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## Asian American Pacific Islander Environmental Leadership for 2040

Charles Lee

### Abstract

Climate change is an unprecedented issue that shapes the era in which we now live. Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPIs) have a stake in environmental justice because AAPIs are disproportionately impacted by climate change. This essay examines how the climate crisis affects AAPIs, and provides examples of the leadership AAPIs have demonstrated to address climate and social equity concerns. These leadership lessons are relevant to the leadership role that AAPIs can play now and in the future, for 2040 and beyond.

### Introduction

The year 2040 represents an important moment of passage for Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPIs). That year is when AAPIs will become one-tenth of the population in the United States. It is challenging to look ahead twenty-five years in any area and say something precise. But it is particularly challenging for an area such as AAPIs and the environment, for which there has been generally very little systematic attention. However, one can say for sure that the issues at the intersection of the natural, built, and social environments will have profound impacts during the next quarter century for AAPIs. These issues range from environmental and occupational health, community development and gentrification, to climate change. AAPIs should pay attention to them because they will be an integral part of our lives in increasingly pervasive ways.

I have the distinct honor of being asked to offer my reflections about AAPI environmental leadership challenges and opportunities for 2040 because of my role in helping to give birth to the environmental justice movement in the United States. I will do so through the lens of climate justice, which focuses on the reality that communities of color, the poor,

and indigenous peoples bear the greatest burden of the climate crisis. Climate justice addresses the ways in which climate, environmental degradation, and racial, social, and economic inequities are intertwined.

In this essay, I will examine how the climate crisis affects AAPIs, particularly the little known plight of Pacific Islanders. I will then highlight two remarkable examples of how AAPIs have played a leadership role in regard to climate issues. Both case studies speak to unprecedented issues that will more and more shape the era in which we now live. The first is the response of the Vietnamese community to the devastation of Hurricane Katrina in the New Orleans East section of New Orleans. The second is AAPI leadership in conceptualization, passage, and implementation of California's landmark Senate Bill 535 (SB 535), which designated that at least 25 percent of the proceeds from the state's Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund must benefit disadvantaged communities. Throughout, I will draw some lessons for environmental leadership over the next twenty-five years.

### AAPI Environmentalism and the Climate Crisis

In our introductory essay for the groundbreaking UCLA *AAPI Nexus Journal* special issue on AAPI environmentalism, Julie Sze, Paul Ong, and I defined *environmentalism* broadly to include the nexus between people and natural resources, environmentalism, and environmental justice. We said that "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 health research and policy" (Sze, Ong, and Lee, 2013, p. 83).

Pope Francis's 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si* was a worldwide wake-up call to help humanity understand the destruction that man is rendering to the environment and his fellow man (Pope Francis, 2015). While addressing the environment directly, the document's scope is broader in many ways as it looks at not only man's effect on the environment, but also the many philosophical, theological, and cultural factors that threaten the relationships of man to nature and man to each other in various circumstances (Cotter, 2015). It is a message for people of all faiths, all backgrounds, and all times.

Pope Francis called climate change one of the “principal challenges facing humanity in our day.” He warned that it is a “global problem with grave implications: environmental, social, economic, political and for the distribution of goods and “if present trends continue, this century may well witness extraordinary climate change and an unprecedented destruction of ecosystems, with serious consequences for all of us” (Pope Francis, 2015, p. 20). However, the *Washington Post* noted that the most radical part of Pope Francis’s message wasn’t about climate change. *Laudato Si’s* “far-reaching impact could be owed to another aspect of the document, which ties together all of the environmental concerns it will address: its focus on environmental justice” (Harvey, 2015). Climate change’s worst impact “will probably be felt by developing countries in coming decades. Many of the poor live in areas particularly affected by phenomena related to warming, and their means of subsistence are largely dependent on natural reserves and ecosystemic services such as agriculture, fishing and forestry” (Hale, 2015).

