

# The Chinatown Cornfields: Including Environmental Benefits in Environmental Justice Struggles<sup>1</sup>

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This paper explores the way in which an environmental justice effort based on opposition to a proposed development of warehouses and light industry in Los Angeles's Chinatown includes arguments about the unequal distribution of environmental benefits as well as environmental risks. This heightened focus on environmental benefits can be seen as an expansion of the predominant environmental justice discourse, and is closely tied to a community-centered planning process. It also serves to highlight the environmental justice movement's broader social justice concerns.

## Introduction

In July of 2000, a crowd faced the Los Angeles Central Area Planning Commission. The first three rows of chairs were filled with Chinese American senior citizens holding signs that read: "We need parks!" "We need schools!" and "No warehouses!"<sup>2</sup> Behind them were community leaders from an impressive variety of groups. Together, these citizens had formed the Chinatown Cornfields Alliance. They were appealing the city's approval of a limited environmental review and mitigation measures for a proposed light industry and warehouse development on a forty-acre plot of open space just northeast of downtown.

Named the Chinatown Cornfields for its historic agricultural use, the site was a Southern Pacific Rail yard until it was abandoned ten years ago. It lies between Chinatown and the Los Angeles River in a census district that is 81% Asian Pacific Islander (Cornfield of Dreams 2000: 79). The Chinatown area is comprised primarily of small, family-owned businesses and has high levels of unemployment. The neighborhood has few parks, and high school students are bused 45 minutes each way to school. The Alliance contends that the Cornfields site is the last available place to build a park and high school for the underserved community and should be developed with these and other amenities, instead of with environmentally damaging industries and warehouses.

On the other side of the room at the planning commission meeting sat the lawyers and business executives of Majestic Realty, well known as the developers of the downtown Staples Center sports arena. Majestic wanted to purchase the Cornfields site for a proposed one million square-foot warehouse development. Los

Angeles mayor Richard Riordan supported Majestic's plan, and the city's Office of Economic Development had identified the site as part of its Genesis LA project, which aims to "revitalize underutilized and blighted industrial and retail sites in disadvantaged communities" (Genesis LA n.d.). The city and other supporters of the development pointed to the depressed business environment in Chinatown and hailed the project for its potential to bring a thousand jobs to the area.

The city planning department had approved Majestic's development, finding it to be in compliance with the area's light industrial zoning designation. At this meeting, the planning commissioners were to decide if a full environmental impact report (EIR) should be prepared for the warehouse development, or if Majestic's environmental mitigation measures were sufficient for approval without further reviews or citizen involvement.

A look at the arguments presented over this land use struggle informs environmental justice theory and practice in a number of ways. This paper will first briefly review how the predominant environmental justice discourse came to be framed around the unequal distribution of environmental hazards. It will then turn to a discussion of an alternative definition of environmental injustice that has been largely unexplored in the literature: the unequal distribution of environmental benefits.

The bulk of the paper consists of a case study exploring how an alliance of various interest groups framed its resistance to a proposed development adjacent to Chinatown in Los Angeles. The Corn-

fields case challenges the predominant environmental justice discourse to include injustices facing Asian American communities. By expanding concepts of environmental injustice from a focus on the unequal distribution of environmental hazards to concerns about the distribution of environmental benefits, the Cornfields case demonstrates how environmental justice concepts might apply more broadly to disadvantaged neighborhoods. This focus on environmental benefits highlights the environmental justice movement's connection to larger civil rights struggles and creates a fulcrum around which more inclusive planning processes can be leveraged. Identifying environmental benefits to be protected and provided can also serve to broaden the base of opposition in an environmental justice struggle, as other civic groups find their interests aligned with the goals of the local residents.

### **The Unequal Distribution of Environmental Risks**

The fear of serious health risks in many communities has rallied local environmental justice movements around opposition to environmental hazards; thus the movement has largely come to be framed as a concern with the unjust distribution of environmental risks. A frame can be defined as a social movement's articulation of a problem, its source and appropriate remedies. As Robert Entman (in Sandweiss 1998: 33) describes it, "Framing essentially involves selection and salience. To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way

as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described.”

