency in Alaska native communities, and to minimize exposure to environmental contaminants. ACAT produced a documentary featuring Annie Alowa, a Siberian Yu'pik elder from St. Lawrence Island who worked as a village health aide and was concerned about high rates of cancer deaths among her people. The film *I Will Fight Until I Melt* traces the 25-year history of her efforts to bring attention to the military hazardous-waste site near her community.

ACAT members distributed 400 copies of the documentary and spoke to a variety of federal agencies in Washington D.C., using the film to bring attention to community health issues. The National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences granted us support for a four-year collaborative research project under its Environmental Justice Partnerships for Communications Program.

## ACTIVISTS

**Alaska Community Action On Toxics**

## LOCATION

**Anchorage, Alaska**

## CONTACT

**907-222-7714**

**[www.akaction.net](http://www.akaction.net)**



“We want to ensure that there is equity and justice in farm policies and that the black family farmer can remain an essential part of American production agriculture.”

—Jenny Pennick  
Director of the Land Assistance Fund

## *From Despair to Hope*

### **IN 1910, THERE WERE MORE THAN A MILLION BLACK FARMERS IN THE UNITED STATES.**

They owned 15 million acres of farmland. In the latest agricultural census (1997), the government counted 18,000 black farmers with 2.3 million acres. Black farmers are still losing land at an astounding rate.

Since 1967, the Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund has worked with grassroots organizations in rural communities across the South. We are dedicated to the cooperative philosophy as the best means to ensure that the economically poor and people of color receive an equitable share of the ownership of resources and distribution of economic benefits in our society. Cooperatives are a flexible development tool, allowing economically poor people to build economic power, political influence, and social stability through democratic participation and mutual aid. The cooperative movement teaches people to deal with their

own problems and to replace despair and depression with hope and positive accomplishments.

The current economic crisis in rural America is accentuated for black and minority farmers, who have been struggling for years to get by on the edge of poverty. For most of the past century, farm ownership and farm population for blacks declined steadily and more rapidly than it did for whites as a result of neglect, racial discrimination, and economic exploitation. Black farmers have been victimized by unscrupulous attorneys, realtors, timber companies, and land speculators. They have received separate and unequal treatment as a result of the South's land tax, partition sale, and foreclosure system. They are also at a distinct disadvantage in accessing capital markets and government-funded programs.

The recent settlement in the *Pigford v. Glickman* class-action lawsuit benefited over 20,000 black farmers who were discriminated against by the



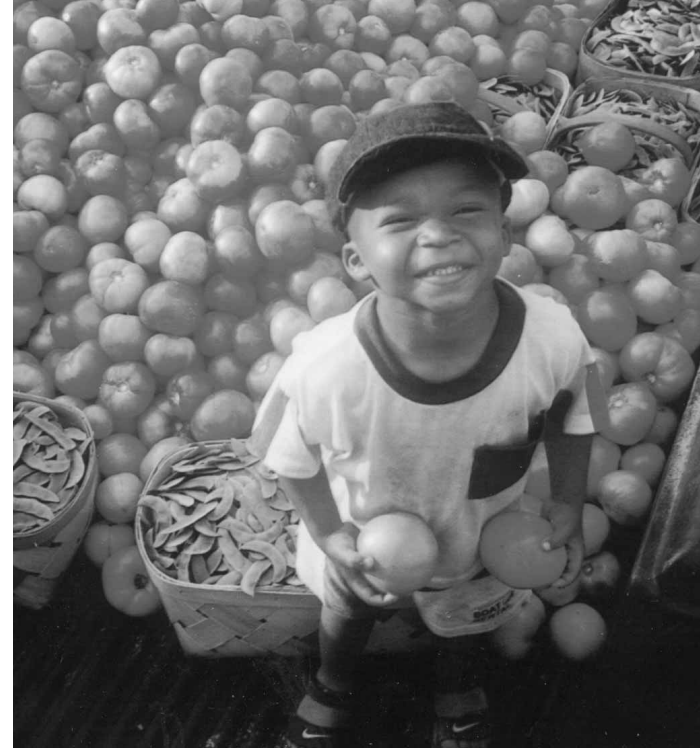


Photo courtesy Federation of Southern Cooperatives / Land Assistance Fund

USDA, but the lawsuit provided few systematic remedies for changing the practices of the federal government.

Building on the work of the Civil Rights Movement, the Federation/LAF works with 10,000 low-income families in over 80 communities across the rural South. We provide services, resources, technical assistance, and advocacy to our members. We help rural people deal with problems that include substandard housing, low literacy rates, unemployment and underemployment, idle land, inadequate health care, hunger, and malnutrition. We consider these problems as opportunities for the development of self-help strategies to change and correct these situations.

The Federation/LAF is the leading group in the nation actively involved with the problems of land loss and displacement of farmers of color. Our 1985 merger with the Emergency Land Fund has enhanced our capabilities to work on the problems of land retention. Black farmers are still losing land at an alarming rate, but in counties where the Federation/LAF is active we are reducing the number and amount of losses by families and rural communities.

## FAMILY FARMERS: KEY TO SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE

America's family farmers and small landowners—be they white or black—are disappearing under the combined onslaught of:

- modern agricultural technology, whether appropriate or not, that raises the cost of farming
- very high interest rates in the past three decades
- low farm prices, depressed by government policies
- agricultural and tax policies biased in favor of large operators and absentee owners

In the past half-century, the government has enacted many agricultural policies and programs in the name of "family farmers." In practice, however, these have strengthened and enriched the largest farmers and the corporate sector. In most USDA programs, the top one-fifth of farmers receive three-fifths or more of total benefits.

As small landowners are displaced, more and more land is concentrated in the hands of wealthy individuals and large corporations unconcerned with rural community development. Rarely do these new owners demonstrate sensible land stewardship, conservation, or sustainable agricultural practices.

### ACTIVISTS

**Federation of Southern Cooperatives/  
Land Assistance Fund**

### LOCATION

**East Point, Georgia**

### CONTACT

**229-432-5799**

**[www.federationsoutherncoop.com](http://www.federationsoutherncoop.com)**



# *The World's Largest Garbage Dump?*

## **DESERT CENTER IS AN UNINCORPORATED RURAL COMMUNITY IN SOUTHWESTERN**

California halfway between Indio and Blythe at the southeastern border of Joshua Tree National Park. Founded by “Desert Steve” Ragsdale in 1921, the population fluctuates from 500 in the summer to 2,500 in the winter. Downtown consists of the Desert Center Café—open every day since 1922—a gas station and general store, a drive-up hamburger and hotdog stand, a trailer park, a post office, and Mr. Stanley E. Ragsdale’s “Tree Ring Circles” of date trees. Other than the date trees, the town looks pretty much as it did in the 1930s photographs hanging on the walls of the Desert Center Café.

Desert Center is the cradle of numerous natural resources and assets. The most important of these are the indigenous jojoba plant and several thousand acres of agricultural land. The jojoba industry was born in the early 1980s, when the United States

Fifty-two miles of rail will transport 40 million pounds of garbage a day to the southeastern border of Joshua Tree National Park in Southern California.

*Photo by Miriam Zoll*



banned imports of sperm-whale oil. Because the jojoba seed contains a liquid wax with similar properties, jojoba cultivation boomed. About 6,000 acres of native desert and ironwood forests made way for jojoba, a plant native only to the Mojave and Sonoran deserts of California, Arizona, and Mexico.

Jojoba now yields lubricant for high-speed industrial machinery, and it is a component of pharmaceuticals and cosmetics. For each and every industrial use, jojoba has proven to be equal or superior to whale oil. It is a renewable and resilient natural resource, with some native species living up to 200 years in the harsh desert climate. Congress has placed the plant on the list of the nation's critical strategic agricultural materials.

The Chuckwalla Valley is also brimming with cultural and recreational resources that can renew the community's tourist and recreational industries. The valley is home to the Joshua Tree National Park, established as a national monument by presidential proclamation in 1936 and designated as a World Biosphere Reserve by the United Nations in 1984. Eagle Mountain's ancient petroglyphs (writings in the rocks left by indigenous people) and nearby nature reserves attract tourists, hikers, and wildlife seeking water. The old Kaiser iron ore mine at Eagle Mountain—once the largest strip mine in the country—could be managed as a historical site by the National Park Service with its abandoned housing area turned into tourist lodging. Our community could be self-sufficient and sustainable with the development of the agricultural and tourism industry. We have all the ingredients for a healthy future with our clean air, water, and beautiful open spaces.

This future is threatened, however, by the proposed development of the world's largest garbage dump at the old Kaiser mine. The dump's developers, Kaiser and Mine Reclamation Corporation, have persuaded the federal government to provide 3,500 acres of land, mostly pristine, undisturbed canyons kissing Joshua Tree National Park, to accommodate the dump. If the plan moves ahead, every day for the next 117 years an estimated 40 million pounds of garbage will arrive from Los Angeles and other

Every day for the next 117 years, an estimated 40 million pounds of garbage will arrive from Los Angeles and other counties to be buried here.

Each day, seven mile-long, double-decker trains will roar across the desert to deliver trash. More trash will be brought in daily by 200 garbage trucks whose exhaust will pump more than 5,000 tons of air pollution into the Desert Center community every year. Located only 500 feet from an open portion of the Colorado Aqueduct, the dump has the potential to leach "garbage juice" into a major source of water for 16 million people.

Dozens of desert communities in Riverside County have been working together since 1992 to stop the dump's development. Citizens have actively rallied against the state's \$200-million-dollar, tax-free, low-interest corporate loans. We have introduced a series of lawsuits, some of which are still pending. California's attorney general, the Sierra Club, the Southwest Center for Biodiversity, Earthlaw, Desert Citizens Against Pollution, and California Communities Against Toxics are among the individuals and organizations joining with the Citizens for the Chuckwalla Valley in efforts to preserve the natural beauty and quality of life in Desert Center.

#### ACTIVISTS

**Citizens for the Chuckwalla Valley**

#### LOCATION

**Desert Center, California**

#### CONTACT

**760-392-4722**

**[www.ccae.org/projects/desert-protection](http://www.ccae.org/projects/desert-protection)**





Small commercial fishing operations head out of the Barataria Bayou during spring shrimp season. *Photo by Michael Shashoua*

# *Fishing the Bayou*

## **THE LAFITTE AND BARATARIA COMMUNITIES HAVE EXISTED FROM THE BEGINNING BY**

using the natural assets of the Barataria swamp and estuary. Hunting, trapping, and fishing for crabs, fish, shrimp, and crawfish have been the basis of our existence. Our dependence on the natural environment for survival breeds close-knit families and communities.

Lafitte and Barataria are fishing communities on opposite sides of Bayou Barataria, about 30 miles southwest of New Orleans. The majority of commercial fishermen here and across coastal Louisiana are small-operation family fishermen. Fishing is the primary economic basis of our community, supporting not only fishing families but also net shops, hardware stores, wholesale seafood dealers, fuel docks, ice houses, boat builders, and other small businesses.

Today our fishing communities are threatened by coastal erosion and “restoration” projects, wetlands development, pollution, pesticide spraying, misguided government regulations, and competition from recreational fishermen who hold commercial fishing licenses.

Coastal erosion is reducing critical habitat. The government has responded with coastal restoration projects that divert polluted Mississippi River water into our estuary. These projects divert not only water but discharges from chemical plants as well along the river. Wetlands are being turned into “fast lands” with dredged materials, leading to loss of habitat. Changes in water salinity have reduced the amount of fish, shrimp, and crab in our traditional fishing grounds. The dredging of oilfield canals causes further loss of habitat.

In addition to Mississippi River water, urban street runoff, sewage treatment effluents, and industrial site runoff are all diverted into our estuary. The oil and gas industry companies are adding to the pollution of our waters. And the state of Louisiana sprays tons of herbicides and pesticides into our ditches and fishing grounds.

Coastal fishermen face constant threats from new government regulations that decrease or eliminate our income. We fish for hard crabs, soft crabs, and fish in the winter and spring, and shrimp in the summer and fall. Recent net bans have all but eliminated income from fish catches, and some environmental groups are now pushing to ban shrimp gear like the trawl, with little or no knowledge about how our trawls work or the habitat bottom that we fish in Louisiana. These groups claim to have support from commercial fisherman, but what they have is an alliance with some fishermen who have an economic interest in eliminating their competition. The fishermen in our community cannot protect themselves because they have neither the time to spend at meetings and lobbying sessions nor the money to hire someone to do these things for them.

Fishing communities are being overrun by developers as people with much higher incomes move out of the cities to rural areas. This adds to habitat losses and leads to higher living costs and the displacement of traditional fishing families.

With this influx comes increased commercial fishing pressure. Anyone can go to the Louisiana Department of Wildlife & Fisheries and buy a commercial fishing license. Large numbers of people have done just that, and they fish commercially on weekends, holidays, or at night after work for extra income. These same people support regulations that are restrictive enough to put a full-time small fisherman out of business. Zoning regulations that prohibit commercial boats from being docked behind homes force the fisherman to move or pay rent to dock their boat elsewhere. This makes it very difficult to do repairs on boats or to sell a catch to anyone but the dock fish brokers. It also creates

numerous other inconveniences and costs. Many small commercial fishing families across the country are being displaced in the same manner.

The Association of Family Fishermen is a citizens' organization based in Lafitte and Barataria that includes individual commercial fishermen, small businesses, and other affected citizens in coastal Louisiana parishes. The purpose of our organization is to sustain Louisiana's unique culture and coastal communities through just and equitable resource allocation and management.

