

Back from the Brink: Ten Reasons to Challenge the Greening of Hate

Betsy Hartmann

Editors' note: This issue of *DifferenTakes* challenges the dangerous reasoning used in the greening of hate, the scapegoating of immigrants for environmental degradation. It urges environmentalists to pull back from the brink of racism and nativism. Spearheaded by right-wing, white supremacist groups affiliated with the John Tanton network, the greening of hate is a political strategy to attract liberal environmentalists to the conservative fold by using the language of overpopulation. On the latest front, the University of Georgia Press recently published an anthology with contributions from key anti-immigrant advocates, *Life on the Brink: Environmentalists Confront Overpopulation*. It includes a few chapters by well-known environmentalists to lend it legitimacy. One of its editors is Philip Cafaro, president of Progressives for Immigration Reform, a notoriously unprogressive anti-immigrant group.

— Betsy Hartmann and Anne Hendrixson, co-editors

The main claim of those who promote the greening of hate—blaming environmental degradation on immigrants—is that immigration, by increasing U.S. population growth, drives ecological destruction by causing traffic congestion, urban sprawl, water shortages, forest loss, and greenhouse gas emissions. Typically, anti-immigrant

groups move seamlessly from portraying immigrants as an environmental burden to painting them as an economic burden on taxpayers, schools, hospitals and other public services.

This disinformation campaign not only reinforces racism and nativism, it obscures the real causes of environmental problems. We need to dispel these myths in order to build a just and sustainable future. Here are ten reasons to challenge the greening of hate.

1. Immigrants are us.

Targeting immigrants as environmental 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 holistic ecological consciousness requires that we challenge the artificial boundaries constructed between humans and nature, and between humans ourselves. At this critical moment we need to acknowledge our common humanity



A publication of the

Population and Development Program

CLPP • Hampshire College • Amherst, MA 01002

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Opinions expressed in this publication are those of the individual authors unless otherwise specified.

if we are to build a broad, diverse, equitable and effective environmental movement.

2. Population growth is not the main cause of environmental degradation.

There is no simple correlation between the number of people in the country and the degree of environmental degradation. Environmental degradation can occur in situations of low population growth as well as high population growth. The real culprit is not human *numbers* but environmentally harmful economic *systems* of production and consumption, as well as unequal distribution of power and resources. The fact that corporate lobbyists have so much political clout in the U.S. explains why many dirty industries are allowed to get away with polluting our land, air and water. Madison Avenue meanwhile drives our culture of overconsumption and waste. Instead of blaming population growth, we need to demand stricter environmental regulations that hold polluters accountable and support investments in greener and cleaner energy and technology.

3. Immigrants are not ‘super-consumers’.

Anti-immigrant activists argue that once immigrants arrive here, they adopt wasteful American lifestyles and so they should stay back in their home countries where they consume less. But isn't the real problem those wasteful lifestyles and the consumer capitalism that encourages them? With only 5% of the world's population, the U.S. consumes 20% of its resources. That must change *now*, regardless of the rate of immigration. However, reducing overconsumption is not just a matter of changing the practices of the individual consumer, but of powerful institutions like the military. The Pentagon is the single largest user of petroleum in the world and produces more toxic waste than the five largest U.S. chemical companies combined.

It's also 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 country's income. Not many immigrants live high on the hog, and moreover, many lead sustainable lifestyles because of their tendencies to recycle and reuse second-hand products, and to rely on public transportation systems.

4. 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 while population has decreased. Pittsburgh and Cleveland are two examples. The problem of sprawl has a long history. In the late 1940's 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. Immigrants have revived many inner city communities.

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5. Immigrants do not cause traffic jams.

To show that immigrants are crowding us out, anti-immigrant propaganda often uses pictures of traffic jams. But America's love affair with the automobile is hardly immigrants' fault. Cheaply priced gasoline, lack of public transport, and an entire economic infrastructure built around the private automobile have been clogging the nation's roads for decades. Latinos, the biggest immigrant population in the U.S., are two times more likely than the average American to carpool, use public transport or bicycle to work.

6. Immigrants are not a major contributor to greenhouse gas emissions.

In the last 60 years, the rise of carbon emissions in the U.S. 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 lifestyles of the rich also play a significant role—the richest 30% of Americans emit almost four times as much carbon as the poorest 30%. When immigrants come to the U.S., they often settle in densely populated urban areas like New York City and Los Angeles, which is why they have some of the lowest per capita emission rates in the nation. In fact, cities with high emissions tend to have low immigrant populations. Examples include Knoxville, Tennessee, Toledo, Ohio,

Cities with high carbon emissions have low immigrant populations

Carbon per person and immigrant population, by city

Highest emitters (city)	Carbon per person	Immigrant population (%)*
Knoxville, TN	3.13	<u>3</u>
Harrisburg, PA	3.19	<u>5.8</u>
Oklahoma City, OK	3.20	<u>8.5</u>
St. Louis, MO	3.22	<u>5.6</u>
Nashville, TN	3.22	<u>7.1</u>
Louisville, KY	3.23	<u>3.8</u>
Toledo, OH	3.24	<u>3</u>
Cincinnati, OH	3.28	<u>3.8</u>
Indianapolis, IN	3.36	<u>4.6</u>
Lexington-Fayette, KY	3.46	<u>5.9</u>

*2000 U.S. Census

Source: Jorge Madrid, *From a "Green Farce" to a Green Future: Refuting False Claims about Immigrants and the Environment*, Center for American Progress, October 2010, <http://www.outdoorfoundation.org/pdf/GreenFarceToGreenFuture.pdf>.

and St. Louis, Missouri. Clearly, when it comes to climate change, immigrants are not the problem.

7. It's not immigrants who stomp the deepest ecological footprint in the borderlands.

Anti-immigrant groups typically blame undocumented Mexican and Central American immigrants for trampling and trashing the desert as they make their way from Mexico. The real damage 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 so that harmful infrastructure can be built without regard for environmental protection or human health. Meanwhile, the wall has done little to curb immigration.

8. Immigrants are not destroying America's idyllic natural landscapes.

Anti-immigrant propaganda targets immigrants for wrecking natural landscapes, from our "amber waves of grain" to forests and wilderness. 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 that 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 by the lumber, mining, natural gas and oil industries, which have been allowed to plunder public lands.

9. Immigrants contribute to green innovation.

Across the nation immigrant-led organizations, like Nuestras Raíces in Holyoke, MA and Growing Power, Inc. in Milwaukee, WI, are spurring successful urban farming efforts and sustainable business projects that 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 U.S. would be much further behind in the field of 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 the country on a track toward fuller employment.

10. Immigrants are often a positive force for political change.

The support of immigrant voters is an essential part of any political strategy to prompt effective state and national action on climate change and other environmental issues. A 2010 study by the National Latino Coalition on Climate Change found that very large majorities of Latino voters in Florida, Nevada and Colorado were much more likely to vote for senatorial candidates that favor climate legislation than other Americans. These voters 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 leaders in struggles for environmental justice and stricter environmental regulation.

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