A movement’s discourse can then be defined as the communicating text—written, spoken and acted—through which the frame is conveyed. A brief review of environmental justice history can illustrate how the movement came to be framed.

The beginning of the environmental justice movement is often dated to 1982 when a group of African Americans protested the decision to site a polychlorinated biphenyl (PCB) disposal facility in predominantly African American Warren County, North Carolina. Protesters, joined by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), unsuccessfully attempted to prohibit the siting on the grounds of racial discrimination (Mowrey and Redmond 1993). Others date the birth of the environmental justice movement to 1978, when low and middle income residents in Buffalo, New York organized the Love Canal Homeowners Association out of concern over health problems in their community. The residents discovered they were living on top of an abandoned toxic waste dump. Eventually the federal government bought their homes (Dryzek 1997: 177). These incidents heightened the concern that environmental risks were borne disproportionately by nonwhite and lower-income communities. A number of empirical studies confirmed this concern, and many researchers and activists concluded that environmental hazards were more closely correlated to race than to economic class

(US GAO 1983; Bullard 1987; United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice 1987) although this is contested (Foreman 1998). As Dryzek (1997: 177) points out, the hazards targeted by environmental justice opposition have evolved: “The risks in question related initially to toxic waste dumps, but concern soon broadened to encompass nuclear facilities, waste incinerators, air and water pollution, mining operations as they threatened the health of rural people (especially Native Americans), and pesticide use as it threatened the health of migrant farm workers.”

Reflecting these struggles, definitions of the environmental justice movement have focused more on the unequal distribution of environmental harms than on environmental benefits. Consider Dryzek’s (1997: 177) definition: “The environmental justice movement is concerned with the degree to which the environmental risks generated by industrial society fall most heavily on the poor and ethnic minorities,” or Schlosberg’s (1999: 12) discussion of the meaning of the term environmental justice: “Obviously the justice in environmental justice refers, in one key respect, to the inequity in the distribution of environmental risks.” Both of these authors zero in on environmental risks as being central to defining environmental justice—understandably so, considering the movement’s history. But there is another side to this perspective.

## The Unequal Distribution of Environmental Benefits

According to Bullard (in Sandweiss 1998: 35), “Low-income and minority communities continue to bear greater health and environmental burdens, while the more affluent and whites receive the bulk of the benefits.” But the conception of environmental benefits has yet to be fully explored in the environmental justice literature.

The central challenge of defining environmental benefits relates to how broad a definition of *environment* one employs. A narrow definition would consider the natural environment and focus on distinct media such as air, water and soil. Environmental benefits would then be the absence of environmental harms, for example, clean air, clean water and uncontaminated soil. A broader definition of environment, however, is *surrounding conditions*—a definition that planners often employ, as in “the urban environment.” Environmental benefits can then be defined to include conditions that improve the human experience of a physical environment, from attractive buildings to safe bus stops, for example. The Southern Organizing Committee for Economic and Social Justice proposed a similar definition in 1992, saying that the environment included “the totality of life conditions in our communities – air and water, safe jobs for all at decent wages, housing, education, health care, humane prisons, equity, justice” (cited in Szasz 1994: 151).

This broad definition is similar to the basic tenet of *justice* in every facet of life, and highlights the environmental justice movement’s connections to larger

social justice concerns. Stephen Sandweiss (1998: 32) sees a strong relationship between the discourses of the environmental justice and civil rights movements: “The mobilization of activists and the securing of an official government response to the demands for environmental justice can be attributed, to a considerable degree, to the ability of the movement to tap into the potent collective action frame of the civil rights movement.”

Environmental benefits could then be seen as part of the larger civil rights agenda. David Camacho sees little distinction between the issues addressed by the two movements. He writes of the environmental justice movement, “This socially inclusive, multiracial coalition connects environmental issues with those of racial and gender inequality, lack of health care and social services, inadequate housing, poverty and other economic barriers that have been the focus of the civil rights and social justice movements” (Camacho 1998: 1).

