

Top Ten Reasons Why Immigrants are not to Blame for Environmental Degradation

One: Population growth is not the main cause of environmental degradation.

Anti-immigrant activists claim that because immigrants swell population growth figures here in the US, they are destroying the environment. While immigration accounts for about one-third of current US population growth, no simple correlation exists between the number of people in the country and the degree of environmental degradation. The real culprit is not human *numbers* but environmentally harmful economic *systems* of production and consumption, and unequal distribution of resources. How can one say that immigrants are trashing the country when 99% of all solid waste in this country comes from industrial processes?

Two: Immigrants are not “super-consumers.”

Anti-immigrant activists argue that once immigrants arrive here, they immediately adopt wasteful American lifestyles, i.e. they inherently consume less in their home countries. Such wasteful lifestyles are part-and-parcel of American culture, which predates the emigration of any one person from their home country. For example, the US is home to only 5% of the world’s population, but we consume 20% of world resources. That must change *now*, regardless of the rate of immigration. And it’s important to point out that not all Americans are “super-consumers.” The wealthiest 20% of the population receives and spends more than 60% of the income generated by Americans. Not many immigrants live high on the hog, and moreover they tend to lead more sustainable lifestyles because of their tendencies to recycle and reuse second-hand products, and to rely on public transportation systems.

Three: Immigrants do not “drive” urban sprawl.

“Smart-growth” experts identify the main causes of sprawl as a combination of poor land-use planning, zoning regulations, and tax laws—not population growth or immigrants. In fact, in many parts of our country urban sprawl has increased even while population figures have decreased. The problem of sprawl is historical. In the late 1940s federal mortgage policies encouraged white flight to the suburbs, which was followed and facilitated by the Highway Act of 1956. Half of all immigrants live in high-density metropolitan areas. Immigrant communities are reviving inner cities, not destroying them.

Four: Immigrants do not cause traffic jams.

To connote that immigrants are crowding us out, anti-immigrant propaganda is often paired with images of traffic jams. But America’s love affair with the automobile is hardly the fault of anyone but Americans. Cheaply priced gasoline, lack of public transport, and an entire economic infrastructure built around the private automobile have been clogging the nation’s roads with too many cars for decades. Latinos, the biggest immigrant population in the US, are two times more likely than the average American to carpool, to use public transport, or to bicycle to work.

Five: Immigrants are not destroying America’s idyllic natural landscapes.

Anti-immigrant propaganda targets immigrants for wrecking natural landscapes, but who are the real “wreckers?” The destruction of rural areas is all about the demise of family farms and the expansion of industrialized agriculture, which is supported by generous government subsidies. Industrialized agriculture is an environmental disaster—a fact which immigrant farm workers understand all too well, as they are regularly exposed to harmful herbicides and pesticides. The country’s forests and national parks are not threatened by immigrants, but they are being destroyed by the lumber, mining, and natural gas and oil industries, which were encouraged by the Bush administration to plunder public lands.

Six: It’s not immigrants who stomp the deepest ecological footprint in the borderlands.

Anti-immigrant groups typically blame undocumented immigrants for trampling and trashing the desert as they make their way from Mexico. The real damage, however, is caused by the militarization of immigration enforcement. As the Sierra Club Borderlands campaign points out, the 600 miles of border walls and barriers constructed by Homeland Security are having dire consequences for flora and fauna across the fragile desert lands. The Real ID Act allows Homeland Security to waive federal laws along the border, which has resulted in the constructing of a devastating infrastructure. Meanwhile, the wall has done nothing to curb immigration.

Seven: Immigrants are not a major contributor to greenhouse gas emissions.

In the last sixty years, the rise in carbon emissions here in the US has fast outpaced the country’s population growth. Wasteful, fossil-fuel based industrial, agricultural, energy, and transport systems – coupled with militarism – are the main determinants behind why our country is the second highest emitter

of carbon in the world. The Department of Defense alone uses as much oil every day as the entire country of Sweden. The lifestyles of super-consumers also play significant roles—the richest 30% of Americans emit almost four times as much carbon as the poorest 30%. When immigrants come to the US, they often settle in densely populated urban areas, like New York City and Los Angeles, which surprisingly have some of the lowest per capita emission rates in the nation. In fact, cities with high emission levels tend to have low immigrant populations. Clearly, when it comes to climate change, immigrants are not the problem.

Eight: Immigrants are green innovators, not environmental destroyers.

Across the nation immigrant-led organizations are spurring successful urban farming efforts and sustainable business projects that should serve as a model for everyone's future. Immigrant scientists and engineers are a driving force behind research, development, and innovation in the renewable energy field. Without them, the US would be much further behind in the field green technology development. Both skilled and unskilled immigrant labor is and will continue to be vital in the building of a green economy that can simultaneously improve the environment, reduce carbon emissions, and put our country on a track towards fuller employment.

Nine: Immigrants are a positive force for political change.

The support of immigrant voters is an essential facet of any political strategy designed to prompt effective state and national action on climate change issues. A recent survey of Latino voters in Florida, Nevada, and Colorado found that said voters are much more likely than many Americans to vote for senatorial candidates who favor climate legislation. They also reject the false dichotomy between jobs and environmental protection, understanding that a green economy can generate more jobs. Suffering disproportionate exposure to pollutants in the workplace and in their communities, many immigrants are also leaders in struggles for environmental justice and stricter environmental regulation.

Ten: Immigrants are us.

Targeting immigrants as environment-destroyers is a divide-and-rule strategy that wedges false categories and divisions between us. The othering of successive waves of immigrants, like the othering of Native Americans and African Americans, has a long and brutal history in our country. Such strategies are often used to undermine the unity of labor struggles. A cultural worldview that includes an increasingly holistic ecological consciousness requires that we challenge the artificial boundaries that these bigots construct between humans and nature, and between ourselves. At this critical moment we need to acknowledge our common humanity if we are to build a broad, diverse, equitable, and efficacious environmental movement.