In January 1995, we began to conduct public meetings in coastal communities throughout the state for the purpose of developing and strengthening local parish-based organizations, as well as building relationships with nontraditional allies such as environmentalists, sportsman leagues, and farmers. We share knowledge about upcoming legislation, and we teach citizens how to participate in the democratic process via letter-writing and telephone campaigns, circulation of petitions, and voter registration. We also organize rallies at the state capital (with the help of the Louisiana Environmental Action Network), teach members how to lobby legislators, and encourage attendance and comments at legislative committee hearings.

Telling small commercial fishermen to "go get a job" is asking them to change their whole lives. Our lives are connected to the earth and her cycles. We want and need natural resources to be healthy and productive, because our lives and livelihoods depend on it.

## ACTIVISTS

**Association of Family Fishermen**

## LOCATION

**Barataria, Louisiana**

## CONTACT

**504-689-7687**

**[rkfisheries@cox.com](mailto:rkfisheries@cox.com)**



# this land



Mountaintop removal mining site in southern West Virginia. *Photo by David Muhly*

# ... is your land

**Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative**  
**Ohio Valley Environmental Coalition**  
**People for Children's Health and Environmental Justice**  
**Torres Martinez Desert Cahuilla Indians**  
**Silver Valley People's Action Coalition**



American culture is replete with legends and songs about wide-open spaces and abundant wealth in the form of land. At the end of the 18th Century, the revolutionary Democrat Thomas Paine declared that land is "the free gift of the Creator in common to the human race." In the 1940s, folk musician Woody Guthrie sang:

*This land is your land, this land is my land  
From California to the New York Island,  
From the Redwood Forest, to the Gulf Stream waters,  
This land was made for you and me.*

We know from history and experience that not all Americans have access to land and other natural assets, and that these "gifts" often remain in the hands of the wealthy and powerful. Fostering greater ownership of land by low-income individuals and communities is a key component of the natural assets movement.

Land ownership provides families with livelihood, security, and standing in a community, as well as a deep sense of belonging and control over their lives. When entire communities own land, people have an opportunity to participate in decisions about how it is managed and share in the benefits from its use.

This section presents profiles of people who are striving to reclaim land and reinvest in this natural asset.

- In inner-city Boston, the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative stands as an emblematic case of urban land reform in America. It is the first community-based organization to win the power of eminent domain to reclaim vacant lots and transform them into community assets.
- In West Virginia's coalfields, residents are organizing low-income families and unemployed miners to reclaim land taken from them by "King Coal," the powerful coal-mining companies. Knowing that the hills of the Ohio River Valley are some of the most beautiful and bountiful natural assets in the nation, these citizens are forming a coalition for clean energy and jobs.
- In the Midway Housing Project in San Francisco's metropolitan area, low-income mothers are waging a courageous battle against contamination left behind by the Pacific Gas & Electric Company. Facing a legacy of illnesses including cancer and chronic respiratory ailments, residents are fighting back against the denials and indifference of government officials.
- In the deserts of Southern California, the Cahuilla Indians are demonstrating that persistence pays off. After nearly a century, the federal government has finally recognized that the flooding of hundreds of acres of tribal lands under the Salton Sea was destructive to their culture and economy. The tribe, recently granted \$14 million in restitution from the Bureau of Indian Affairs, plans to invest the funds in housing, job training programs, schools, and child and elder care facilities.
- In the panhandle of northern Idaho, the town of Kellogg lies within the Bunker Hill Superfund site. Wracked by mercury and lead poisoning from old silver mines, the region has experienced severe poverty since the industry moved overseas. Today residents are fighting industry and government officials who have dragged their feet on cleanup efforts, even in the face of off-the-chart levels of lead poisoning among children.

The gallant dedication of groups like these gives new meaning to the refrain of Woody Guthrie's ballad "This Land was Made for You and Me."



Young Dudley Street residents participate in community cleanup. *Photo courtesy Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative*

# *When Neighborhoods Make Decisions*

## **SOME TWENTY YEARS AGO, BOSTON'S DUDLEY STREET NEIGHBORHOOD HAD BEEN**

abandoned by government and financial institutions and razed by arson. A third of the land was vacant lots strewn with rubble and everything from abandoned cars to rotting sides of beef. The Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative (DSNI) was formed in 1984 to reverse the physical and spiritual devastation of the neighborhood. The story of DSNI is one of residents having the wisdom, vision, and resilience to turn liabilities into assets.



The Dudley Street neighborhood straddles the historic communities of Roxbury and Dorchester. It was founded by British colonizers in 1630 and annexed to the city of Boston after the Civil War. When streetcar service came to the neighborhood in the 19th Century, so too did Boston's large Irish immigrant population. Throngs of Jewish immigrants from Europe followed. During the first half of the 20th Century, Dudley was a vibrant residential and commercial area. In the 1940s and 1950s, African Americans migrated from the nation's southern states to its northern cities, helping to transform Roxbury's predominantly white population to black. Over the next 20 years, waves of Latino and Cape Verdean immigrants joined them.

During this same era, government programs encouraged white flight to the suburbs. Public and private institutions withdrew resources from urban schools, housing, street repair, businesses, and public transportation. When companies left the city, abandonment and disinvestment were followed by arson and dumping.

A visitor likened the Dudley Street neighborhood in those days to a bombed-out Beirut. The contamination from burned-down houses and businesses, industrial activities, and dumping had left the neighborhood with disproportionate environmental hazards, high rates of asthma and lead poisoning, and other human and physical-development challenges.

DSNI was founded in the midst of this devastation. Our first task was to maintain and regain a sense of hope and possibility. This was a slow, step-by-step process. Our first organizing campaign—"Don't Dump on Us!"—succeeded in closing some illegal transfer stations and encouraged the community to become involved in broader planning efforts.

Our greatest asset is our people. We are a diverse community of about 24,000 people. Many have agricultural roots, so there is great interest in urban farming. Many are young, bringing energy and creativity to the process of community change. Neighborhood resident and DSNI board member Paul Bothwell often quotes an African proverb, "Together we find the way." This attitude has guided our work to place decision-making in the hands of the community. We have tried

to seize control of our future, to forge a vision of a vibrant urban village, and to bring it to reality.

Aside from our people, our greatest asset is the land. Huge tracts of vacant lots were liabilities 20 years ago. We have now turned these lots into opportunities to gain control over land, replan our neighborhood, and make our urban-village vision a reality.

To achieve this, we launched a campaign under the banner "Take a Stand, Own the Land." In a relationship marked at times by great tension, we forged a win-win partnership with the city of Boston. In 1988, the Boston Redevelopment Authority granted our community eminent domain authority over vacant lots, allowing us to compile a critical mass of land to begin the process of physical revitalization. The land is now owned by a community land trust, Dudley Neighbors. Where there was once rubble, we now have affordable new housing.

The signs of transformation are visible throughout the Dudley Street neighborhood. Eighteen years of hard work and innovative thinking have brought dramatic results. Working with a network of partners—planners, local officials, foundations, and others—we have transformed more than 600 vacant lots into high-quality homes, community gardens, food production lots, and safe play spaces and parks. A new community spirit and a sense of "can do" optimism bears witness to these physical changes. Perhaps the most powerful testament to the fact that we are indeed building an urban village is the presence and growing leadership of neighborhood young people who are returning home after attending college. This neighborhood is on its way back.

## ACTIVISTS

**The Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative**

## LOCATION

**Roxbury and Dorchester, Massachusetts**

## CONTACT

**617-442-9670**

**[www.dsni.org](http://www.dsni.org)**





# *Dethroning King Coal*

## **SOUTHERN WEST VIRGINIA IS A REGION OF RIVERS, VALLEYS, AND STEEP MOUNTAINS**

covered by some of the most biodiverse forests in North America. Our mountain streams teem with life. This landscape inspires an awe and wonder that is embedded in the very souls of our people.

“King Coal”—the cabal of big coal companies—has long been the dominant political and economic force in southern West Virginia. Blair Mountain in Logan County is the only place in U.S. history where the military was deployed and bombs dropped by aircraft against our country’s own people: miners fighting to form a union. Today coal employment has plummeted as 20-story-high mountain-leveling machines have replaced tens of thousands of miners. Coal production is near record highs, with fewer workers than ever before. But the companies’ political campaign contributions ensure that Coal is still King in southern West Virginia.

To reach the valuable layers of thin-seamed coal within the mountains, the coal companies today are blowing up mountains, taking up to 800 feet off these once-glorious peaks. This is called “mountaintop removal.” After scraping off the trees and blasting the mountains, the companies then dump the “overburden”—the remains of what used to be a mountain—into the adjacent valleys, snuffing out the streams below along with their aquatic life. This process annihilates entire ecosystems and mountain communities, leaving barren moonscapes in its wake.

While the coal companies ring in the profits, the mountain communities see little financial gain. Instead they endure noise and dust 24 hours a day. Blasting destroys homes, water wells, and peace of mind. School buses must travel on roads made hazardous by overloaded coal trucks. In the narrow valleys between the stripped hillsides, flooding is a constant worry, as is the threat that huge holding ponds will collapse or overflow.

The Ohio Valley Environmental Coalition (OVEC) is a grassroots organizing and advocacy group working to try to stop this blatant ecocide. We are based in Huntington, West Virginia, a major coal port on the Ohio River. OVEC was formed in 1987 to fight a BASF chemical company plan to burn toxic wastes in our already over-polluted, low-income community. In an all-volunteer effort, we defeated BASF’s plan. By 1992 we had grown into an organization with three full-time staff members. Volunteers remain key to our structure. We strive to shift the balance of power away from destructive, polluting corporations back toward the people.

Right: Coal-mining sludge from mountaintop removal sites drains into holding ponds that often overflow and wipe out surrounding communities and wildlife.

Left: Residents of Inez, Kentucky demonstrate after 300 million gallons of toxic sludge from a 72-acre slurry lake flooded their town in October 2000, destroying 100 miles of streams, rivers, and property.

*Photos courtesy Ohio Valley Environmental Coalition*



As coal employment has taken a downward dive, tourism has become the fastest growing industry in the state. People from all over the eastern United States are discovering the beauty and solace of our mountainous terrain. The state government could be encouraging the development of sustainable industries such as tourism, mountain crafts, and bottled water.

Instead, our politicians look the other way while mountains are blown up, streams are demolished, and communities are devastated. The coal industry has already annihilated 300,000 acres of hardwood forests and buried streams in an area covering 500 square miles. As the mountains come down, the industry's spin doctors and allies in government feverishly work to put a falsely positive face on their actions. Million-dollar television ad campaigns attempt to gloss over and blatantly lie about the horror of mountaintop removal. Even people who don't work directly in the coal industry feel the threat of unemployment and retaliatory measures if they speak out against the companies' abuses.

OVEC uses a multi-pronged approach to organize opposition to this assault on our land, water, and communities. We seek to save and preserve our threatened natural assets through citizen organizing and actions, media and educational outreach, technical and scientific research, and litigation with *pro bono* attorneys.

We've succeeded in building a strong movement of people who care about their communities and about the future of our state. Some of these folks are defending the mountains that have surrounded

them since childhood. Some are people of neighboring towns and small cities who feel a strong love and connection with the mountains, streams, and coal-field communities.

We have become a major force to be reckoned with. Working with West Virginia citizens and national groups, we successfully stopped a legislative attempt by West Virginia Senator Robert Byrd to make it easier for government officials to permit more mountaintop removal. We are frequently invited to speak with groups of college students, and we are working to get them more involved.

Stimulating discourse and critical thinking are worthy goals. But in southern West Virginia we are facing an immediate crisis. Our very landscape is under assault—the mountains and valleys that are part of the spirit of our people. Our most pressing need is for resources to increase our organizing capacity and expand citizen action. We need to bring more people into the active fight to save our natural assets, before they're gone forever.

## ACTIVISTS

**Ohio Valley Environmental Coalition**

## LOCATION

**Huntington, West Virginia**

## CONTACT

**304-522-0246**

**[www.ohvec.org](http://www.ohvec.org)**



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# PG & E's Toxic Playground

## MIDWAY VILLAGE IS A LOW-INCOME HOUSING PROJECT BUILT ON TOP OF

a Superfund site previously owned and operated by the Pacific Gas & Electric (PG & E) Company. Men who as children had spent afternoons on the swings and basketball courts at nearby Bayshore Park, the playground for Midway Village's children, are now developing scrotal and other cancers.

Created by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) in 1976 in Daly City, California, only ten minutes from the San Francisco Airport, Midway is home to thousands of women and children of color. We are exposed to high levels of more than 350 contaminants, including arsenic, cyanide, lead, benzopyrene, and chromium VI—the cancer-causing chemical made famous in the movie *Erin Brockovich*, whose story was based on contamination at another PG & E site.

Members of our community suffer from numerous illnesses. Chronic bloody noses, sterility in women and men, childhood learning disabilities, abnormal genitals, stomach and brain tumors, cancer, and unexplained

deaths are common. We believe these are directly linked to our proximity to the Superfund site.

For decades, PG & E has been fully aware of the contamination that has existed at the site. Midway residents have documentation to prove this. The W. R. Grace Construction Company was commissioned by HUD to build the housing project by “remodeling” military housing built on the site 25 years earlier. When the federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) requested documents related to the construction, Grace claimed that they had been ordered to destroy the files in 1983—the same year that Midway was designated as a Superfund site.