A large body of scholarship addresses equity in the provision of and access to public services. The provision of police services, parks, streets, libraries, fire protection, housing inspections and education have been examined, as well as more recent research on access to transportation, housing and potable water.<sup>3</sup> However, these lines of research have rarely converged with the environmental justice discourse.<sup>4</sup>

While the distinction between public services and environmental benefits remains unclear, the Chinatown Cornfields Alliance case shows how some debates on public services are indeed environmental justice struggles. Parks, and the recreational

opportunities they provide, allow residents to experience the natural environment, and therefore fall more easily into a definition of environmental benefits. Schools can also be viewed as an environmental benefit, as education is often linked to individual and community health. Similarly, historic and cultural preservation serve in the development of community identity.

### **An Environmental Justice Movement**

“Chinatown should not become 32 acres of industrial wasteland.” Collin Lai, president of the Los Angeles chapter of the Chinese American Citizen’s Alliance (Ramos 1999: B1).

Environmental justice protests have traditionally focused on particular sitings of noxious facilities. The primary claim has been that environmental risks are being disproportionately borne by nonwhite and low-income communities. Activists and scholars have argued that this pattern is due in large part to imbalances in power regimes and political representation. The Cornfields Alliance members have engaged in environmental justice discourse by highlighting the warehouse development’s disparate impacts on nonwhite and low-income communities, and the failure to include the Chinatown community and Los Angeles River interest groups in the planning process. The Alliance’s written appeal to the planning commissioners states:

Proceeding with the warehouse proposal without full exploration of the alternatives would result in the continuing environmental degradation of Los Angeles and would work an extreme environmental

injustice on the surrounding communities, which are disproportionately communities of color and low-income communities. We have requested an EIR to analyze the impacts of the project and to provide a public forum for consideration of the alternatives, but the city has failed to comply. (Chinatown Cornfields Alliance 2000: 8)

As opposed to the hierarchical structure of mainstream environmental groups, the environmental justice organizational structure is typified by local, grassroots groups that form loose networks. In addition, there often exists a recognition of difference among groups (Schlosberg 1996, 1999). The Cornfields Alliance follows this structure; it is a loose coalition of groups, each with different interests in the site. Historic preservation organizations, Latino organizations, Chinese American associations, established environmental justice groups, local park and environmental organizations, resident associations, and mainstream environmental groups are all members of the Alliance.<sup>5</sup>

There is one way that the Chinatown Cornfields Alliance does not resemble a typical environmental justice effort: the disputed site is in an Asian American community. Asian Americans are often perceived to be outside the group of minorities suffering from environmental injustice. Robert Bullard once defined environmental racism as “practices that place African Americans, Latinos and Native Americans at greater health and environmental risk than the rest of society” (1993: 319). Other authors in the environmental justice field have implied that Asian Americans do not suffer the institutional racism that other minority groups do (Bath, Tanski and Villarreal 1998: 135).

The Chinatown Cornfields Alliance has made a point of demonstrating the history of institutional discrimination against the city's Chinatown community. Their written statement begins this history with the Chinatown Massacre of 1871, when nineteen Chinese residents were lynched by a mob that included police officers. Discriminatory housing policies in the first half of the century are discussed as well as the demolition of Chinatown in 1933 to build Union Station (the first building razed was a school). The Alliance concludes this section by stating that "the dominant white society remains deeply implicated in environmental degradation that adversely impacts Chinatown" (Chinatown Cornfields Alliance 2000: 27). The mayor's promotion of Majestic's project, and the city planning office's acceptance of no EIR preparation, continues this disregard for Chinatown's neighborhood and its history.

### **Framing the Chinatown Cornfields Debate**

"There is a disparity of acres of parkland by race in Los Angeles. There are alternative locations to create jobs. There are not alternative sites for mixed use, parks and schools." Attorney Robert Garcia, Environmental Defense, July 2000 planning commission meeting.

