

Message from the Editors

Asian American and Pacific Islander Environmentalism:

Expansions, Connections, and Social Change

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This groundbreaking special issue of *AAPI Nexus* examines Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) communities and the environment. Despite the tremendous growth in Asian American studies and environmental studies, few academic studies (and even fewer journals) examine their intersection. To our knowledge, this issue is the first full volume devoted to this topic. These research articles, practitioner essays, and resource papers represent an exciting snapshot that collectively shows the importance of environmentalism, broadly defined.

There is much more research and community action on Asian American environmentalism than is widely recognized. Asian American environmentalism in praxis tells us important stories of our age: about what counts as environmentalism for AAPI (including immigrant and refugee communities in the United States) within a global context of population migration, and the movement of pollution across international spaces; what communities are doing to address the myriad environmental problems and pollution exposures they face; and how these populations are at the cutting edge of environmental policy, especially in community-based environmental health research and practice.

Our initial call, deliberately capacious in scope, defined the environment broadly to include the nexus between people and natural resources (across different spatial scales, from local and statewide), environmentalism, and environmental justice (e.g., social movements, policy, and organizations). We are pleased that our call received a wide range of submissions. Collectively, they begin to answer the questions of what does contemporary AAPI environmentalism look like and what lessons can we learn from various environmental efforts? Our goal in this introductory essay is to ex-

pansively frame key components of Asian American environmentalism in order to make connections between individual case studies and topics, as well as to argue for the significance of these cases to broader public agendas for environmental and social justice.

This collection of essays represents the best emerging research, policy, and practice focused on AAPI attitudes and opinions about environmentalism, activism on environmental justice concerns, changes in collective action and agency, and studies at the local, statewide, and global scales. Taking broadly multidisciplinary and comparative lenses, our objective here is to share information and insights to enhance the areas of environmental and social justice advocacy, strategic planning, policy development, and programming.

AAPI Nexus is explicitly devoted to crossing boundaries between academic researchers, communities, and policy makers. This special issue was conceptualized by Paul Ong, with long-standing research interests in public and environmental policy. The special expert consulting coeditors are Charles Lee, Deputy Associate Assistant Administrator for Environmental Justice at the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and author of the historic United Church of Christ 1987 report "Toxic Wastes and Race," and Julie Sze, a leading researcher in environmental justice movements, with an interest in Asian American environmental justice organizing. Together they have produced a body of work that encapsulates the vibrancy and diversity of research on Asian American environmentalism, whether that diversity be defined by approach (empirical, qualitative, historical, policy-relevant, normative and proscriptive, and/or collaborative across academia/government/nonprofit domains) or by topic as particularly related to specific subpopulations of Asian Americans, immigrants, or refugees in the United States (e.g., toxicity in the workplace, dry cleaners, historical case studies of racialized zoning of Chinese laundries in California, furniture manufacturing, garment industry, computer chip production, air pollution, urban restructuring and neoliberalism, or hazardous waste siting).

The general trends in research on AAPIs and environmentalism is particularly well developed in the areas of environmental policy analysis, public health and environmental health disparities, sociological research on environmental justice movements, and as related to immigrant inequality and racialization, includ-

ing Vietnamese organizing in post-Hurricane Katrina New Orleans (the work of sociologists David Pellow, Lisa Park, and Bindi Shah are notable here), historical and cultural research on the racial origins of zoning and public health (historian Nayan Shah and urban planner Paul Ong), and in the Western United States (literary scholar Robert Hayashi). Although there is extant research on the topic, Sze has argued elsewhere that it is not well recognized as Asian American, immigrant, and refugee environmentalism.

Thus this volume explicitly conceptualizes research in AAPI environmentalism and, in doing so, offers a collective and comparative approach between seemingly disparate cases. But AAPI environmentalism is important to recognize, not just as an academic exercise. Rather, we are situating the individual case studies and topics in a broader intellectual, historical, and policy framework. In short, through this expansive framework, we argue that what connects each case study and topic is a shared emphasis on power inequalities, whether defined by race and its intersections with class, immigration status, and gender, and which are deeply influenced by power relations that must be understood historically and in spatial contexts.

The topics addressed under the rubric of AAPI environmentalism are particularly important because of the pressing nature of environmental problems in what has been called the Anthropocene, or the era of when human impacts have shaped geologic time. In the very decade in which overall carbon emissions from China have exceeded that of the United States, a sophisticated analysis of global environmental problems, such as climate change, that takes race, space, history, and global power seriously seems *particularly* necessary. The default position would be to fall back upon racialized tropes that see the rise of China and India through the same interpretive lenses that framed Asian “population” growth in apocalyptic terms in the 1950s and 1960s. The larger *political* dimensions of Asian American, Pacific Islander, immigrant, and refugee environmentalism in the United States cannot be separated from global environmental discourses and how they shape international power relations.