Despite urgent public concerns, the mayor of Daly City and the County Board of Supervisors claim that Midway is safe enough for people to live there. But tests they ordered (at our insistence) in April 2001 found that numerous toxins are still present. Apparently, these officials think it is okay for people to continue to live directly on top of this Superfund site, ignoring the suffering and injustice they have endured.

State and federal agencies have looked the other way, downplaying the serious health issues in the community. The federal EPA has pushed responsibility to the state EPA. To the California EPA, “public participation” means that the people are present at the site while remediation is taking place. It doesn't mean that people have any voice in the process.

People for Children's Health and Environmental Justice is comprised of current and former Midway residents. We have from the beginning, and will to the end, fight against allowing any people—and especially those of color who are considered powerless—to live on and be exposed to life-threatening contaminants of any kind. We will continue to organize and inform communities, empowering them with knowledge about their environment and the threats affecting them and their families so that they can be part of the decision-making that directly affects them.

We are demanding justice and accountability from responsible parties, including the PG & E, the San Mateo County Housing Authority, and all government and health agencies who have ignored this injustice.



## PRIVATE DUMPING, PUBLIC HOUSING

Public housing in the United States dates from President Roosevelt's 1937 U.S. Housing Act, enacted in an effort to eliminate slums and substandard housing. Today more than 11 million people in the United States live in 17,750 federally subsidized public housing units. People of color comprise the majority of residents in two-thirds of these units.

According to a three-part investigative report published in the *Dallas Morning News* in October 2000, 45 percent of public housing is located within one mile of a toxic air pollution source, and 40 percent is located within one mile of a toxic waste dump. A U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)-funded study quoted by the *Dallas Morning News* found that public housing residents are exposed to higher pollution risks from toxic emissions than are people who live in private housing. Such findings have led to charges of "environmental genocide."

In response to the *Dallas Morning News*'s series, HUD issued a press release stating that the Department "has been a leader in empowering communities to make informed choices about environmental concerns." It added, "We won't, however, micro-manage a city's urban development strategy based on poor science and speculative hysteria."



Chicago housing project's wall of remembrance honoring people whose deaths residents believe were caused by contamination and pollution.  
Photo by David Woo

### ACTIVISTS

**People for Children's Health and Environmental Justice**

### LOCATION

**Daly City, California**

### CONTACT

[www.greenaction.org/midway](http://www.greenaction.org/midway)

# Tribal Lands Under the Sea

## BEFORE THE FORMATION OF THE TORRES MARTINEZ RESERVATION, OUR ANCESTORS

traveled to the Santa Rosa Mountains and beyond during the hot season. During the rest of the year they followed the shoreline of ancient Lake Cahuilla. The Desert Cahuilla lived in a system of “clans,” each with its recognized leaders, medicine men, dancers, and singers.

The Torres Martinez Reservation in Southern California was established by presidential executive order in May 1876. During the traumatic transformations that followed European contact, our people lost skills in basket-making, pottery, and building *kish* houses of local materials. The hand-dug “walk-in” wells of our people went dry when excessive use of water by the new agricultural industry lowered our water table.

In 1905, floodwaters from the Colorado River broke through a weak point in an irrigation canal and spilled into what was then the Salton Sink, a dry lakebed, flooding thousands of tribal acres. By the time the canal was fixed two years later, the inland Salton Sea had been created. It covered roughly half the Torres Martinez Reservation.

Drowning waves of external impacts pounded us and kept us off balance for awhile. However, we have now regained our footing and we are on the road to revitalization. We attribute much of this to our children, who have taken it upon themselves to learn our traditional celebration songs and dances.

Currently, the Torres Martinez Desert Cahuilla are breathing a sigh of relief after a settlement agreement with the U.S. government and the Imperial Irrigation and Coachella Valley Water Districts. We will receive \$14 million in compensation for reservation lands lost to flooding when the Salton Sea was created. We also won the right to purchase 11,800 acres of land to be held in trust for the tribe.

The tribe has been active in developing ways to restore the Salton Sea and the wetlands on its north shore. The sea’s salinity is 25 percent higher than ocean water because salts from the surrounding agricultural lands drain into it and are concentrated by the



Restoration of historical buildings on the Torres Martinez Reservation are part of the Cahuilla's plans for economic development.

*Photo by Miriam Zoll*

high evaporation rate of the desert climate. Average rainfall is about three inches a year. Selenium has been detected in fish in the sea at concentrations above state advisory levels, and a water-quality assessment conducted by the state of California in the 1990s designated the Salton Sea as "impaired."

The tribe is also working with Calpine, an energy-producing group from San José, California, that plans to build a 650-megawatt facility on the reservation. The plant is to be powered by clean natural gas, using an advanced emissions-control system that will be the first of its kind in California.

In pursuing these new opportunities, we have aligned ourselves with different organizations including the Coachella Valley Association of Governments, the Salton Sea Authority, and Desert Alliance Community Empowerment.

We feel fortunate that our ancestors have guided us in the direction in which we are going. Our slow easing into economic prosperity is allowing us to maintain our culture.

#### ACTIVISTS

**Torres Martinez Desert Cahuilla Indians**

#### LOCATION

**Thermal, California**

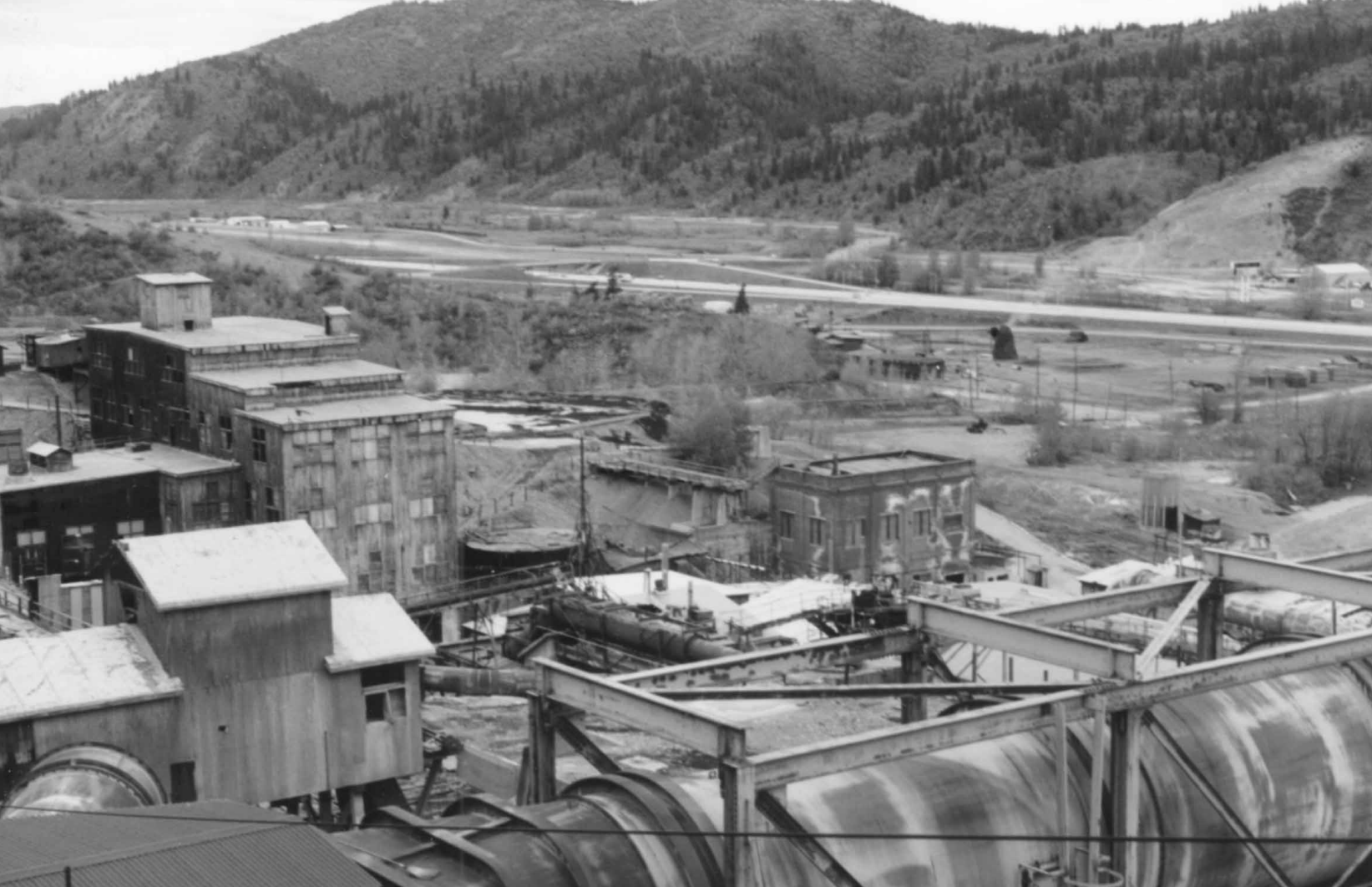
#### CONTACT

**760-397-8144**

**[www.torresmartinez.com](http://www.torresmartinez.com)**



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Original mine operation area at the Bunker Hill, Idaho mine and smelter. Raw silver mining waste was dumped into a nearby river until the mine closed in the 1980s. Photo courtesy Silver Valley People's Action Coalition

# *Taking the Lead Out*

## **IN 1974, BLOOD TESTS CONDUCTED ON CHILDREN IN NORTHERN IDAHO FOUND**

some of the highest lead levels ever recorded in humans. Seven years later, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) put the 21-square-mile Silver Valley area where these children lived on its National Priority List of sites for toxic cleanup under the Superfund program.

The Bunker Hill Superfund site, named after an old silver mine, is among the largest Superfund sites in the nation and one of the few that includes residential homes within its boundary. The site encompasses four towns—Kellogg, Pinehurst, Smelterville, and Wardner—that are home to about 5,000 men, women, and children. In 1986, residents formed the



Silver Valley People's Action Coalition (SVPAC) to monitor lead contamination and cleanup efforts.

The mining industry came to Silver Valley in the late 1800s and controlled the area's economic and political life for nearly a century. Acts of intimidation and judicial manipulation can be traced as far back as the end of the 19th Century when farmers many miles downstream from mining activity had record numbers of livestock dying as a result of pollution from the mines. The farmers filed a lawsuit, and after five years they won a settlement of one dollar. Mine workers were threatened with losing their jobs if they took action to disclose pollution.

In 1981, mining companies such as Gulf Resources and Hecla closed down their operations in Silver Valley without any notice, and 2,000 employees were suddenly out of work. Since that time, Shoshone County has had the highest rate of unemployment in the state of Idaho. More than 20 percent of its residents live in poverty.

After a decade-long fight with Region Ten EPA, SVPAC succeeded in getting technical advisors hired to review documents and submit reports in language accessible to community members. The Technical Assistance Group's findings confirmed that the site was not being adequately cleaned by the EPA. Pollution from lead, arsenic, and cadmium has spread to an area of more than 1,500 square miles, including parts of neighboring Washington state.

With the assistance of pediatrician John Rosen of New York's Albert Einstein College of Medicine, SVPAC is establishing a Community Lead Health Project to provide a place where children, former workers, and residents will, for the first time in a century, have ready access to diagnosis and treatment for lead poisoning.

Today SVPAC seeks to restore economic development to one of the most devastated areas of the United States. The thorough cleanup of the Bunker Hill Superfund site and the two-state region has the potential to create jobs for residents and improve their overall quality of life. We aim to bring economic recovery and adequate health care to the valley.

Acts of intimidation  
and judicial manipulation  
can be traced as far back  
as the end of the  
19th Century.

#### ACTIVISTS

**Silver Valley People's Action Coalition**

#### LOCATION

**Kellogg, Idaho**

#### CONTACT

**208-784-8891**

**[www.imbris.net/~paccrcco](http://www.imbris.net/~paccrcco)**





Cancer Alley, Louisiana. Photo by Paul Orr

Does air belong to polluters, or to the people who breathe it?

# clearing the air

**North Baton Rouge Environmental Association  
Concerned Citizens of Iberville Parish  
New Start for a Better Environment  
Philippine Action Group for the Environment  
Environmental Health Coalition**



Air is a natural asset we often take for granted. It is owned by no one and shared by all. Yet in communities across the United States, this common asset is being defiled by industrial polluters who spew deadly toxins into the atmosphere. Meanwhile, officials voted into office to protect the public interest all too often turn a blind eye.

In the wake of scandals triggered in 2002 by the collapse of Enron and other major corporations, Americans have become increasingly concerned about corporate corruption and lack of effective government regulations on the environment. This skepticism has given a boost to groups monitoring dangerous industrial practices and working to reclaim their right to clean air.

This section features some of the organizations and neighborhoods across the United States that are fighting to clear our air.

■ For decades the residents of Louisiana’s “Cancer Alley,” including the communities of Alsen and White Castle, have battled the corporate Goliaths of the petrochemical industry. Along the Mississippi River, acres and acres of manufacturing plants emit deadly particulate matter and noxious gases into the air. Billowing smoke and fumes hover above low-income, mostly black residential communities along the river. Joining with other residents of the state, these citizens are now organizing to assert their democratic right to clean air.

■ In West Dallas, Texas, a former substance-abuse treatment center transformed into an environmental justice organization after participants learned they had another problem in common: all had lived in close proximity to a lead smelter plant abutting residential neighborhoods. They are now actively involved in promoting public health awareness and cleanup and helping residents make informed connections between pollution and illness.

■ Southern California has long been infamous for air pollution and smog, a condition that has come to be seen as “normal” by many who live there. This section includes profiles of community groups that have mounted international campaigns to protect public air quality—from San Diego Bay in California to Subic Bay in the Philippines.