At the planning commission appeal hearing, speakers from the Cornfields Alliance asserted that the warehouse development would have significant adverse environmental impacts on the Chinatown community. Residents were especially concerned about the potential negative community health impacts from diesel truck emissions. Children at a nearby elementary school and at the adjacent William

Mead Homes, one of the oldest and largest housing projects in the city, were seen as especially vulnerable, not only to air quality threats but to accidents associated with increased truck traffic. Moreover, the development would sandwich the housing project between warehouses and a jail. Concerns were also raised about runoff from the site affecting water quality.

Yet the speakers went beyond this list of objections and discussed what they envisioned should be developed on the site instead. Specifically, they demonstrated the need for a park, school, and cultural and historical preservation. The case was made most strongly for the need to develop part of the Cornfields as a park in order to begin to address the unequal distribution of parkland in Los Angeles. The Cornfields Alliance's written appeal states that the site's city council district has 0.9 acres of parkland per thousand people compared to 1.7 acres in more affluent areas of the city. One UCLA study found that in some Chinatown neighborhoods the number is closer to 0.3 acres and puts the Los Angeles average at 0.9 acres per thousand residents (Cornfield of Dreams 2000: 90). At the planning commission meeting many people said that Chinatown has "one postage stamp size park." Compounding this problem, the William Mead Homes' playground has been closed because of lead and hydrocarbon contamination. In their written statement the Alliance claims, "The warehouse proposal would have an adverse disparate impact by perpetuating the history and pattern of unequal access by people of color and low-income communities to parks and recreation pro-

grams in the Cornfields area...and throughout Los Angeles” (Chinatown Cornfields Alliance 2000: 23).

In addition to the lack of park space in Chinatown, the Cornfields site borders the Los Angeles River, the target of greenway efforts by several environmental groups. These efforts include river ecology restoration and the creation of community parks and bike paths along the riverbank. The Cornfields’ proximity to the river and potential for parkland use may have played a large role in inspiring mainstream environmental groups such as the Sierra Club to join the Alliance—groups which have been criticized for ignoring minority health concerns and issues relevant to low-income people.

The speakers at the planning commission meeting were quick to point out the lack of schools in the neighborhood. The shortage of schools is a chronic problem in Los Angeles, often worst in central city areas such as Chinatown. The Chinatown Cornfields, the Alliance claims, is perhaps the last available site to build a high school in Chinatown.

The Alliance is also concerned with preserving historical and cultural resources at the Cornfields site. Both Mexican American and Chinese American cultural histories are represented at the Cornfields. The site is directly adjacent to Chinatown, and its former use as a railroad yard harkens back to a time when Chinese immigrants worked on the railroads. Chinatown residents are hoping to have a shoreline temple built on the site, which would help create a stronger sense of Chinese American culture in the community. The recent discovery of tile remnants of

an historic irrigation ditch by renegade archeologists (who excavated the site at night) solidified the Cornfield’s importance to Mexican American cultural history. The *zanja madre* (mother ditch) was constructed in 1781 to bring water from the Los Angeles River to the original Mexican pueblo, where the Olvera Street historic area is now located.

At the planning commission meeting, Alexis Moreno of the Latino Urban Forum explained the Cornfield’s importance to Mexican American cultural history and said that an EIR was needed to investigate historic preservation issues. In addition to its cultural significance, members of the Alliance view the *zanja madre* as a community asset that could boost tourism to the proposed park. Majestic’s plan to memorialize “the ditch” with a placard, or a display of the tiles at another location, was characterized as thoughtlessly casting aside an important part of the city’s cultural history.

The Chinatown Cornfields Alliance has in large part based its resistance to the warehouse development on the unequal distribution of parks and schools, and the need to promote historical and cultural values, which can be seen as subjects of environmental benefits. Concern over the unequal distribution of environmental benefits is not a novel concept. There has always been an implicit reference to environmental benefits as well as risks in the movement’s discourse, and certainly communities have often rallied to procure a just provision of public services. The Chinatown Cornfields Alliance, however, can be viewed as a case where community activists are including discussions of environmental benefits as a

central aspect of their claims of environmental injustice. In focusing on the potential for parkland, schools and historical preservation, as well as air and water quality threats, the Alliance broadened the definition of environmental health to include other quality of life concerns. In doing so, mainstream environmental groups, Latino organizations and smaller groups focused on parks have aligned with the Chinatown community in resisting Majestic Realty's proposal. Thus discussions of environmental benefits have helped to broaden the Alliance's base.