### Climate Change Threats to the Pacific Islands

While these words apply to all people, they describe perils of particular gravity for Pacific Islanders and other indigenous populations. According to the Pacific Islands Regional Climate Assessment (2015), a collaborative effort aimed at assessing the climate change indicators, impacts, and adaptive capacity of the Hawaiian archipelago and the U.S.-Affiliated Pacific Islands, evidence suggests many ways in which climate change poses a threat to human and natural communities in the Pacific Islands region. Multiple impacts are forecast, including decreased fresh-water supplies; increased coastal flooding and erosion; increased ocean acidification and changing ocean chemistry; decline of open-ocean fisheries; and increased risk of extinctions. Threats to the traditional lifestyles of indigenous communities may include destruction of coastal artifacts and structures, reduced availability of traditional food sources and subsistence fisheries, and the loss of the land base that supports Pacific Island cultures. These losses will make it difficult for Pacific Island communities to sustain their connection to a defined place and their unique set of customs, beliefs, and languages.

Ultimately, migration may be the only option for many Pacific Islanders. Mounting threats to food and water security; infrastructure; and public health and safety will lead to human migration from low islands to high islands and continental sites (Pacific Islands Regional Climate Assessment, 2015). This is not just a phenomenon of the future. Worldwide,

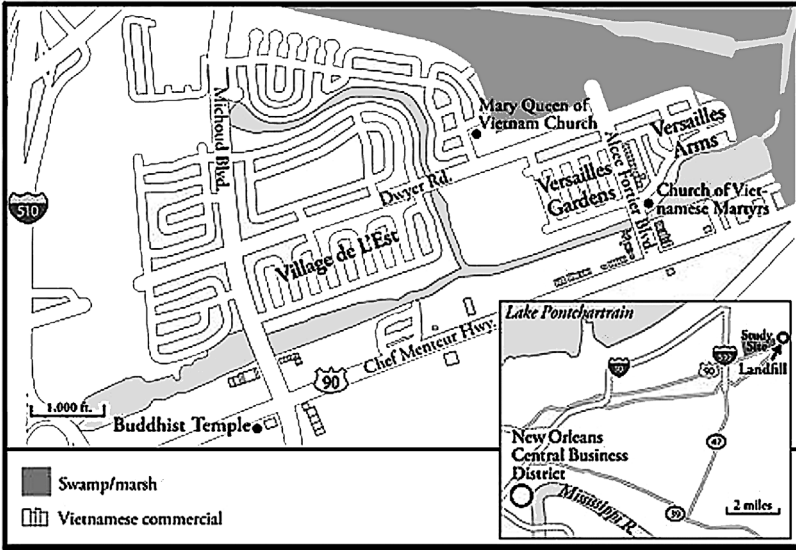
an International Displacement Monitoring Center report (2014) estimated twenty-two million people were displaced by natural disasters in 2013, and it pointed out that Pacific Island countries are disproportionately affected by disasters and the displacement they cause. These facts underscore why climate change impacts in the Pacific Islands must be addressed in the present, as well as in the future. Our global carbon footprint, one that Pacific Islanders have done little to cause, are already at dangerous levels. Its effects are being felt already and will only be worse in 2040 unless we seize the moment to control greenhouse gas emissions now.

### Vietnamese Community Response to Hurricane Katrina

In the wake of the devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina in 2005, the Village de l'Est Vietnamese community provided the nation with a remarkable story of return, rebuilding, and rebirth (see Figure 1). It continues to inspire people of all backgrounds and provides lessons on the important role of community social capital and resilience. Hurricane Katrina etched into the American consciousness not just the horrific images of destruction resulting from climate change, but it also reminded us about how persistent racial segregation and social exclusion have made certain communities more vulnerable to climate change impacts. This historical context has made the story of Mary Queen of Vietnam Church in Village de l'Est all the more noteworthy. One of the first communities to recover and rebuild, Village de l'Est, as New Orleans City Council Member Cynthia Williard Lewis said, can serve as "a model for other communities" (Leong et al., 2007).