The work being done by these groups pose a crucial question: Does air belong to polluters, or to the people who breathe it?



Local resident in front of Superfund site near his home in Alsen, Louisiana.  
Photo by David Woo

# *From Rural to Ruin*

## **ALSEN, LOUISIANA, IS PERCHED ON THE HIGH BLUFFS OF THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER AT THE**

edge of the magnificent Devil's Swamp wetlands. After the Civil War, newly freed slaves settled here and founded a community which, through the generations, upheld a tradition of living close to the land.

The residents grew vegetables and fruits in their gardens, and they hunted and fished in bountiful Devil's Swamp, a productive ecosystem with great biodiversity. The waters of the swamp were home to a wide variety of shellfish and fish, from bottom-feeders to bass. The area's forests contained stately

old cypress trees, oaks, gums, magnolias, dogwoods, and tupelo. Many varieties of waterfowl nested in the swamp, and wild game was plentiful.

All this changed in 1956 when Alsen's first petrochemical plant arrived. It was soon followed by others. In 1964, industrial developer Tim Alexander came to town and opened a large pit for industries to dump their toxic chemicals. Those who used the pit include Dow, Ethyl, Uniroyal, Allied Signal, American Hoechst, Exxon Chemical, Rubicon Chemical, and Shell Chemical.

The family that lived 800 feet away from the site was never consulted or warned about its dangers. The children continued to swim in the pit as they had always done. A brother in the family recalls, "You were dirtier after you came out of the pit than before you went in." The pit was closed in 1980, and the area was placed on the Superfund National Priorities List in 1983. It remained unfenced until 1991.

Today, nine square miles of the once-majestic Devil's Swamp are contaminated. We are told not to eat any wildlife from the swamp. Residents must be careful of what they consume from their gardens, and many have become sick after eating home-grown vegetables.

Our once-sweet country air is now laced with fumes from the nine nearby petrochemical plants, two Superfund sites, a commercial hazardous waste incinerator, numerous hazardous waste landfills, a lead-smelting plant, a railroad switching yard that stores tank cars loaded with hazardous cargo, and a storage and washing facility for waste-hauling trucks.

These facilities were installed in Alsen with no input whatsoever from the community and no consideration for its residents. At the time of many of the installations, the people of the community were denied the right to vote because of their race. The handful of whites in Alsen have suffered the same fate as the blacks because they committed the twofold "sin" of being people of modest income and living adjacent to people of color. Alsen's residents invested a lifetime of earnings in their dream homes, only to have the dream turn into a nightmare as

property values plummet, health declines, and loved ones sicken and die. This is a clear case of environmental racism and environmental injustice.

More than 80 percent of Alsen's residents suffer from respiratory problems. Skin rashes are common. Cancer rates are unusually high. Spontaneous nosebleeds—including severe hemorrhaging—began occurring in 1991 and continue today. Many residents, including children, suffer from frequent headaches, irritated eyes, sore throats, arthritic-like pains, bleeding gums, and a host of other illnesses.

Yet we are told that there is nothing "unusual" in our air, and that our air quality is "in compliance and consistent with other industrial zones." We are told that our water quality is good and that we have nothing to worry about. After 45 years of suffering, our plight is still ignored. We see no relief in sight.

Today, dozens of well-known companies—including Georgia Pacific, Ferro Corporation, Reynolds Calcined Coke Plant, Allied Chemicals, Exxon Chemical America's Resin Finishing Plant and Plastics Plant, Le Chem Incorporated, Deltech, Stupp Corporation, Union Tank Car Company, Rollins Environmental Services, Petro Processors, and Browning-Ferris Industries—have industrial sites in Alsen, exacerbating existing pollution and resulting health problems.

Alsen was originally a peaceful, rural community. Now, without any input from the community, Alsen has become an industrial zone. In 50 years we've gone from rural to ruin. Will there ever be justice for Alsen?

#### ACTIVISTS

**North Baton Rouge  
Environmental Association**

#### LOCATION

**Alsen, Louisiana**

#### CONTACT

**225-932-9744  
225-928-1315**



In thickly populated communities along the Mississippi River, signs like this are constant reminders of the hazardous waste that poisons the air, water, and soil.

*Photo courtesy Louisiana Environmental Action Network*



# *Where Industry Gets Tax Breaks and People Get Pollution*

**WHITE CASTLE, LOUISIANA, IS OWNED BY WHITE FARMERS, BUT ITS POPULATION**

is 90 percent black. Community members have invested years of labor in the town, but they have received nothing beyond wages for their work. There is a basic lack of community ownership or investments that would guarantee a secure future.

White Castle is located in Louisiana's "Cancer Alley," the corridor on the Mississippi River between Baton Rouge and New Orleans that has one of the nation's heaviest concentrations of oil refineries, petrochemical plants, plastics factories, incinerators, and solid-waste landfills. Shell Oil Company and Cora Texas Manufacturing are located on the outskirts of White Castle.

Toxic emissions from these industries are contaminating our air, water, and land. We can't go outside and walk. We can't breathe comfortably; the emissions affect your eyes, your nose, your sinuses. A high number of children in White Castle suffer from asthma, stomach pains, and other illnesses.





Industrial pollution and agricultural pesticides flow freely through our water sources. Local government has not made industry accountable for their actions. Now we are paying the price.

Local industries have been given generous tax exemptions by the state government, priority use of utilities, and low prices for electricity and gas. These tax breaks have hurt White Castle's social services and public schools.

These conditions have left community members economically as well as environmentally vulnerable. Housing conditions are deplorable and in dire need of renovation. Vacant buildings are vandalized. There is a high rate of drug and alcohol consumption. Jobs are seasonal, low-paying, and provide no benefits.

Despite these difficulties, in many ways White Castle is a strong community. We have our own water, natural gas, and sewage systems, including a relatively new sewage treatment plant. We have curbed and guttered streets with lighting, several recreation areas and parks, and one of the nicest tennis complexes in the parish. An effective volunteer fire department operates two fire stations and numerous emergency vehicles, and there is an eight-member police force. White Castle's community leaders are working to empower citizens and to equip residents with skills and business opportunities that will support the community financially. At the same time, we are joining with other communities in "Cancer Alley" in the struggle to reclaim our rights to clean air and water.

#### ACTIVISTS

**Concerned Citizens of Iberville Parish**

#### LOCATION

**White Castle, Louisiana**

#### CONTACT

**225-928-1034**



Before long, participants learned they shared a common bond: similar health problems.

## *Heavy Metal in West Dallas*

### **ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE WAS NOT ON NEW START'S AGENDA IN THE BEGINNING.**

New Start is an outgrowth of the New Waverly Baptist Church in West Dallas, Texas, founded in 1988 by Reverend R. T. Conley, his two sons, and a nephew. They originally designed the program to help substance abusers and the less fortunate reclaim their lives and gain a "new start." Before long, participants learned that they shared a common bond: all or most of them suffered similar health problems, and at some point most had lived near the RSR Corporation's lead smelter in West Dallas. This discovery prompted the birth of an environmental justice movement in West Dallas. It also prompted New Start to change its name to New Start for a Better Environment.

Fifty-two percent of West Dallas residents are Latino, and 40 percent are African-American. The town was originally settled by French, Belgian, and Swiss immigrants in 1855. Half a century later, the "Cement City" community was established there





after two cement plants began operations. Mexican immigrants came during the Great Depression, and the West Dallas population quadrupled with wartime industrialization and the postwar return of veterans. In the early 1950s, the Dallas Housing Authority built 3,500 low-income units on a 435-acre site in the center of West Dallas, the largest public housing development in the United States.

Over the years, West Dallas has been plagued with environmental and economic concerns including abandoned industrial sites, vacant property, lack of home ownership, lack of economic development, and health problems in the community.

The RSR Corporation operated a lead smelter in West Dallas for 50 years, starting in 1934. The emissions from the smelter contaminated nearby areas. Lead battery casings were used as chips to fill yards and driveways. The facility was closed in 1985, and now the smelter is in the process of being dismantled.

New Start for a Better Environment has been instrumental in educating and assisting the West Dallas community as it fights for the right to a clean environment:

- Through outreach forums, radio, television, and other means, we have publicized numerous health problems among residents of West Dallas.
- In 1992, New Start secured compensation monies for West Dallas residents for exposure to lead from the RSR smelter, in a lawsuit spearheaded by New Start's current director, B. J. Moore.
- In 1998, with the help of numerous organizations, we held the Minority Workers Training Program at New Waverly Baptist Church, to train residents about hazardous waste and underground storage tank removal.

In our efforts to combat environmental injustice, both New Waverly Baptist Church and New Start for a Better Environment have built solid relationships with several local and state organizations. Our primary goal is to empower communities working for environmental justice on a national level.

B. J. Moore, director of New Start for a Better Environment, discusses public health problems linked to the RSR Corporation's lead smelter plant in West Dallas, Texas. Photo by David Woo



**ACTIVISTS**  
**New Start for a Better Environment**

**LOCATION**  
**West Dallas, Texas**

**CONTACT**  
**214-638-4434**





Children who live near Clark Air Base in the Philippines protest against the U.S. military's inadequate toxic waste cleanup efforts. Photo by Christina Leño, Filipino/American Coalition for Environmental Solutions

# *From South Bay to Subic Bay*

## **HAWAIIAN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL IN WILMINGTON, CALIFORNIA, HAS SOMETHING**

most schools don't: air-monitoring equipment to detect toxic chemicals. This isn't for a science experiment. The equipment is there to protect the health of the children and teachers. In January 2000, an early morning accident at a nearby oil refinery released a cloud of toxic gases into the air. The public was not alerted, so children went to their nearby school where they inhaled the chemicals. After this experience, the school purchased its own air-monitoring equipment.



This was not an isolated incident. Residents of South Bay in greater Los Angeles live side-by-side with chemical plants, heavy industries, and refineries owned by ARCO, Shell, Mobil, Tosco, and other companies. These facilities emit dangerous chemicals such as benzene, hydrochloric sulfur, and methyl bromide. Most of the residents living in communities in South Bay—including Carson, Lomita, San Pedro, Torrance, and Wilmington—are low-income and lower-middle-income families.

The Philippine Action Group for the Environment (PAGE) was organized in 1992 as a community-based environmental justice organization in South Bay. We conduct community education campaigns for people of color, especially Filipino Americans.

To involve our youth in pollution prevention, PAGE has been organizing around high schools. For example, we train students and community members to use household buckets for air sampling. The buckets, provided by Communities for a Better Environment, are used to sample air around schools and elsewhere in the communities. Working with other groups, PAGE is part of the coalition that drafted the integrated pesticide management policy of the Los Angeles Unified School District. We continue to educate parents and community members about the use and dangers of pesticides in schools. Since 1993, we have helped to organize yearly Earth Day forums in Carson that address issues from local air pollution to global warming.

PAGE is also a member of the national Filipino American Coalition for Environmental Solution (FACES), a campaign to cleanup toxic waste left by former U.S. military bases in the Philippines. Recent health surveys near Clark Air Force Base in the Philippines revealed high levels of reproductive, kidney, and nervous-system disorders. PAGE has been instrumental in organizing the FACES chapter in Los Angeles, which is now engaged in a community information and education campaign on the issue. We are also seeking to make U.S. legislators understand the problem and file legislation to clean up the toxic wastes left behind at the bases.

South Bay residents live side-by-side with chemical plants and heavy industries. . . . These facilities emit dangerous chemicals such as benzene, hydrochloric sulfur, and methyl bromide.

**ACTIVISTS**  
**Philippine Action Group for the Environment**

**LOCATION**  
**Carson, California**

**CONTACT**  
**310-513-1030**





White herons in San Diego Bay, where pollution-generating military installations loom in the background. Photo courtesy Environmental Health Coalition

# *Boom or Bust in San Diego*

No community should be held subject to economic blackmail in its struggle for a healthy community.

## **SAN DIEGO IS THE SEVENTH LARGEST CITY IN THE NATION AND THE SECOND LARGEST**

in California. San Diego County, covering 4,238 square miles—roughly the size of Connecticut—is the fourth most populous county in the United States. Within five to 10 years, the majority of its residents will be people of color, predominantly Latinos. The San Diego metropolitan area includes Tijuana, Mexico, with its additional million people.

San Diego's rapid growth after World War II is closely linked to the industries and six military bases still operating there today: Military Naval Station San Diego, Navy Amphibious Base, Naval Air Station North Island, the Naval Submarine Base, USN Radio Station, and the Imperial Beach Helicopter Port. Together, these bases constitute the largest naval installation in the world, and nearly 30 percent of all U.S. naval operations. Since the 1980s, electronics and biotech businesses have become major industrial sectors and, most recently, corporate development has been tied to the explosive growth of maquiladoras, or foreign-owned companies, operating in Mexico.

San Diego's naval operations are supported by local shipbuilding and repair industries which, along with the U.S. Navy itself, are among the largest generators of hazardous wastes and toxic air contaminants in the county. More than 255 million pounds of toxic waste were generated in 1998, and more than 677 million pounds of hazardous materials are stored on site at San Diego facilities. The city's new growth has resulted in a boom-or-bust mentality that has destroyed much of the native habitat and polluted water and air.

From its inception in 1980, the Environmental Health Coalition (EHC) has taken its direction from the people of the San Diego/Tijuana communities. Long-term projects provide technical and organizing assistance to populations adversely affected by toxic chemicals and pollutants. While EHC offers county-wide assistance, the majority of its efforts are directed at communities of color in urbanized neighborhoods in and around San Diego Bay. These include the



largely Latino communities of Barrio Logan, Logan Heights and National City, and the ethnically diverse neighborhoods of Southeast San Diego.