### Environmental Benefits and Process

"From our experiences in South Central, we learned the importance of EIRs in allowing for community participation," Juanita Tate, Executive Director of Concerned Citizens of South Central LA, July 2000 planning commission meeting.

One strategy that often unites various communities in environmental justice struggles is the repeated calls for a more inclusive political process. Imbalances in power dynamics are often seen as the main reason that minority and low-income communities have been forced to bear the bulk of environmental hazards. Increased community participation and political clout in the planning process is a primary goal of many involved in environmental justice movements. As activist Chi Mui, director of Friends of Castalar Elementary School and the Chinese and American Elderly Association, asserted at the July meeting, "Zoning can be changed. Planning should be for the community—not just for the developers."

The focus on the need for parks in Chinatown, and the Cornfields site's connection to the Los Angeles River greenway projects, helped increase community participation in the planning process. This participation led to an alternative plan that incorporated the interests of a wider group of people. The Alliance's written statement explains, "The Cornfields can provide land for a multitude of uses, enriching and enhancing the quality of life for the surrounding residents and for all the people of Los Angeles. To make this vision of the Cornfields into a reality, an unprecedented multicultural coalition of community, civil rights, environmental, historic preservation and business interests has joined together in the Alliance to bring badly needed parkland to a City and a neighborhood that is park poor" (Chinatown Cornfields Alliance 2000: 1).

Despite this inspiring vision, the Chinese Chamber of Commerce was motivated to support the city's Genesis LA project and Majestic's warehouse development because it seemed the most likely plan to make the site productive again. But others questioned the extent to which the proposed warehouse development would provide jobs and economic development for the Chinatown community. As the director of the North East Renaissance Corporation said at the July hearing, "How many Chinese truck drivers do you really think are going to be driving out of those warehouses? ... Businesses [advocating for the development] who say they represent the community don't." A 1996 survey conducted by Asian American Economic Development Enterprises Incorporated found that local Chinatown



business owners overwhelmingly saw increased tourism as playing a vital role in the area's redevelopment and desired to see amenities such as parks, schools and a cultural center (Cornfield of Dreams 2000). This suggests that not all community businesses would support the warehouse development.

Friends of the Los Angeles River (FOLAR), a local environmental organization, met with Chinatown residents in January and February of 1998 to gather their ideas for the site. Residents suggested a mixed-use development with a school, a park, a bike path along the river and an area for commercial and industrial use. These ideas were then written into a formal plan by a team of architects, landscape architects and urban planners.

Alliance members' identification of the environmental benefits that could be provided on the Cornfields site inspired a proactive community planning process that contributed to the development of an alternative plan. Everyone was invited to articulate his or her dreams for the site, an exciting and engaging opportunity that increased overall participation in and attention to the process. The FOLAR planning process has served throughout the Cornfields struggle as a model of what the Alliance means when they call for a more inclusive planning process in the Chinatown community. It stands in stark contrast to the existing planning process, in which the city identified the community as disadvantaged, declared the Cornfields to be a Genesis LA site, and then supported Majestic Realty's plan to build warehouses and light industry with financial incentives in an effort to bring jobs to the neighborhood.

The alternative plan also played a key role in the Cornfields Alliance's legal strategy. In formulating the basis of a civil rights violation claim, attorneys had to first point out the disproportionate negative impact the warehouses would have on the Chinatown community, and then to demonstrate that a less discriminatory project alternative (the FOLAR plan) existed. If the purpose of Genesis LA is to revitalize the community, FOLAR's plan, the Alliance contends, would be just as effective. At the planning commission hearing, Dr. Jack Foley, a professor in the Department of Leisure and Recreation Studies at California State University Northridge, asserted that parks often improve the economic vitality of an area and cited examples from other cases around the country where this has occurred. A park on the Cornfields site, he said, could be an economic development strategy.