Father Vien Nguyen, pastor of the Mary Queen of Vietnam Church, spearheaded the efforts of Village de l'Est community residents to return to their homes and rebuild their lives. Because of the tight-knit nature of this immigrant community, he had information on the locations where his parishioners had dispersed. Armed with this information, he traveled throughout the country to find his parishioners and facilitate their return. "My people were in California, Georgia, Florida, Washington, Minnesota, Michigan, [Texas,] and the Carolinas. They even went so far as New Hampshire and Connecticut." The pastor asked available council and hamlet representatives to meet in Houston to plan for the return to the parish as soon as permission was granted for people to reenter New Orleans. According to Nguyen, on October 5, 2005, the first day people could return to the city to begin the cleanup, more than three hundred parish members did so (Leong et al., 2007).

Figure 1. Map of Village de l'Est, Home to the Vietnamese American Community in New Orleans East



Source: Leong et al., 2007

One of the first things Nguyen did was to organize his parishioners to advocate for the resumption of basic services and to ensure the community's voice in the rebuilding process. In November 2005, Nguyen organized residents, mostly home owners returning to New Orleans East, in a petition drive to demand electricity and water. He submitted more than five hundred signatures, negotiated with the utility companies, and succeeded in restoring power and water to the community. In 2006, Nguyen led efforts to close the Chef Menteur landfill. Located only 1.2 miles away from Village de l'Est, the landfill would have housed 6.5 million cubic yards of potentially hazardous waste in an unprotected dump site. Through partnerships with the National Coalition for Asian Pacific American Community Development (National CAPACD), Asian Law Caucus, Louisiana Environmental Action Network, the Sierra Club, and local environmental attorney Joel Waltzer, Nguyen organized residents of Village de l'Est to educate policy makers at the local, state, and national levels. These partnerships resulted in the formation of the Coalition for a Strong New Orleans, a multiracial coalition comprised of neighborhoods throughout the city.

The landfill campaign was organized through a multigenerational effort. Typically, it is common for Vietnamese elders to lead. However, the landfill campaign provided a unique opportunity for the Vietnamese youth to lead through use of social networking. In May 2006, the Vietnamese American Young Leaders Association (VAYLA), a youth organization, emerged out of this multigenerational response to the landfill expansion. On July 14, 2006, Mayor Ray Nagin signed an order to shut down the landfill.

Working with the National Association of Vietnamese American Service Agencies, Nguyen helped to establish the Mary Queen of Vietnam Community Development Corporation (MQVN). MQVN initially played a lead role in providing emergency relief assistance and organizing Vietnamese residents to take an active role in rebuilding the Village de l'Est area. With technical assistance from National CAPACD and other organizations, MQVN worked to ensure long-term housing and home ownership. It implemented the Village de l'Est community recovery plan to develop an eighty-four-unit senior housing complex, a community health center, a business revitalization zone, an urban farm, and a charter school. Today, MQVN aims to foster quality community development, resilience, and celebration of cultures. It works with a range of partners on a wide array of issues including health care, environmental and agricultural concerns, education, housing, social services, economic development, and culture and the arts. The community development corporation's major accomplishments include emergency relief assistance to more than three thousand Vietnamese American residents, the development of a trailer site encompassing 199 homes, and culturally competent case management services to more than 1,200 community members. MQVN has recently completed its \$1.8 million New Orleans East Community Health Center, which received its Federally Qualified Health Center designation this year. They also completed their three-acre farm site for the VEGGI Farmer's Cooperative, a farmer-run cooperative that grows local produce utilizing natural and organic practices to promote healthy eating, access to healthy foods, and family economic security.

