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The State

Expanding Environmental Horizons

April 16, 2000 | Robert Gottlieb | Robert Gottlieb, professor of environmental studies at Occidental College, is the author of "Environmentalism Unbound: Exploring New Pathways for Change," which will be published this winter

Something is happening among environmental and community-based movements. Call it revised perspectives for the new millennium, a sea change in this the 30th-anniversary year of Earth Day or, more specifically, a renewed focus on how to improve the quality of life in urban core areas. Crucial to the change is the marriage of community and environment.

It can be detected among grass-roots environmental-justice groups. It is evident in the issues and perspectives of inner-city, community-based movements that long portrayed environmental issues as a middle-class concerns far removed from the realities of economic and social injustice. It can even be seen among mainstream environmental groups like the Sierra Club. It is a change that could alter political debate in L.A. and other areas around the country.

The marriage of community and environmental concerns first arose among environmental-justice groups. Since the late 1980s, the term "environmental justice" chiefly referred to hazardous facilities found in minority/low-income communities. The groups' main line of attack was an extension of the civil rights argument about disproportionate risks and unfair environmental burdens. Since the problem was defined as one of equity, media coverage and government action focused on the location of hazardous facilities rather than on the broader needs of affected communities. But by the end of the '90s, environmental-justice groups began breaking out of this advocacy box.

The problem of "brownfields"--contaminated land that has lain vacant or underutilized because of liability fears or high cleanup costs--illustrates the shift. To environmental-justice groups, taking on brownfields was attractive because it opened up the possibility of addressing a broad range of community needs.

Previously, groups dealing with old industrial sites in urban corridors divided between those that wanted to pursue community economic development and those concerned with upholding environment standards to eliminate contamination. Environmental-justice groups, however, sought to promote more sustainable, community-oriented development and ensure a community role in the decisions. They challenged development strategies that would bring contaminated inner-city sites up to "industrial standards" to promote the "marketability" of the properties. "Reclaiming brownfields for us," said activist Carl Anthony, "is about the need for communities to become players around land-use issues."

This focus on community has begun to have an impact on mainstream environmental groups. Previously, these organizations were less concerned about communities than protecting natural areas or environmental amenities that could be enjoyed by their middle-class constituents. But the rise of the environmental-justice movement has begun to reconfigure environmental politics. In Los Angeles, for example, the Environmental Defense Fund, one of the most conservative of the mainstream groups, has established a regional office dedicated to environmental-justice issues. The Sierra Club is seeking a bilingual community organizer as part of its new Fair Share for Urban California campaign. Environmental groups interested in park development, tree planting and other "urban greening" strategies have, for the first time, become focused on inner-city community needs. Community gardens, farmers' markets in low-income communities, re-landscaping projects and park and recreational opportunities in densely populated areas have been embraced by both wings of the environmental movement.

Perhaps the most significant change is the fusion in low-income communities of environmental and community issues. Changing perceptions in L.A.'s Latino neighborhoods illustrate the shift. A poll taken by the Latino Issues Forum, for example, indicated that 91% of Latinos thought environmental issues were important. But 61% felt that the environmental decisions were made by whites, and, by extension, Latinos were outside the loop.

The issues of livable communities, who makes the decisions and the expansion of the environmental agenda have reshaped "open space" advocacy. Open space has long been an environmental buzzword, mostly referring to places outside urban areas or at the urban edge where there is no or only limited development. Open-space battles in urban areas have generally focused on preserving habitat, wildlife and biodiversity. They have not been over built environments, in which there is little or no existing green space, density is high and land contamination is often extensive.

That's changing. New leaders in low-income communities are redefining the open-space issue as the need to re-envision community spaces and reclaim, rather than simply preserve, such places. Areas immediately adjacent to the Los Angeles and San Gabriel rivers, many of them former industrial sites or low-income neighborhoods, are such places. Similarly, community activists and local officials in heavily Latino, densely populated neighborhoods along the L.A. River south and east of downtown are exploring opportunities to reclaim riverland for parks, recreation and re-landscaping.

Even more significant, Proposition 12--the Safe Neighborhood Parks, Clean Water, Clean Air and Coastal Protection Bond Act of 2000--showed how far the open-space issue has evolved. The largest chunk of funding in the voter-approved bond measure--\$826 million for urban parks, trails and recreational facilities--identifies urban community needs as its core priority.

If you define the community-environment marriage as an effort to re-envision, reconstruct or reclaim community spaces, a very different kind of environmental agenda emerges, as the evolution of the open-space issue suggests. It's an agenda that includes neighborhood transportation needs, access to and quality of food, health concerns like asthma and schools as re-landscaped, livable places rather than fortress-like, asphalt jungles. It is a marriage in which the greening agenda becomes a justice agenda. Nature belongs in the city as well as outside it. *

