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Urban Greening or Urban Loss? Community Standpoints and the Contradictions of Green
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The city in which I grew up and have lived for most of my life is considered one of the most disadvantaged communities within the greater Los Angeles region. Designated as such by the California Environmental Protection Agency, Pacoima meets the agency's criteria for geographic, socioeconomic, and environmental vulnerability. This designation has prompted the city to direct some efforts toward improving neighborhood infrastructure and beautification. One recent project, funded through the Green Together Collaborative, aims to invest \$22.5 million into Pacoima and Sun Valley through infrastructure improvements such as urban greening and clean mobility initiatives (Green Together Collaborative n.d.). Part of this project finally allocated funds to pave sidewalks that had experienced decades of neglect. While the new sidewalks improved the conditions of my daily dog walks, the construction process also removed a very mature tree whose canopy once stretched roughly thirty feet in diameter and shaded a large portion of the street. Today the tree and evidence of construction are gone, and there is no visible plan to replace the lost canopy. In this case, an "urban greening" project has ironically altered the land use pattern in a way that reduces ecological benefits: the neighborhood now contains more impervious surface and less tree cover than before. As a result, the area may become more vulnerable to urban heat island effects and increased stormwater runoff during heavy rains. Urban greening initiatives are meant to address environmental inequities, yet their implementation may produce unintended ecological losses. Urban greening projects often attempt to engineer environmental solutions without engaging the knowledge and experiences of the communities most affected by environmental inequality; Incorporating Standpoint perspectives and Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) could produce more equitable and ecologically effective approaches to urban environmental planning.

Standpoint theory emerged from feminist research movement that critiqued how dominant social perspectives shape every stage of the research process, often presenting partial viewpoints as objective knowledge. Early scholars argued that hegemonic assumptions embedded in scientific and policy frameworks can disregard the experiences of marginalized communities, making supposedly neutral solutions incomplete or biased. A standpoint framework proposes a more robust approach to knowledge production by intentionally accounting for the lived experiences of those who exist outside dominant conceptual frameworks. Philosopher Sandra Harding described this approach as “strong objectivity,” arguing that incorporating perspectives from marginalized communities can reveal structural inequalities and produce more meaningful solutions to social and environmental problems. By centering these lived experiences, standpoint theory exposes biases embedded in conventional practices and opens space for approaches that are more considerate of the communities and environments most affected by policy decisions.

As a member of my community who has long desired a cleaner and healthier neighborhood, recent infrastructure improvements initially appeared to represent meaningful progress. However, what was presented as a project aimed at environmental improvement ultimately reduced tree cover and increased impervious surface area. The loss of canopy in an area like Pacoima is not simply a loss of natural beauty; it represents the loss of critical protection from extreme heat. Pacoima experiences higher-than-average temperatures and is heavily exposed to pollution due to its proximity to major transportation corridors and industrial land uses located near densely populated residential areas. These conditions contribute to what is commonly referred to as the urban heat island effect, in which built surfaces such as asphalt and concrete absorb and retain heat, raising local temperatures. As a commuting student traveling

between Pacoima and UCLA's campus in Westwood, I regularly experience temperature differences of nearly ten degrees Fahrenheit between the two areas on the same day. These differences make the environmental implications of infrastructure changes particularly visible for community members like myself who have developed an understanding of these conditions both through lived experience and through formal study.

Tree canopy has become especially important to me in recent years as climate change intensifies heat exposure in urban environments. In conversations with colleagues involved in the City of Los Angeles tree planting programs within the Department of Public Works, I suggested planting additional trees in Pacoima and even offered to help identify potential locations. Their response was that planting trees in Pacoima is often difficult due to strict sidewalk clearance and spacing requirements. Recent research on urban forestry policies in Los Angeles supports this claim. A study examining tree-planting guidelines found that infrastructure regulations significantly limit opportunities for adding new canopy in lower-income neighborhoods while allowing more flexibility in higher-income areas (Messier et al. 2025). In a comparison between neighborhoods such as Studio City and Boyle Heights, researchers found that existing planning rules created fewer viable planting locations in lower-income areas despite their greater need for shade and cooling. The study also estimated that relaxing certain spacing guidelines could increase potential planting locations in lower-income neighborhoods by as much as twenty-six percent (Messier et al. 2025). These findings suggest that infrastructure policies designed primarily for engineering efficiency and risk management can unintentionally reinforce environmental inequities. These outdated practices expose system inefficiencies when there is a denial of alternative knowledge frameworks that are potentially more informed and have the tools to effectively address urban environmental issues.

These outdated practices expose systemic inefficiencies when alternative knowledge frameworks are dismissed in favor of rigid technical standards. TEK, which reflects generations of observation and interaction between human communities and their surrounding ecosystems. Indigenous peoples of California developed deep relationships with local landscapes through long-term stewardship practices that relied on careful observation, experimentation, and reciprocal relationships with plants and animals (PBS SoCal n.d.). Over centuries, Indigenous communities learned how to harvest and manage natural resources in ways that sustained both human livelihoods and ecological diversity. This knowledge represents a collective understanding of how ecosystems respond to human interaction and how environmental management can occur without degrading the systems that support it. In contrast to modern planning approaches that often treat nature as a component of urban infrastructure, TEK emphasizes stewardship, balance, and long-term ecological health.

Recognizing alternative knowledge systems can offer invaluable insight for urban environmental planning. When urban greening projects prioritize engineering standards and infrastructure efficiency over ecological relationships and community knowledge, they risk undermining the very environmental benefits they seek to create. The removal of a mature tree in Pacoima illustrates how planning decisions can overlook the lived environmental experiences of the communities they affect. Incorporating standpoint perspectives alongside frameworks such as Traditional Ecological Knowledge could help reshape how urban greening projects are designed, shifting the focus from short-term infrastructure improvements to long-term ecological resilience. Ultimately, truly sustainable urban environments will require not only scientific expertise, but also a willingness to learn from the knowledge systems and lived experiences of the communities most closely connected to the land.

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