EHC organizes communities of color to advocate for the prevention of toxic pollution hazards at their source. Our campaigns are guided by the principle that residents of every community are equally entitled to protection from exposure to toxic materials, and that no community should be held subject to economic blackmail in its struggle for a healthy community.

Among the issues we contend with are:

- Contaminated sites have been discovered at 22 separate San Diego County military bases, including newly discovered radioactive waste sites on North Island in San Diego Bay.
- Five of the top ten hazardous waste generators in the county are located in the community of Barrio Logan, as are four of the top ten hazardous materials users. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Cumulative Exposure Project evaluated the multiple sources of pollution affecting communities, looking especially at cancer and respiratory and reproductive risks resulting from these pollutants. The study revealed that some health risks in the Barrio Logan area are up to 3,000 times above accepted health standards.
- San Diego Bay is one of the most polluted harbors in the United States. A study recently released by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration indicates that the most toxic sites were found along the shipbuilding and navy facilities adjacent to Barrio Logan.
- Tijuana has approximately 675 maquiladora industries, more than any other city along the U.S./Mexico border. The majority of these manufacturing industries—furniture, plastics, metal finishing and fabrication, and electronics production—are highly polluting.

During its 20-year history, EHC has developed a unique formula that combines community organizing and advocacy strategies to achieve social and environmental justice. For all of our programs, EHC identifies local problems and develops solutions and alternative models that lead to institutional change. Each campaign is assigned a team of community organizers and advocates who develop complementary organizing and advocacy tactics supported by research, education, and media efforts.

In 1997, after five years of community protests, EHC was instrumental in pressuring the Port of San Diego to adopt the Fumigation Use Policy, a victory that ended the Port District's use of methyl bromide at the Tenth Avenue Terminal. This toxic air pollutant is known to cause respiratory irritations, and it is especially harmful to those who have preexisting respiratory illnesses such as asthma.

EHC's work with environmental organizations and citizen groups in Tijuana has helped to reduce toxic pollution caused by foreign and domestic-owned industries. Several years ago, we won a NAFTA Petition Case against the Mexican-owned Metales y Derivados, an abandoned U.S.-owned lead smelter and battery recycler that was ordered to clean up a field bordering a residential area in Tijuana.

EHC has established powerful alliances with the Campaign for Clean and Safe Shipyards as well as a partnership between EHC and the labor movement. EHC also organized the Lead Poisoning Prevention Project with a coalition of community clinics, affordable housing advocates, and community development organizations.

## ACTIVISTS

**Environmental Health Coalition**

## LOCATION

**San Diego, California and  
Tijuana, Mexico**

## CONTACT

**619-235-0281**

**[www.environmentalhealth.org](http://www.environmentalhealth.org)**





*Photo by Daniel Sullivan, courtesy Louisiana Environmental Action Network*

Access to clean water is a basic human right.

# liquid assets

Committee for Environmental Soundness  
Center for Community Action and Environmental Justice  
Defense Depot Memphis Tennessee Concerned Citizens Committee  
Southwest Organizing Project  
Water Information Network



Water is a precious resource. Its value is increasingly apparent as supplies of clean fresh water dwindle. In regions hard hit by drought, water wars have become a common feature of American life. Worldwide, bottled water has grown into a \$35 billion-a-year industry, and in the United States, bottled drinking water is more expensive than gasoline.

Even in areas of the country where water is abundant, pollution often renders it undrinkable and unfit for other human uses or for wildlife. Many public water supplies have been contaminated by heavy metals, petrochemicals, pesticides, and other toxic substances.

In urban America, residential neighborhoods that border industrial and military facilities often face the biggest risks. Typically, these are blue-collar neighborhoods and communities of color. In rural areas, the contamination of rivers and streams drastically reduces tourist dollars from recreational fishing and boating and harms public health.

This section introduces groups that are protecting water sources by tapping into their communities' knowledge and their sense of outrage.

- For generations, the Hispanic families of the acequia farming communities of southern Colorado have maintained systems of earthen irrigation channels built by their ancestors. Now they are engaged in legal battles to retain access to the water that is the lifeblood of their unique cultural and ecological heritage.
- Residents of Glen Avon, California, have been fighting contamination of their private and public drinking water. By working together, they have exposed corrupt partnerships between business and local officials and have succeeded in changing corporate and government policies.
- Black residents of Memphis, Tennessee, are facing similar struggles to protect their water from contamination, in this case by the U.S. military. Outraged by illegal toxic dumping in neighborhood waterways, they have exposed official coverups and raised public awareness about the links between racism and pollution.
- In New Mexico, where water is a highly coveted commodity, activist groups are monitoring the effects of the military's nuclear tests. They are challenging corporate use of billions of gallons of public water and supporting community efforts to win access to safe drinking water.

These Americans do not view water as a mere commodity to be bought and sold, nor as a sink for disposal of wastes. They believe that access to clean water is a basic human right.



Colorado *acequia* farmer irrigating a cornfield. Photo by Devon Peña

## SEVEN GENERATIONS OF CHICANO FAMILIES HAVE LIVED AND FARMED THIS LAND.

Acequias—snow-fed, gravity-driven, communally maintained and managed earthen irrigation ditches—are the heart of our farming system. Our first acequias were constructed by hand in the 19th Century by farmers who settled the Culebra watershed as part of the Sangre de Cristo Land Grant of 1844.

We have a saying: “Sin agua no hay vida.” This means, “Without water there is no life.” Acequia custom teaches that water is tied to the land, and that it can never be sold. Under customary law, the water belongs to the community as a whole, and individual farmers have the right to use water for cultivation on their private “long-lots.” Under the land grant, the entire community also has customary rights to use 80,000 acres of common lands on upstream slopes. These lands were once used for hunting, fishing, grazing, wood gathering, and other traditional uses.

Between 1890 and 1910, the state of Colorado’s new water law took away an estimated two-thirds of the acequia communities’ water. The communities have been working ever since to reclaim and protect their water rights.

The common lands have also been lost in an unjust and contested enclosure. In 1960, land developer Jack Taylor bought the last unfenced portion of those common lands and erected fences around it. The community has been seeking, through the courts, to restore its historic use rights. The loss of the

# *Sin Agua No Hay Vida: Without Water There Is No Life*



common lands has had a terrible economic and cultural impact. The sheep industry collapsed because of the loss of the ancestral grazing range on the common lands. More than half of the population of our villages has had to leave. They moved to cities like Denver, Colorado Springs, Pueblo, and Albuquerque.

In 1988, the community founded the Committee for Environmental Soundness (CES) to oppose the Battle Mountain gold mine. Joining with other acequia communities, CES fought to block the transfer of water rights to the mining company. Now the mine is closed, but our communities are still contending with the pollution and contamination it left behind.

In 1993, in an effort to purchase Taylor's land, the acequia communities established the La Sierra Foundation. Shortly thereafter, the governor of Colorado established Sangre de Cristo Land Grant Commission, a local-state partnership designed to purchase the land to create a small state park and large wildlife management area. The commission was also charged with restoring the historic use rights of the land grant's heirs and implementing a unique co-management system based on principles of environmental justice and conservation biology. In 1998, the Commission made Taylor an offer of \$18 million. Taylor rejected the offer and instead sold the land in two separate transactions to Lou Pai, the billionaire CEO of Enron Energy Services.

Meanwhile, the Taylor Ranch began a massive industrial logging operation in 1995 that directly threatened our acequias, farms, and use rights to the common lands. The community responded by organizing a protracted five-year, anti-logging campaign that included direct action and civil disobedience as well as efforts to adopt and enforce land-use regulations to protect the watershed from logging.

Today there are 278 acequia farms in the Culebra Basin. Although this is less than half the number that existed before 1960, the community is on a rebound: the number of farms has increased slightly and some farms are increasing in size. Our people are coming back to the land, and interest in sustainable farming is increasing among our youth.

But Costilla County is also home to more than 60,000 subdivision lots. It is the most subdivided county in Colorado. These new property owners are largely absentee landowners, coming from every corner of the globe.

In confronting these threats from logging, mining, and subdivision, the acequia community's natural assets include:

- 23,000 acres of family-owned irrigated land
- 10,000 acres of family-owned wetlands
- 15,000 acres of family-owned riparian areas along acequia and other water courses
- 35,000 acres of family-owned nonirrigated lands
- the first 74 adjudicated priority rights to irrigation water in the Culebra watershed
- heirloom crops and orchard stocks

A recent study of our communities found that the acequia farms annually provide:

- \$9.4 million in agricultural income, sales, and services
- \$4.7 million in artisan, subsistence, and amenity values
- \$12.7 million in ecosystem services such as soil and water conservation, wildlife habitat, and open space
- a total regional value of our farms of \$26.8 million

## ACTIVISTS

**Committee for Environmental Soundness**

## LOCATION

**San Luis Valley, Colorado**

## CONTACT

**Colorado Acequia Assn.  
719-672-3005**



Distribution centers in Mira Loma encroach on residents' homes. Photo courtesy CCAEJ

# Fighting Toxic Foam

## THE STORY OF GLEN AVON, CALIFORNIA, DEMONSTRATES HOW A MOBILIZED COMMUNITY

is not only able to protect and improve its residents' lives, but also to win policy changes at the local, state, and federal levels. Just 60 miles from downtown Los Angeles, blue-collar Glen Avon, Mira Loma, and neighboring communities in the Jurupa Valley have fought and won a 22-year-long series of legal battles to pressure the county to clean up toxic waste and sewage from their drinking water and prevent future contamination.

In 1932, Glen Avon began holding a county fair called the Harvest Festival in honor of our agrarian heritage. The Harvest Festival featured livestock exhibits, food, quilts and handwork, 4-H displays, and a carnival. The festival came to be known as the "best free show in Southern California," drawing

from 30,000 to 40,000 people each year until it was discontinued during World War II.

After the war, Los Angeles expanded, engulfing surrounding communities in its path. The rural, desert and unincorporated areas of the Jurupa Valley gradually lost their reputation for rich agricultural land and instead began to be seen as mere wastelands of unused, open space. Our vacant land was viewed by urban planners as a "sink"—the perfect location for "remote disposal" of sewer sludge, toxic waste, and garbage.

In 1955, a site called the Stringfellow Acid Pits was approved for placement in the community of Glen Avon, over the objections of local residents. It is now California's worst toxic dump and most notorious Superfund site. The Stringfellow site lies directly above the community of Glen Avon, less than one mile from the Glen Avon Elementary School. During the life of the site, more than 34 million gallons of toxic chemicals were dumped into pits, ponds, and lagoons. The unlined dump allowed chemicals to seep into the ground, contaminating the groundwater on which Glen Avon residents relied for drinking water.

On several occasions, without prior notification to residents, liquid waste pumped from the site by state and county agencies flowed through the community, flooding streets, invading homes, and inundating the school. Children splashed in the puddles, making beards and "snowmen" with the toxic foam.

Contamination from the Stringfellow site stole our groundwater, one of our community's most

important natural assets, and altered our livelihood and lifestyle. Many families can no longer afford to irrigate their land, raise animals, or grow food in their gardens because they now must pay for water instead of using water free from their own wells.

The Center for Community Action and Environmental Justice (CCA EJ) emerged from the fight of our small, economically poor community to stop pollution and gain access to the decision-making that directly affects our lives. Our community has overcome the threat from the Acid Pits and regained our voice. We have stopped new toxic releases, built a new water system, changed public policy, established new legal precedents, created a more democratic process, and won what was then the nation's largest toxicity tort lawsuit with a settlement of \$114 million.

As cleanup of the site continues, groundwater quality is gradually being restored. But once this is achieved, the state is poised to claim the water for use elsewhere. We believe this liquid asset belongs to our community. While lacking confidence that it is clean enough for drinking, residents believe the water should be used for purposes that benefit the community, such as irrigation of park lands.

To build cohesion among residents, we asked what people want most for the community. The unanimous response was "a park!" Glen Avon has no central gathering place for children, families, and neighbors. Children play in the streets, since there are no sidewalks. Our goal is to create a space that belongs to the people, built with our own hands and under our community's control. After two years of searching for land and raising funds, we bought 13 acres in the heart of town for the Glen Avon Heritage Park. We feel the park will spark new pride, instill a sense of ownership, and advance the process of rebuilding in our community.

As we delved into the history of the community, we were astounded to find that the land we bought for our Glen Avon Heritage Park is the same land on which our forbearers held the annual Harvest Festival. We see this as a sign that we truly are revitalizing and rebuilding our community.

## ONCE-QUIET STREETS TEEM WITH ROARING TRUCKS

While we focused on the effort to protect our lives from toxic chemicals at the Stringfellow site, many changes occurring in the community went almost unnoticed. Land, cheapened by the shadow of the toxic dump in our midst, was bought by outside speculators. Lifetime investments in homes and businesses were wiped out due to redlining by financial institutions and overreaction from real-estate brokers. In response to the hard economic times of the community, county officials hit on a solution: designate the area as "industrial."

One result has been the sudden appearance of mega-warehouses and distribution centers on the dairy lands surrounding the community. With these massive buildings come thousands of trucks, whose deadly diesel exhaust threatens an area already known to have some of the worst air pollution in the nation. According to the World Health Organization, our area has the fourth highest particulate air pollution in the world, with levels surpassed only by Jakarta, Calcutta, and Bangkok. The combination of trucks and children riding horses on country roads creates a scenario for tragic results. Once-quiet streets now teem with roaring trucks. At night our once-black, starlit sky now glares with huge industrial lights.