The story of Village de l'Est has been chronicled extensively by journalists and researchers, including the award-winning PBS film *A Village Called Versailles* (PBS, 2009) and health studies that found rates of posttraumatic stress disorder may be lower within that community. Two points stand out as noteworthy lessons. The first is the importance of community social capital in developing the community resilience to

prepare for, cope with, and recover from disasters. The Village de l'Est community enjoyed tight-knit leadership structures, social networks and organization, and cultural ties that contributed to its resilience and adaptive capacity. The community possessed social and cultural capital based on its members' lived experience, including a historical memory rooted in its refugee experience of the 1970s. The existence of a strong faith community added further social support and a strong leadership structure. The importance of social capital and community resilience in disaster response is highlighted by Eric Kleinberg in his study of the 1995 Chicago heat wave, which resulted in nearly five hundred deaths. He found fear of crime, lack of access to healthful facilities, and social isolation in many poor communities in the Chicago Southside where high death rates prevailed. In contrast, communities of similar demographics, such as Little Village in Chicago's West Side, a predominantly Latino community with strong social and family networks, suffered very few deaths (Kleinberg, 2002). Simply put, people in Village de l'Est and Little Village knew and looked out for each other during times of crisis.

The second lesson, related to the first, pertains to how the community's vision for its future built on the same neighborhood assets enabled it to recover so effectively. Gardening and fishing are two important parts of the local culture, health, and economy. MQVN explored aquaponics<sup>1</sup> as a sustainable agriculture and aquaculture alternative that can provide community members the opportunity to combine gardening with household fish farming. Aquaponics technology offered an opportunity for the community to transition toward safer, more environmentally and economically sustainable seafood production, and may be a viable alternative to fishing wild stocks. Aquaponics technology offered a vision for a long-term, profitable, sustainable, and green-job-creating industry with significant environmental benefits (Mary Queen of Vietnam Community Development Corporation, 2015).

Today, MQVN has successfully implemented a pilot aquaponics project in which community growers were trained in the science of aquaponics to develop functional backyard systems. However, the aquaponics startup costs are too high for the low-income population of Village de l'Est. Instead, the growers decided to focus their efforts on a land-based vegetable production for some of New Orleans's finest chefs. The growers supply their vegetables to more than twenty of New Orleans's finest restaurants and two local markets in the New Orleans metropolitan area.



## California's Landmark Senate Bill 535

A landmark event in the history of climate justice took place in September 2012 when Governor Jerry Brown signed California's SB 535 into law. SB 535, sponsored by Senator Kevin De Leon, mandated that at least 25 percent of the state's Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund investments must go to projects that benefit disadvantaged communities, with a minimum of 10 percent of the fund proceeds going to projects located within those communities. During the first year of the fund's operation, SB 535's mandate resulted in \$272 million for such projects.

Before I highlight the role of AAPI leadership in the conceptualization, passage, and implementation of SB 535, I must emphasize in the strongest terms that this historic development was the result of community-driven multicultural leadership. In a comprehensive analysis of the history of SB 535 in the *Harvard Civil Rights-Civil Liberties Law Review*, Vien Truong highlighted the role of Shankar Prasad (Truong, 2014). Prasad has often been referred to as the "Father of SB 535." A medical doctor born in India, Prasad has worked throughout his career to utilize science in order to influence public policies in ways that benefit communities most impacted by pollution in the state. As Deputy Secretary for Science and Environmental Justice at the California Environmental Protection Agency (CalEPA), Prasad led the agency in improving the role of science in its decision-making processes, particularly for the most vulnerable communities. He is well known for his strategic thinking and recommendations that have long-term implications in the context of science, policy, and resources. For example, his work resulted in the adoption of environmental justice policies by the California Air Resources Board, initiation of an air pollution toxics research program by the South Coast Air Quality Management District, and the development of "cumulative impacts" as a viable policy construct for addressing vulnerable areas affected by multiple pollution sources and social factors (Breathe California Golden Gate Public Health Partnership, 2011).