### **Conclusion**

Despite the Alliance's efforts, the Central Area Planning Commission was unconvinced by the July appeal and voted to uphold the city's approval of Majestic Realty's proposal.

However, in central Los Angeles, where undeveloped land is scarce and locations next to the Los Angeles River embody the greening hopes of the city, arguments about righting the injustice of an unequal distribution of parklands have resonated with a larger community. A news reporter wrote:

For more than a decade, numerous grassroots groups in Los Angeles have been fighting to improve the urban landscape. Their banner has been

environmental justice... In large part, the fights have been defensive maneuvers, aimed at keeping new sources of pollution from being introduced to minority neighborhoods...but a different kind of urban activism is emerging, a more proactive one, that seeks to redevelop forsaken inner-city areas into places where people can picnic, play soccer and enjoy nature. (Mozingo 2000)

Candidates in the 2001 mayoral election declared their support for the community's alternative plan for the Cornfields (Re-Envisioning the LA River 2000), and Los Angeles Times editorials have supported a park as well (2000a, 2000b).

Most significantly, the Chinatown Cornfields Alliance's struggle to stop the warehouse development was ultimately successful. In March 2001, the Trust for Public Land purchased the forty-acre site from Majestic Realty for \$30 million and will turn the site over to the State Parks and Recreation Department when state funds are secured.

The question now is the extent to which an inclusive planning process for further development of the site will occur. A Trust for Public Land (2001) press release indicates that once the land is turned over to the state "a community planning process [will] be initiated to determine future uses for the parkland and to come up with a design for the property." Towards this end, FOLAR has already initiated another planning session with members of the Chinatown Cornfields Alliance. Their tentative design includes a shoreline temple and a magnet school on the site. If a version of this plan is implemented, the Chinatown Cornfields Alliance will have successfully resisted the siting of a large warehouse and light in-

dustrial development in a disadvantaged Chinese American neighborhood and instead developed it for uses that bring environmental benefits to the community.

The study of the Chinatown Cornfields Alliance struggle raises several points for scholars and activists. The focus on an unequal distribution of environmental benefits has ultimately been a successful strategy in this case, likely more successful than if the focus had been only on environmental hazards. It has also inspired a proactive community planning process, which reflects the environmental justice aim of increasing nonwhite and low-income people's control over local planning decisions. By highlighting issues relating to environmental benefits, the Chinatown Cornfields Alliance expanded the environmental justice frame beyond a traditional emphasis on hazards. Doing so demonstrates the ways in which environmental justice struggles often simultaneously address broader social justice concerns.

### Endnotes

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<sup>2</sup>All references and quotes from the July 2000 public hearing are based on the author's notes from that meeting.

<sup>3</sup>Empirical studies have resulted in mixed findings about the equity of public service distribution, complicated by numerous possible definitions of equity.

For a review of the public services literature see Mladenka (1989), on access to transportation see Ong and Blumenberg (1998), on housing see Dear and Wolch (1987).

<sup>4</sup>The provision of affordable and senior housing, and retail development at the site, have also been discussed by the Alliance. I do not focus on these issues at length because they seem to have become secondary concerns of residents.

<sup>5</sup>The Alliance includes the Chinatown-Alpine Hill Neighborhood Association, the Chinese-American Citizen's Alliance, Citizens Committee To Save Elysian Park, Coalition L.A. 1st District Organizing Committee, Concerned Citizens of South Central L.A., The Advancement Project, the Echo Park Community Coordinating Council, the Elysian Heights Residents Association, Environmental Defense, Friends of Castelar School, Friends of the Los Angeles River, Latino Urban Forum, Lincoln Heights Neighborhood Preservation Association, William Mead Homes Residents Association, Mothers of East L.A. Santa Isabel, National Resource Defense Council, Northeast Renaissance Corp., Northeast Trees, People for Parks, Sierra Club, Southern California Council of Environment and Development, and Communities for a Better Environment.

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