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Assumption is wrong — Latinos care deeply about the environment

My View

By Manuel Pastor and Rachel Morello-Frosch

THE latest Public Policy Institute of California poll on the environment confirms the extent to which Latinos and others in the state differ on the importance of environmental protection.

The traditional assumption is that Latinos, especially immigrants, care less about environmental issues, partly because their home countries have weak environmental policies and movements, and partly because their usual status as low-wage workers leads them to value jobs over the environment.

Yet the new poll indicates that Latinos are more likely to identify ocean and air pollution as a "big problem" and far more likely than non-Latinos (52 percent to 39 percent) to identify the threat of urban sprawl to the Sierra as serious.

Similar demographic gaps are found in the identification of soil and groundwater contamination as important issues, as well as concern about how urban growth threatens wildlife habitat.

Are these poll results an anomaly? In fact, a series of previous polls pointed to the same trend. Latino support for the environment actually builds upon a long legacy of struggle — from early fights in the 1960s and 1970s by the United Farm Workers leading to the ban of the pesticide DDT, to current efforts that have compelled policy makers to address the fact that environmental benefits and costs are distributed unequally.

The problem of "environmental injustice" is particularly acute in the Golden State, with toxic waste facilities, pollution emissions and health risks from air pollution disparately affecting minority, particularly Latino, neighborhoods. While some skeptics suggest that Latinos tend to gravitate to toxic areas, a bit like speculators in search of cheap property, studies now indicate that many hazardous facilities were placed in communities that were already predominantly minority.

It's not surprising then that several key environmental struggles have been built on the premise of unequal treatment. In the Southern California community of Huntington Park, for example, a largely Latino group of neighbors organized by Communities for a Better Environment successfully fought for the city to mandate the removal of La Montaña, a pile of dusty concrete rubble stacked in the city in the wake of the 1994 Northridge earthquake and the collapse of Los Angeles area freeways.

The driving force was concern about the health impacts of particulates on nearby residents, but another motivator was the realization that such a hazard would not have been permitted in, say, Beverly Hills.

In the same vein, Latino legislators have pushed the state in recent years to mandate that local demographics be considered in siting and other decisions. While this might be seen as a recipe for simply redistributing pollution, new research on California and the nation shows that where income, power and environmental quality are distributed unequally, pollution levels and associated health risks are worse for everyone.

As it turns out, when someone else's backyard is no longer fair game, more people think about the pollution prevention and source reduction strategies central to a broader environmental agenda.

If we build on both the evident environmental sympathies and the social justice legacy of the Latino community, we have a chance to both revitalize the environmental movement and restore the "California dream" that attracted so many of us to this state. It's a vision that promises economic opportunity for diverse communities and demands protection for our precious land, coast and wildlife.

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