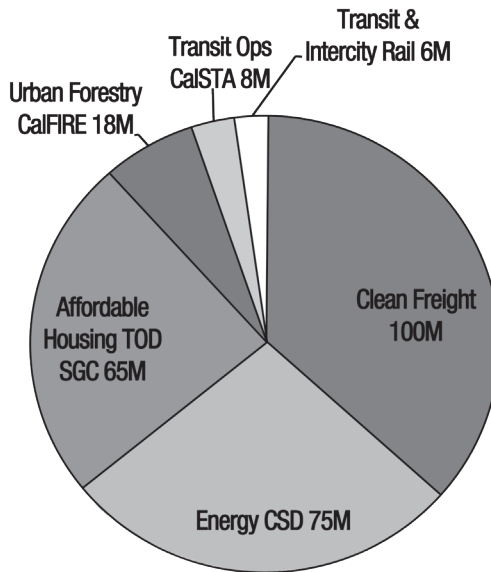
Prasad recognized the need for follow-up legislation to realize the promises of Assembly Bill (AB) 32, or the Global Warming Solutions Act, to disadvantaged and environmentally overburdened communities when he worked at CalEPA. He articulated many times that in order to make progress and achieve environmental justice, long-term commitment of a sizeable amount of resources is necessary. Prasad also recognized that carving out from existing resources in the annual budget process was an uphill battle. However, the new large-scale revenue source

that would be generated by the cap-and-trade mechanism within AB 32 would be a good source to allocate for the low-income communities that have higher pollution burdens and are more vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. He left CalEPA and joined the Coalition for Clean Air as an Executive Fellow, where he led the efforts for four years to pass a law requiring the intentions of AB 32 to be realized.

Under the banner of the Coalition for Clean Air, Prasad proceeded to organize an alliance to cosponsor the legislation. The initial cosponsoring organizations representing communities throughout California included the Center on Race, Poverty and the Environment, which was subsequently substituted by the California Environmental Justice Alliance; the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights; the Greenlining Institute; the California National Association for the Advancement of Colored People; and the Natural Resources Defense Council. This alliance represented communities of color, environmental justice organizations, civil rights organizations, small and minority-owned businesses, and mainstream environmental organizations.

The SB 535 coalition continues to organize to ensure that SB 535 funds will truly benefit disadvantaged communities affected most by pollution. The Asian Pacific Environmental Network (APEN) leads efforts to organize communities to ensure transformative climate investments that integrate frontline communities into solutions. In “Building a Twenty-First-Century Environmental Movement That Wins,” Roger Kim and Martha Matsuoka described how APEN-identified AAPI communities are a critical piece for winning needed progressive policy change in California and how they can be a strong force on climate and clean energy issues. They also point to “a growing landscape of climate activism where community-based groups, organizing in low-income communities and communities of color,” had strung together a series of victories that resulted in significant decreases in greenhouse gases and demonstrated a path to a sustainable future.” APEN’s strategy promotes a “just transition” for highly polluted low-income communities whereby resources are leveraged for carbon pollution reduction projects like local clean energy, clean freight, affordable housing at transit hubs, transit operations, and urban forestry projects (Kim and Matsuoka, 2013, p. 153). The immediate benefits and future promise of APEN’s strategy describing funding allocation from SB 535’s first year of implementation is illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund for SB 535 Fiscal Year 2014–15: \$272 Million



Source: Taruc, 2015

In my blog written for the Environmental Protection Agency’s (EPA’s) “EJ in Action” series on the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of President William Clinton’s signing of the environmental justice executive order in 1994, I called SB 535 a harbinger of the future (Lee, 2014). It has implications for climate policy, state innovation, sustainable development, community revitalization, equitable development, and environmental justice. It is an example of how states can foster cobenefits of greenhouse gas reduction for environmentally and economically distressed communities. This experience may be particularly instructive as states look to implement the historic Clean Power Plan regulations recently promulgated by the EPA. SB 535 uses CalEnviroScreen—a science-based cumulative impacts screening and mapping tool that takes into consideration pollution, environmental, health, and socioeconomic factors—to identify disadvantaged communities. For the first time ever, environmental factors have been a significant part of determining what constitutes a “disadvantaged” community. And, perhaps most important, SB 535 provides lessons on the significance of an empowered community voice for transformative environmental decision making.