Alarmed by these changes, community residents have come together to demand a voice and defend their rural lifestyle. A new neighborhood organization called HOME (Help Our Mira Loma Environment) recently won a legal halt to all industrial building until residents' concerns are addressed and resolved. County officials have responded by forming a committee of local residents to explore appropriate use of the land and to create a blueprint for the future of the community. This new organizing effort has shocked local developers and powerbrokers, renewing our belief that the residents can indeed have a say in decisions about their community's natural assets.

### ACTIVISTS

**Center for Community Action and Environmental Justice**

### LOCATION

**Glen Avon, California**

### CONTACT

**909-360-8451**

**[www.ccaej.org](http://www.ccaej.org)**



South Memphis, Tenn. resident Doris Bradshaw is determined to hold the U.S. Defense Depot accountable for poisoning local water sources. *Photo by David Woo*

# *The Army's Secret Dump*

## **ALL PEOPLE HAVE A GOD-GIVEN RIGHT TO SAFE DRINKING WATER, CLEAN AIR, AND**

uncontaminated food. Toxic contamination at the Defense Depot in Memphis, Tennessee, operated by the U.S. Army and Department of Defense from 1942 to 1997, has violated these rights of the people of South Memphis.

The Depot covers 642 acres of federal land southeast of the Memphis central business district. The site is bordered on the north, south, and west by mostly residential properties and a few industrial facilities, and on the east by commercial property. Twelve schools are located within a one-mile radius of the site boundary, and some residences are located within 100 yards of the Depot's boundaries.

The stated mission of the Depot was to receive, store, and ship everything the American soldier needed in combat situations. This necessitated the handling of hazardous chemicals, chemical-warfare weapons, and other very dangerous materials. Unfortunately, many serious accidents involving toxic chemicals occurred during the Depot's 55-year history, leaving the surrounding area an ecological disaster.

The Army created a secret dump on the site, where a wide array of dangerous toxins and hazardous wastes were intentionally buried. This military dump, known as Dunn Field, was kept secret from local residents until the day the federal facility closed in September 1997.

Toxic chemicals from the Depot—including lead, chromium, arsenic, mercury, volatile organic compounds (VOCs), and polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs)—migrated off the facility and severely contaminated the water, soil, and air of the innocent and unsuspecting residents of this heavily populated, low-income, predominantly black community. Drainage systems and stream tributaries flow from the site to the south and west, with one of the two main streams that collect the runoff flowing straight through Hamilton High School.

In a classic case of environmental racism, the commanding officers of the Depot—all of whom were white men—showed a callous indifference to the black people of the neighborhoods surrounding the federal facility. The Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation defied state legislators and adamantly refused to place poison signs at the Depot to warn children of the toxins emanating from the facility.

Outraged at being poisoned by toxic chemicals for 55 years without anything being done to protect them, black residents at a Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) Meeting at Norris Elementary School in South Memphis formed an environmental justice group they named Defense Depot Memphis Tennessee Concerned Citizens' Committee (DDMT-CCC).

Today, after a five-year struggle, DDMT-CCC has successfully educated the community about the injustices that the Department of Defense has wreaked upon black people in Memphis and on people of color who live near federal facilities throughout America. We are doing everything we can to ensure environmental justice for residents of South Memphis and for people of color everywhere. We believe that there should be a sensible balance in both business and national defense that doesn't result in the senseless destruction of America's ecosystems.

We believe there should be a sensible balance in both business and national defense that doesn't result in the destruction of America's ecosystems.

#### ACTIVISTS

**Defense Depot Memphis Tennessee  
Concerned Citizens' Committee**

#### LOCATION

**Memphis, Tennessee**

#### CONTACT

**901-726-0008  
ddmtccc411@yahoo.com**



New Mexico is an internal colony: its primary function has been to provide minerals, oil, natural gas and uranium to global corporations and the U.S. government.

## *A Thirst for Justice in the High Desert*

### **THE NUCLEAR CYCLE BEGINS AND ENDS IN NEW MEXICO. URANIUM IS MINED ON THE**

Laguna Indian lands; nuclear weapons research and development is conducted at Los Alamos and Sandia national laboratories; weapons are tested at White Sands, Farmington, and Carlsbad; and the nation's first nuclear waste dump is sited near Carlsbad.

At the same time, New Mexico is home to some of the economically poorest people in the nation. The state, in fact, ranks near the bottom in all economic and educational indicators. In effect, New Mexico is an internal colony: its primary function has been to provide minerals, oil, natural gas, and uranium to global corporations and the U.S. government.

Water is one of New Mexico's most important natural assets. The entire population is dependent on groundwater for drinking, and the Rio Grande is the main artery sustaining agriculture in the state. Today, communities and traditional water users are struggling to maintain their water rights in the face of competition from sprawling cities and high-tech manufacturers who have been lured to the state by government subsidies and tax breaks.

The Southwest Organizing Project (SWOP) has been working for two decades to empower communities in New Mexico and the Southwest. As a grassroots membership organization, we have trained hundreds of community activists to protect the natural assets and cultural heritage of their communities. Environmental justice has been a major focus of our efforts. We define the environment as "where we work, where we live, and where we play." We have worked to force industries and government agencies to reduce water use, clean up groundwater pollution, install air pollution controls, and incorporate local residents into environmental decision-making.

The Intel Corporation uses seven million gallons of water per day at their semiconductor manufacturing plant in Rio Rancho. That is 2.5 billion gallons of water per year—in the desert. When Intel attempted to buy water rights from southern New Mexico in 1997, SWOP and area residents opposed the sale and won.



Local children participate in a weekend retreat for community members. Photo courtesy Southwest Organizing Project

The Parajito Mesa community, overlooking Albuquerque's South Valley, is home to over 250 families who lack basic services such as paved roads and access to water, sewers, and electricity. We have established the Mutual Domestic Water Association in the community so residents can build their own water system. Each family will have a water tank and a pressure tank run by solar power.

In Veguita, 30 miles south of Albuquerque, we have helped community residents to organize after they learned about recent discoveries of nitrate contamination in 30 percent of their private wells.

Our efforts have helped to protect air and water from industrial contamination, particularly in communities of color. We are working to redirect public resources away from sprawl development and instead towards maintaining roads, schools, water, and sewer services in Albuquerque's inner city. Youth organizers in SWOP will issue a report card on the performance of Albuquerque public schools in low-income neighborhoods. They are also using theater as a vehicle to express their views on current political issues.

As SWOP celebrates its 20th anniversary, we look forward to a new decade of building our communities and making sure that the assets of Albuquerque and New Mexico are controlled and managed by the community.

#### ACTIVISTS

**Southwest Organizing Project**

#### LOCATION

**Albuquerque, New Mexico**

#### CONTACT

**505-247-8832**

**[www.swop.net](http://www.swop.net)**



**WATER  
53**



Oscar Alta Mirano from Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua, and his daughter participate in a community gathering blessing the waters of the Rio Grande/Rio Bravo river basin. The Water Information Network (WIN) works to build a broad-based, binational coalition addressing human rights as well as indigenous and environmental concerns. *Photo courtesy Living Rivers*

# *Protecting Water and People on the Border*

## **ATRISCO, NEW MEXICO, WAS ORIGINALLY CALLED ATLIXCO, A TLAXCALTECA-NAHUATL**

word that means “place on the water.” The water is the Rio Grande/Rio Bravo flowing south to Mexico. Here, as in other Pueblo and Mexicano communities, the people annually bless the water from the *acequias* (gravity-driven earthen irrigation canals) in the May 15 ceremony of San Ysidro. The procession begins with the “Danza of the Matachines” as people walk along the ditches, scattering rose petals into the water. We pray for rain, good crops, and a bountiful harvest in the ongoing cycle of life. This is the water that feeds the fields and still brings life to the valley—Valle de Atlixco.



Where once we were self-sufficient, harvesting corn, beans, squash, and alfalfa, our situation in recent memory is tangled in a web of “technological progress.” Globalization is challenging our ability to survive as a distinct people and culture, and we are now forced to labor in an economy that knows no respect for people or the environment. With our prayers and our actions, however, we believe that traditional New Mexican cultures will prevail.

The Water Information Network (WIN) is one of many community-based organizations in the area. Like the Atrisco Land Rights Council, the Rio Grande Community Development Corporation, and the Atrisco-South Valley Growers Market, as a native-led environmental organization, WIN is committed to preventing and cleaning up pollution of the land, air, and water in the Southwest.

The border areas face a multitude of environmental problems that transcend the limits of international boundaries. We face huge demands for water resources as well as a sharp expansion of Mexico’s industrial base fueled by NAFTA and global pressures. Environmentally destructive coal and uranium mining activities are located predominantly on Native American lands characterized by high unemployment and depressed economies. Mexicano and ranching communities in Eastern New Mexico and West Texas are under the constant threat of proposed toxic and radioactive waste dumps.

WIN’s members are directly impacted by environmental contamination, proposed nuclear waste and toxic sites, and uranium and coal mining. We have a strong history of organizing in Native American, Mexicano and economically poor rural communities—the regions most affected by natural resources exploitation and pollution. We work in the Four Corners area, in southeastern New Mexico and West Texas, and with NGOs in the U.S. and Mexican border communities. Today, for example, WIN is opposing the development of a new coal strip mine proposed for a sacred Native American site near Zuni Pueblo.

We work to engage area residents in critical dialogue and to help generate community-based power.

We are concerned with the abuses of workers and of human rights associated with U.S. immigration policies, and with the poverty and lack of respect for the plight of indigenous people who do not recognize the imposition of the border on their homeland.

One of our strengths is helping communities to figure out the motives and behaviors of corporations engaged in the exploitation of natural resources for profit. With traditional and grassroots leaders, we support community-based organizational development. We organize campaigns, research, and coalition-building activities to unmask and hold accountable those corporate and government players that are out of sync with our community needs.

Organizing helps put into place the dialogue and leadership infrastructure necessary to take the next steps toward empowerment, sustainability, and community development. It is ironic that we have to work so hard to recapture the simplicity and balance that was so common to our ancestors. It is much easier to be anesthetized by drugs, poor education, low-paying jobs, and TV than to meet the challenges of empowerment—the challenges that confront our ability to survive.

We work to create a vision brought about by hands-on participation from the bottom up. Often we organize against tremendous odds. But we know that people can win if they are organized out of their own needs and interests. We are rebuilding community when we engage in this process. We organize to help put in place tools to build our capacity to act.

## ACTIVISTS

**Water Information Network**

## LOCATION

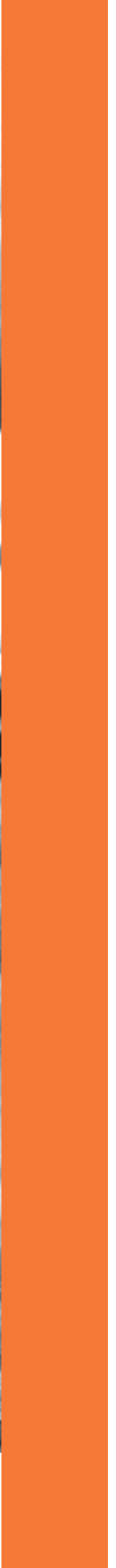
**Albuquerque, New Mexico**

## CONTACT

**505-255-4072**



Baton Rouge resident Harold Green at a public demonstration against Dow Chemical's incineration of napalm. *Photo by Paul Orr*



# we the people

Louisiana Environmental Action Network  
Concerned Citizens of South Central Los Angeles  
Tri-Valley CAREs  
Albuquerque San Jose Community Awareness Council  
Spring Lake Neighborhood Association



This section profiles community groups that have dedicated long hours to forging effective strategies for change:

- In Louisiana, residents who know firsthand that a sick and poisoned population cannot work and support its families have forced mammoth petrochemical firms to adopt cleaner practices. They have exposed and reprimanded elected officials who put corporate welfare ahead of human welfare.
- In South Central Los Angeles, families mobilized successfully to block plans for a proposed waste incinerator sited in their neighborhood. They are now working to create green spaces, affordable housing, and community employment.
- In the San Jose barrio of Albuquerque, New Mexico, most residents are economically poor but by no means passive: they are rebuilding their neighborhood from the inside out and striving to secure a healthy environment.
- In South Omaha, Nebraska, the descendants of immigrants who labored in the city's meatpacking plants are fighting to restore city parks, rid their streets of rotting beef carcasses, and break the hazardous alliance between government and business that has imposed health risks on their community.
- In Livermore, California, people living near one of the nation's principal nuclear weapons research labs are fighting radioactive contamination and drawing links between building natural assets and building a more peaceful world.

Citizens engaged in the natural assets movement view people as part of nature, not apart from it. Rejecting the myth of a grim trade-off between economic wealth and environmental health, they are advancing a positive vision that promotes both economic development and environmental sustainability.

Across America the people who bear the brunt of pollution and environmental decay are bringing the greatest energy and determination to the battle for a clean and safe environment. That the majority of this new breed of environmental warriors are low-income and people of color is no coincidence: for years their neighborhoods have been targeted as "sacrifice zones" where environmental quality is viewed as expendable. It is precisely this history that has propelled them into the vanguard of the natural assets movement. They are moved to act because, quite literally, their lives depend on it.

These committed Americans and thousands like them across the country are at the forefront of the movement for environmental protection of the people, by the people, and for the people.