Turning now to the articles in this issue, we find two main observations. First, environmental issues matter very much to AAPIs. Paul Ong, Loan Le, and Paula Daniel’s research article, “Ethnic Variation in Environmental Attitudes and Opinion among Asian

American Voters,” finds that Asian Americans are strongly pro-environment overall. Based on a unique survey of one thousand Asian American voters conducted by the California League of Conservation Voters, they also found systematic ethnic differences in the distribution of responses related to self-reported “environmentalist” identity, support for environmental policies, and environmental concerns such as climate change. This research focused on how this concern translates to political and civic engagement in the environmental arena, and adds to the nascent literature on Asian American political action literature and debates on individual and collective action and agency.

From a statewide survey of Asian American voter attitudes and behavior, we then turn to a particular national origin group in the next research article. In “Engaging Vietnamese American Communities in California in Environmental Health and Awareness,” Tina Duyen Tran and colleagues report the results of their unique academic and nonprofit collaborative, which focused on Vietnamese communities in Alameda, Marin, Santa Clara, and Orange counties in California. Their project conducted community mapping audits (e.g., collecting air contaminant data and observational survey information and using photovoice documentation). The collaborative focused clearly on the community-based participatory research process in order to raise awareness about the environment for participating Vietnamese American communities, with an outcome-oriented question of how community environmental engagement can lead to action for social change. Thus the project outlines the steps to a fully engaged community-based research process: from assessment, to trainings in personal exposure monitoring and photovoice. The findings are positive behavioral and attitudinal changes, as well as increased knowledge about environmental problems and solutions in their communities. Overall, the project offers a good model for collaborative, community-based environmental health research in an understudied population.

Our second observation is that, although issues that concern AAPI environmentalism are national in scope, their research, activism, and policy are most strongly articulated in California and Hawaii. California in particular, has been a bellwether state in terms of environmentalism for more than forty years, and both states have the highest populations of AAPIs. Roger Kim and

Martha Matsuoka detail the important work of the Oakland-based Asian Pacific Environmental Network (APEN) as immediate past executive director, and founding board member in their practitioner essay, “Building a Twenty-First-Century Environmental Movement That Wins: Twenty Years of Environmental Justice Organizing by the Asian Pacific Environmental Network.” They describe the organization’s evolution, from important local campaigns, to a statewide electoral strategy, and how they both are crucially linked to one another. APEN established the Laotian Organizing Project as an intergenerational, interethnic community-led organization where Laotian families came together to transform Richmond. APEN later launched a second organizing effort, Power in Asians Organizing, to organize low-income residents in Oakland’s Chinatown. By the mid-to-late 2000s, the organization built upon its successful community organizing and coalition work culminating in the 2010 initiative when APEN launched the Asian Pacific American Climate Coalition to build alliances with AAPI organizations to advance climate solutions in California. APEN was a key player in defeating an antienvironmental ballot initiative. Ultimately, Kim and Matsuoka argue that APEN’s approach—investing in organizing, movement building, and power building in low-income communities and communities of color—is an effective strategy for the broader environmental movement.

Leslie Kahihikolo, in the second practitioner essay, describes the work of the Pacific America Foundation in “Native Hawaiians Getting Back to *Mālama `Āina*.” Kahihikolo discusses the Ka Wai Ola O Wai`anae project in which the Wai`anae Coast community is using federal funding to build capacity to understand and take effective actions that mitigate pollutants in the environment, with the goal of getting back *mālama `āina*—caring for the land. In an effort to get back to *mālama `āina*, Native Hawaiians are incorporating cultural history and identity into addressing environmental problems by taking responsibility to reclaim and restore the *`āina* for future generations. Thus this project builds upon indigenous critiques of environmental justice policy that do not take the worldviews of native populations as their central focal point. This project uses a restorative justice approach to environmental issues, which, Kahihikolo argues, enables indigenous people the opportunity to incorporate cultural values and practices into the repairing of the harm to the people *and* the land.

These research articles and practitioner essays highlight how environmental issues are centrally connected to core AAPI policy concerns in the areas of immigration and community development. For example, the National Coalition of Asian Pacific American Community Development released a resource article on transit-oriented development. Practitioners and researchers need to have better information and networking about existing projects, and we hope that our special issue has provided a lens for researchers, organizers, regulators, and the general public to see just how central environmental issues are to AAPI communities.

In conclusion, a robust research agenda for AAPI environmental scholarship draws upon a rich history of activism, as well as creative and collaborative ongoing projects with a clear future-oriented outlook. This introduction has focused on expanding the knowledge base of what constitutes AAPI environmental policy and research, making crucial connections, and articulating what social and environmental change is necessary in an increasingly precarious world, environmental and otherwise.

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