## The Fight for the Future Is Now

Multicultural leadership and multigenerational leadership are hallmarks of successful organizing efforts and were important features of both the Village de l'Est and SB 535 stories, as well as future efforts to meet the pressing issues caused by climate change in the Pacific Islands and other impending environmental challenges. The Village de l'Est story speaks to how AAPIs exerted leadership within and on behalf of their own communities in order to address local issues and leveraged this social capital to achieve common goals for many population groups throughout the city and the nation. It highlights the importance of understanding and building on the cultural assets of communities, particularly immigrant communities and the adaptive capacities derived from unique historical experience. The SB 535 story speaks to the leadership role of AAPIs in a multicultural coalition that functions at many scales, from individual community-level organizing to statewide advocacy, and involving diverse demographic communities, interest groups, and institutions of power. Many AAPIs now hold positions of influence in organizations that affect the environment and can do much to promote the voice of AAPIs on these issues. To name a few, they include David Fukuzawa, Managing Director of Kresge Foundation's Health Programs; Don Chen, Director of Ford Foundation's Metropolitan Opportunity; Vien Truong, National Director of Green for All; Rhea Suh, President of Natural Resources Defense Council; Mathy Stanislaus, Assistant Administrator of the EPA Office of Solid Wastes and Emergency Response; and Grant Nakayama, a leading private-sector environmental attorney and former assistant administrator of the EPA Office of Enforcement and Compliance Assurance.

Youth are a bridge to the future. Both the Village de l'Est and SB 535 stories involve youth in significant ways. VAYLA continues to thrive today as a progressive multiracial community-based organization in New Orleans that empowers youth and families through supportive services and organizing for cultural enrichment and positive social change. As described earlier in this article, young community leaders founded VAYLA in 2006 as a means to reach out to the larger community to create a voice and organize to address the needs in the local community. VAYLA is composed of young leaders, high school and college students that want to engage and empower others educationally, mentally, physically, and spiritually. Today it is committed to youth development, community empowerment, higher education, and cultural awareness (Viet-

namese American Young Leaders Association, 2015). Similarly, APEN is nurturing partnerships with AAPI youth organizations like Asian Pacific Islander Youth Promoting Advocacy and East Bay Asian Youth Center to train and empower youth leaders to register voters and build cultures of civic engagement in their communities. APEN combines electoral advocacy with local organizing in the Richmond and Oakland communities of California (Asian Pacific Environmental Network, 2015).

In closing, the most inspiring thing about the leadership illustrated by the two case studies provided in this article is how they are incredibly forward looking. In addressing the crisis and challenges of today, they have carved a pathway to the future. Nowhere are these leadership lessons more important than efforts to address climate change issues in the Pacific Islands. They are fitting examples of why President Clinton said in a *Time* magazine cover article that he was optimistic about the future. Among other things, he cited his participation in a global-sustainability conference in Manaus, Brazil, at the edge of the rain forest. Represented were utilities and oil companies, native Brazilian tribes, small businesses, and environmental groups, as well as the Green Party candidate for president. The delegates sat around small tables, speaking to one another with great respect, believing that if they worked together, they could find an answer. They all understood that if this were a simple issue, someone would have already solved the problem. President Clinton's conclusion, the fight for the future is now, should resonate with all who care about the prospects for addressing the challenges of the environment for 2040, all of which will impact AAPIs in more and more profound ways (Clinton, 2012).

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### Notes

1. *Aquaponics* refers to a system that combines conventional aquaculture (raising aquatic animals such as snails, fish, crayfish, or prawns in tanks) with hydroponics (cultivating plants in water) in a symbiotic environment.

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