# *Tipping the Scales of Power*

## **IN LOUISIANA, STATE GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS CONTINUE TO PRACTICE THE DISCREDITED**

economic development philosophy that the only way for people to prosper is to give a free ride to industries that release deadly toxins. Through lax environmental enforcement and one of the most generous corporate welfare programs in the country, we have lured and nurtured chemical plants that are rarely tolerated in other states. We have never seen the oft-promised jobs and prosperity, but Louisiana has set records for toxic air and water discharges as well as deep-well injection. Almost 200 million pounds of toxic chemicals are released into our environment every year.

The Louisiana Environmental Action Network (LEAN) was founded by citizens to help citizens change the balance of power and challenge the insanity of continued economic and ecological destruction as practiced Louisiana-style. By helping to empower grassroots community organizations and individuals, LEAN has already gained a tremendous foothold in the war to make Louisiana's communities safer, healthier places to live.

"This is a struggle for our very lives and the survival of our community," explains Pat Melancon of St. James Citizens for Jobs and the Environment, a LEAN member group. "Our concerns are people, pollution, and poverty; theirs [industry's] are politics, profits, and power."

At a historic gathering of Louisiana's environmental community in 1986, grassroots leaders from around the state recognized the need for a statewide organization that could weave together individuals and community groups to speak with a united voice and greater political power. From this meeting, LEAN was born with five founding member groups. Over the past 15 years, we have grown into an effective homegrown, multi-issue organization with more than 85 member groups representing grassroots communities, environmental organizations, social justice groups, labor unions and churches, and more than 1,300 individual members.



Persistent citizen protests combined with ongoing public awareness campaigns have successfully pressured some chemical companies into adopting safer industrial practices. *Photo by Paul Orr*

Louisiana is a paradox of ecological and economic riches coupled with poor quality of life. Sitting on the final stretch of the Mississippi River, America's greatest inland waterway, our rivers are our lifeblood. Half the state's industrial facilities are located in the notorious "Cancer Alley" along the Mississippi River corridor between Baton Rouge and New Orleans. Today they are the primary economic fixtures along the river. Unfortunately, these same facilities release millions of pounds of toxic chemicals each year into the air, water, and soil.

Our state, with 40 percent of the nation's wetlands, serves as important habitat and breeding grounds for wildlife, birds, and marine life. Vast areas of these wetlands and coastal regions are being lost to erosion and polluted by industrial chemical discharge.

Many of Louisiana's most serious environmental problems occur in communities composed of people of color, people with low income, and the working class. About 80 percent of our member groups are from traditionally disenfranchised communities.

One of LEAN's greatest strengths is our ability to form cross-cultural, interracial, and interclass coalitions that extend beyond traditional environmental concerns. Communities and individuals in Louisiana trust our commitment to diversity and united action. These are intrinsic to everything we do, from board and membership development to programmatic efforts. LEAN also places a high value on relationships with organizations and networks around the country and on occasion around the world, participating in national and international events that help build relationships of mutual aid, benefit, and power.

#### ACTIVISTS

**Louisiana Environmental Action Network**

#### LOCATION

**Baton Rouge, Louisiana**

#### CONTACT

**225-928-1315**

**[lean007@aol.com](mailto:lean007@aol.com)**

**[www.leanweb.org](http://www.leanweb.org)**

Juanita Tate, executive director of Concerned Citizens of South Central Los Angeles, explains how neighborhoods have pulled together to rebuild and restore South Central. *Photo by David Woo*



# Greening South Central

## **SOUTH CENTRAL LOS ANGELES IS RIDDLED WITH ABANDONED BUILDINGS AND MANY**

vacant lots. Old and polluting industrial facilities are interspersed with residential housing and schools. It is not unusual to see an auto-plating company across the street from a school, a cement company next to residential housing, or an oil processing business a block away from a housing development. Needless to say, asthma and other respiratory ailments afflict many of our residents.

It wasn't always like this. Forty years ago, South Central was a flourishing, largely African-American, working-class community with well-maintained houses and manicured lawns. The streets were paved regularly and the trees trimmed. The auto industry and the post office were major employers in the community. But the departure of industry and the scaling-down of post office operations caused large-scale unemployment.

Today the community is in a flux of constant change. Our population is 65 percent Latino, of whom 43 percent are undocumented. Seventeen

percent are African-Americans, of whom half are seniors. Forty-nine percent of the African-American youth are unemployed. Many residents across the spectrum are low wage-earners.

South Central boasts few financial assets. Historically, we have suffered from redlining by financial institutions. Banks have closed their doors, taking with them millions of our deposited dollars that they did not invest in the redevelopment or rehabilitation of our community. Instead, they invested in real estate development projects in suburban cities and towns such as Beverly Hills and Santa Barbara.

Government agencies in Los Angeles have subsidized suburban development at the expense of the inner-city neighborhoods. Monies for city services have not been distributed to serve all residents equally. Per-capita spending on social services decreased in South Central while it increased for residents in newer communities.

In 1985, African-American community members formed a nonprofit organization called Concerned Citizens of South Central Los Angeles (CCSCLA) to help organize against the development of a massive waste incinerator that was earmarked for the neighborhood. After a two-year fight, we defeated the \$535 million bond issue for the incinerator. The members of CCSCLA decided to remain together after this victory and address other concerns and issues affecting the community. Today we strive to create a healthier, safer environment with stable employment for our residents.

One of CCSCLA's greatest challenges is to clean up existing contaminated sites—"brownfields"—in a community that has been overburdened by polluting industries. These include abandoned gas stations and commercial and manufacturing lots now left vacant due to real or perceived environmental contamination. At the same time, unchecked planning by insensitive agencies has led to many unacceptable land uses, such as the Jefferson New Middle School being built on top of a contaminated industrial site.

Through its various campaigns, CCSCLA has developed relationships with a variety of government

# We strive to create a healthier environment with stable employment for our residents.

entities, media, and educational and financial institutions. Although some of these did not begin on a positive note, we recognize the importance of building relationships. We collaborate on joint projects and programs including affordable housing and retail development, safe and clean schools, community employment, and environmental cleanup.

CCSCLA has created housing that incorporates common areas with green spaces. We treat each development as a community and create housing management teams that are sensitive to community needs. Ninety percent of our employees live within walking distance of their jobs. We have created a local community garden and are currently working to develop open space and pocket parks.

We maintain a large cadre of block clubs to link the concerns of our multicultural population. CCSCLA has successfully educated, informed, and learned from the community. It has empowered its membership to participate in decisions concerning community cleanup, planning, land use, and development. This more enlightened and organized community is our greatest asset in improving the quality of life for all our members, and for all of greater Los Angeles.

## ACTIVISTS

**Concerned Citizens of South Central  
Los Angeles**

## LOCATION

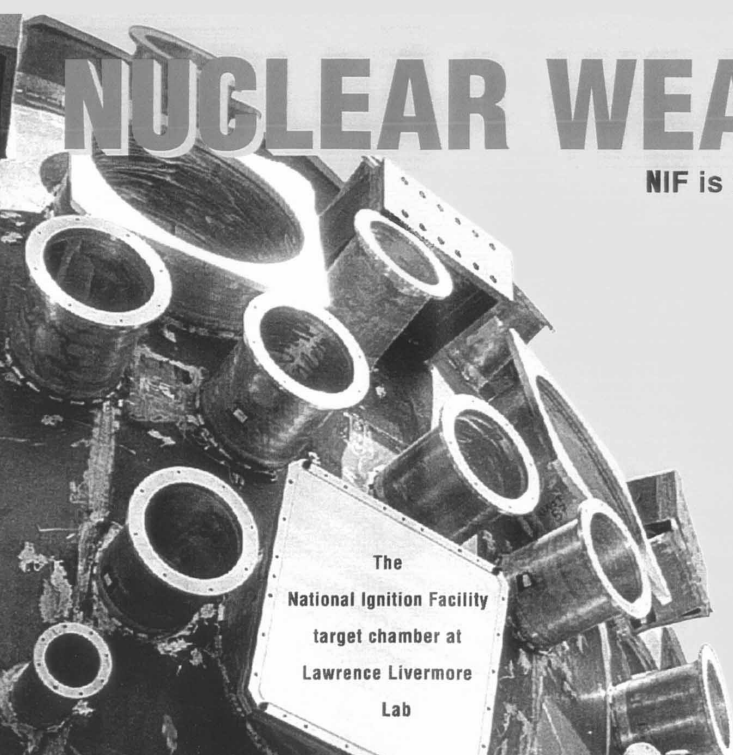
**Los Angeles, California**

## CONTACT

**323-846-2505  
[www.ccscla.org](http://www.ccscla.org)**

# NUCLEAR WEAPONS SCIENCE?

NIF is intended to train a new generation of bomb designers



*YOUR MIND IS A  
TERRIBLE THING  
TO WASTE*

Reaching more than 214,000 commuters a day each year, this Tri-Valley CAREs billboard in Livermore, California challenges the nuclear industry.  
Graphic provided by Tri-Valley CAREs

## *Atomic Rules*

The hidden history of the poisonous nuclear arms race is written in environmental devastation and soaring health problems.

### **LIVERMORE, CALIFORNIA IS THE HOMETOWN OF THE ATOMIC BOMB. THE CITY LOGO**

contains the atom, and the school district's vans sport a picture of Aladdin's lamp enmeshed in an atom. The newsletter of a local church bears a crucifix inside the atom on its masthead.

Tri-Valley Communities Against a Radioactive Environment (Tri-Valley CAREs) was created in 1983 by residents living in the shadow of an active nuclear weapons facility. Our aims are to protect public health and the environment, to promote disarmament, and to convert the U.S. Department of Energy's Lawrence Livermore Laboratory to an environmentally responsible, peaceful mission.

Founded in 1952 to build new generations of nuclear weapons, the Livermore Lab and its sister laboratory in Los Alamos, New Mexico, have designed every nuclear weapon in the U.S. arsenal. The hidden history of the poisonous nuclear arms race is written in the environmental devastation and soaring community health problems that have accompanied the atomic bomb.



Livermore is a once-rural community that has become increasingly suburbanized; today its population is about 74,000. The community includes three distinct groups: scientists and engineers who work at the Lab, old-time ranching families, and commuters to the metropolitan San Francisco Bay area. The Lab employs some 10,000 people, about half of whom live in town. The Livermore City Council, the school board, and other local governing bodies generally consist of a high percentage of Livermore Lab employees. In some ways, organizing in Livermore is not unlike organizing in a “company town” owned by the coal or textile industries.

We have documented numerous accidents, spills, and leaks at the Lab, including releases of plutonium, uranium, and tritium (the radioactive hydrogen used to boost the explosive power of modern nuclear weapons). Dr. John Gofman, former associate director at Livermore Lab and founder of its biomedical department, estimates that known tritium releases have caused 120 cancer cases and 60 cancer deaths in Livermore. According to environmental reports and documents we have obtained through the Freedom of Information Act, Livermore and the surrounding San Francisco Bay area have been subjected to about one million curies of airborne radiation from weapons projects at the lab. This is roughly equal to the amount of radiation dropped on Hiroshima in World War II.

Today, more than a decade after the Cold War, nuclear weapons programs continue unabated at the Lab. Currently, the site harbors up to 1,540 pounds of plutonium, enough for nearly 100 modern nuclear weapons. There are also more than 500 pounds of highly enriched uranium on site.

The Livermore Lab has witnessed at least one “criticality accident” (an unplanned nuclear chain reaction) involving highly enriched uranium. In this incident, some of the fission products were released into the air. Plutonium has recently been discovered in a city park next to an elementary school about a quarter mile west of Livermore Lab. Both the Lab’s main site and its testing range between Livermore

and Tracy are on the EPA’s Superfund list of the most contaminated places in the country.

In 1995, the California Health Department released findings from a 30-year cancer study (1960-1991) of Livermore’s children. Researchers found that children born in Livermore had more than six times the incidence of malignant melanoma as did similar-age children born in the rest of the county. Further, the study found that children who were born elsewhere and moved to Livermore during childhood experienced more than double the rate of malignant melanoma. The study also found higher rates of brain cancer. State investigations have also revealed similar findings of abnormally high rates of malignant melanoma among Lab employees.

Tri-Valley CAREs has 2,900 members, including teachers, physicists, artists, cabinet makers, retail clerks, engineers, secretaries, biologists, writers, chemists, and technicians, as well as students and retirees. Many of our core members and volunteers have been with the organization for nearly two decades. We’ve been actively working for peace, justice and a healthy environment. We belong to the nationwide Alliance for Nuclear Accountability, and we are a co-founding member of the Abolition 2000’s global network for the elimination of nuclear weapons. Tri-Valley CAREs is also a member of the U.S. Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons and the Back From The Brink campaign to remove nuclear weapons from hair-trigger alert status.

**ACTIVISTS**  
**Tri-Valley CAREs**

**LOCATION**  
**Livermore, California**

**CONTACT**  
**925-443-7148**  
**[www.igc.org/tvc](http://www.igc.org/tvc)**

# *In the Barrio*

## **THE CITY OF SAN JOSE IS AN URBAN BARRIO OF ALBUQUERQUE, NEW MEXICO. SETTLED IN**

the 1880s, it flourished as a fertile farming community until the city's growth brought industry and less desirable businesses into the neighborhood. The barrio now has a heavy concentration of toxic waste sites and oil refineries as well as two Superfund sites.

San Jose has 2,100 residents, with 86 percent being Latino. The 1990 U.S. Census found that the unemployment rate was 18 percent, with the median household income for a family of four hovering at \$14,325. At the East San Jose Elementary School, 99 percent of the children qualify for the federal lunch program. Lack of employment opportunities as well as drug abuse, domestic violence, abandoned vehicles, and substandard housing all mark our disenfranchised community.

The Albuquerque San Jose Community Awareness Council, Inc. (ASJCAC) is a grassroots organization formed in 1988 in response to the many problems affecting the health and welfare of residents. Previously there were often no effective rules or regulations to protect the health and safety of the people. Laws, statutes, and zoning ordinances either did not exist or went unenforced. ASJCAC, Inc. began as a volunteer organization, operating from the property of the San Jose Parish Catholic Church. In 1992, we received funding from the New Mexico Department of Health to operate as an environmental education program. Our work builds on the key assumption of the Healthy Cities Movement: When people have the opportunity to address their own locally defined health problems, they will find sustainable solutions.

ASJCAC, Inc. works on zoning issues, neighborhood enhancement, sustainable development, brownfield remediation, affordable housing, education, employment, and environmental contamination. We build coalitions and attend many meetings at the neighborhood, community, and regional level. The organization's director is an elected official on the Albuquerque public schools' Board of Education. For ten years we have circulated a monthly newsletter to 2,500 people. We hold community meetings twice a month, and we have organized many retreats,





Residents attend educational strategy sessions to determine how they will limit environmental damage in their neighborhoods. *Photo courtesy ASJCAC, Inc.*

summits, work/study sessions, workshops, dinners, and fundraisers.

In collaboration with the local community college, the next-door Barelas Community Development Corporation, and the El Puente project, we developed a professionally produced strategic development plan for the neighborhood. The plan, based on statistical data, will lay out the needs, requests and requirements of people who live, work, play and learn in our community.

We are working hard to eliminate preconceived notions and misinformation about our community. We are tired of people who come into the community to analyze or oversimplify the issues. We no longer accept the notion that issues in the community have to be addressed in one particular way. Our aim is to develop a new approach to community development. Our goal in the end is to empower our community to solve our own problems.

Our focal point is to create the conditions where people speak for themselves to provide a common-sense approach and workable solutions. The focus of our training and retraining programs is to take ownership, be accountable, and become effective advocates for ourselves, our community, and future generations. We advocate and defend the public's right to know and the need to assume an active leadership role in our neighborhood's future and destiny.

# We defend the public's right to know.

## ACTIVISTS

**Albuquerque San Jose Community  
Awareness Council, Inc.**

## LOCATION

**Albuquerque, New Mexico**

## CONTACT

**505-243-4837**



Residents of South Omaha want to restore the natural spring-fed lake in their inner-city park.

*Photo courtesy Spring Lake Neighborhood Association*

# *Keeping Nature in the City*

## **IN SOUTH OMAHA, WE HAVE MEATPACKING PLANTS THAT ARE LITERALLY NEXT DOOR**

to our only movie theater and shopping center. We have cow manure on our streets daily. In the 1990s, packing plants were allowed to reopen across the street from residential areas and to operate 24 hours a day, seven days a week, at three times their 1970 capacity. Not even Sunday is a day of respite. The stink is outrageous.

South Omaha was established around 1875 by the Livestock Land Syndicate as a township for workers attracted to what eventually became the largest livestock railhead in the United States. Growth was fast and furious as large numbers of immigrants came to the area, some for jobs, others to prepare for the westward journey as pioneers. South Omaha became known as the “Ellis Island of the northern plains” because of its inclination to accept anyone willing to work in the livestock industry.



# In the 1990s, meatpacking plants were allowed to reopen across the street from residential areas.

In the beginning, the immigrant groups were Irish, Czech, Polish, and Greek. They were followed by waves of freed Negro slaves, Germans, Swedes, and Norwegians. Today, Hispanic, Sudanese, South-east Asian, and Slavic immigrants continue to arrive, many of them as refugees from civil wars in their homelands.

Once delineated by its ethnic enclaves, South Omaha's neighborhood boundaries are now set by the federal Housing and Urban Development Department's Target Area Program. Spring Lake is a blue-collar neighborhood that qualified for federal dollars under this program because we met conditions based on income, housing stock, minority population, crime, and infrastructure needs. The 2000 U.S. Census has dramatically reemphasized this status.

Our housing is insufficient and degraded. Homeownership is mostly in the hands of both the elderly and absentee landlords. We have a large number of rental properties that are not well maintained. Crime is high, and we have been taking advantage of crime prevention and graffiti abatement programs and pushing for more community-oriented policing strategies. Our streets are in bad shape, with insufficient parking and clogged sewers. Our sidewalks along the main streets are buried most of the winter in snow. Because sidewalks abut the streets directly, pedestrians have to walk in traffic to get to bus stops, home, and schools.

The Spring Lake neighborhood takes its name from Spring Lake Park, established in 1885. The Spring Lake Neighborhood Association has a motto: "Showing We Care, Showing We Are Aware, Our Neighborhood Is Our Home." We take that motto seriously.

In 1990 the association participated in the city bond issue to fund park rehabilitation efforts. Out of this sprang the Spring Lake Park Habitat Restoration and Preservation Team. Its motto is "Neighbors and Friends Keeping Nature in the City." The team's purposes are to protect, restore, and preserve the natural areas of the park and to stabilize the municipal landfill that was placed at the south end of the park in the mid-1960s.

In the 1970s the municipal wastewater treatment plant was built in the neighborhood. It took us 25 years just to get the treatment plant to put lids on the trickling filters so that people could sit on their porches again without having to watch their paint peel or brass doorknobs corrode from the hydrogen sulfide fumes.

We now want to restore the natural spring-fed lake in our inner-city park and improve the area's natural riparian woodland habitat. We were designated as a Groundwater Guardian Community in 1997. The Habitat Restoration and Preservation Team consists of area residents, environmental consultants and activists, science teachers from neighborhood high schools and middle schools, teenagers interested in keeping this bit of "wildlife" in their back yards, and local representatives of government agencies.

We who live in and love Spring Lake are a group of folks as tough as those immigrants who came and continue to come to South Omaha. We do not give up. We get damned tired of having to reeducate every newly elected official to our needs and to the fact that we are not a bunch of dummies. But we keep at it because Spring Lake is our home.

## ACTIVISTS

**Spring Lake Neighborhood Association**

## LOCATION

**Omaha, Nebraska**

## CONTACT

**402-932-3555**

**[www.unl.edu/ucip/spring.htm](http://www.unl.edu/ucip/spring.htm)**



# renewing democracy,

The profiles of environmental courage highlighted in this journal teach us that efforts to protect the environment are inseparable from the tasks of overcoming racism, poverty, and injustice.

Across America, people striving for environmental justice and building natural assets are renewing and drawing inspiration from our country's democratic traditions.

Sixty years ago, U.S. Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis remarked:

*"We can either have democracy in this country, or we can have great wealth concentrated in the hands of few, but we can't have both."*

As we embark on this new century, Americans are recognizing the profound implications of Justice Brandeis' insight and its relevance to our natural environment.

In the end, the fate of nature and the fate of democracy are intimately bound together.

## *one community at a time*





# *Toxic Dream in White Castle*

I  
Cows graze in the shadow  
Of the incinerator,  
Louisiana Bayou  
In shock, toxic trixx  
Of industry  
Tenderizing turtles  
In your turtle soup.  
Toxic soup in Alsen,  
Where cranes still fly  
Over Exxon entrails  
Spilling into Mississippi  
Waterways, whoosh . . . whoosh  
Awake at night  
Petrochemical dreaming,  
Leaching into groundwater,  
Spontaneous combustion,  
Waste from Savannah River,  
Tritium trickles  
On our brains  
And we smell the taste  
With our tongues,  
Singing old gospel songs  
About children who play  
In the lead-infested sands,  
Of we shall overcome  
And we want justice today  
From the plantation owners  
Who still say, this is  
The American way,  
In the land of the free  
And the home of the brave;  
Welcome to Cancer Alley!

II  
Plaquemine Parish  
On the Mississippi,  
Old Man River  
On the Delta,  
Is the home of Dow  
In Iberville  
Where tumor trees  
Commune with cancerous cows,  
In the Bayou  
Thick brine  
Of chemical towns,  
Iberian, Acadian,  
Festival in  
The historic district  
Of Eden.  
Even though  
It glitters and glows,  
It's still dangerous,  
Blistered paint  
Peels as business  
Booms:  
Chitlins and  
Hot tamales  
On Highway 1.

III  
White Castle  
Dow's smoking and Shintec too,  
Sugar cane fields  
Where sweet honey  
Black bears  
Are sick of those lines.  
Radioactive  
Swines of industry  
Wine and dine  
On generations  
Of ancestors  
Bent over in the fields  
Of the Bayou Gouls  
And Choctaw  
Indians' souls that walk  
Lost in the bosom  
Of industry  
Since antebellum days,  
Sweet Jesus,  
My eyes still burn  
With what I see.

Jaime Chavez  
Water Information Network  
Albuquerque, New Mexico  
March 2, 2001

# participants

## BATON ROUGE CONFERENCE MARCH 2001

- John Barros**  
Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative  
Roxbury, Massachusetts
- Mary Belardo**  
Torres Martinez Cahuilla Indians  
Thermal, California
- Lila Bird**  
Water Information Network  
Albuquerque, New Mexico
- Janet Bonet**  
Spring Lake Habitat Restoration  
Omaha, Nebraska
- Rachel Bouvier**  
Department of Economics  
University of Massachusetts  
Amherst, Massachusetts
- James Boyce**  
Political Economy Research Institute  
University of Massachusetts  
Amherst, Massachusetts
- Doris Bradshaw**  
Memphis Concerned Citizens' Committee  
Memphis, Tennessee
- Donna Charpiéd**  
Citizens for Chuckwalla Valley  
Desert Center, California
- Jaime Chavez**  
Water Information Network  
Albuquerque, New Mexico
- Felicia Eaves**  
Environmental Health Coalition  
San Diego, California
- Laura Foreman**  
Ohio Valley Environmental Coalition  
Huntington, West Virginia
- Rachel Morello-Frosch**  
University of California School of Public Health  
Berkeley, California
- Joe Gallegos**  
Colorado Acequia Association  
San Luis, Colorado
- Michael Guerrero**  
Southwest Organizing Project  
Albuquerque, New Mexico
- Diane Harris**  
Center for Community Action and Environmental Justice  
Glen Avon, California
- Albertha Hasten**  
Cane Field Community School Board member  
White Castle, Louisiana
- Dolores Herrera**  
San Jose Community Awareness Council  
Albuquerque, New Mexico
- H. Patricia Hynes**  
School of Public Health  
Boston University  
Boston, Massachusetts
- Helen Johnson**  
Center for Popular Economics  
Amherst, Massachusetts
- Marylia Kelly**  
Tri-Valley CAREs  
Livermore, California
- Fe Koons**  
Philippine Action Group for the Environment  
Carson, California
- Tracy Kuhn**  
Association of Family Fishermen  
Barataria, Louisiana
- Barbara Miller**  
Silver Valley People's Action Coalition  
Kellogg, Idaho
- Pam Miller**  
Alaska Community Action on Toxics  
Anchorage, Alaska
- Vernice Miller-Travis**  
The Ford Foundation  
New York City
- Brenda Moore**  
New Start for a Better Environment  
Dallas, Texas
- Peter Montague**  
Environmental Research Foundation  
Annapolis, Maryland
- Penny Newman**  
Center for Community Action and Environmental Justice  
Glen Avon, California
- Mary Lee Orr**  
Louisiana Environmental Action Network  
Baton Rouge, Louisiana
- Manuel Pastor**  
Latin American and Latino Studies  
Merrill College  
Santa Cruz, California
- Maria Pellerano**  
Environmental Research Foundation  
Annapolis, Maryland
- Devon Peña**  
Department of Anthropology  
University of Washington  
Seattle, Washington
- Florence Robinson**  
Honors College  
Southern University  
Baton Rouge, Louisiana
- Hector Saez**  
Environmental Studies  
University of Vermont  
Burlington, Vermont
- Luis Saez**  
Nuestras Raices  
Holyoke, Massachusetts
- Barry Shelly**  
Political Economy Research Institute  
University of Massachusetts  
Amherst, Massachusetts
- Shirley Sherrod**  
Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund  
Albany, Georgia
- Juanita Tate**  
Concerned Citizens of South Central Los Angeles  
Los Angeles, California
- Paul Templett**  
Institute of Environmental Studies  
Louisiana State University  
Baton Rouge, Louisiana
- LaDonna Williams**  
People for Children's Health and Environmental Justice  
Daly City, California
- David Woo**  
*Dallas Morning News*  
Dallas, Texas
- John Zippert**  
Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund  
Epes, Alabama

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## PERI

The Political Economy Research Institute (PERI) was founded at the University of Massachusetts–Amherst in 1998. PERI’s mission is to facilitate research, graduate education, and outreach in the area of policy-relevant political economy. The Institute is committed to conducting and disseminating research to inform policymakers and grassroots activists who are trying to improve living standards and create a more just, democratic, and ecologically sustainable world.

## CCA EJ

The Center for Community Action and Environmental Justice (CCA EJ) fosters partnerships with U.S. and global organizations working for environmental and social justice as well as economic development. CCA EJ supports movements for change that recognize (1) the connections between environmental and worker exploitation, and (2) persecution based on race, gender, sexual orientation, and class. Located in Riverside, California, CCA EJ helps organizations find common ground for cooperative actions that enhance individuals’ and communities’ abilities to create fundamental change.