

# planning for inclusive urban ecological restoration

## what is the issue?

Urban ecological restoration projects within the City of Toronto have had limited involvement from diverse communities even though the population of the city is becoming increasingly diverse. This handbook looks at the planning procedures and policies and examines how we might address this issue.

The goals of this document are; to increase awareness of the importance of culturally inclusive practices within the field of urban ecological restoration and provide tools to help restorationists work towards a more inclusive practice.

Almost 50% of the population of Toronto, the largest city in Canada, is recent immigrants according to a 2004 Vital Signs study, produced by the Toronto Community Foundation.<sup>1</sup> However, according to a Toronto restoration planner interviewed, less than 10% of the volunteers who attend plantings and stewardship events in public greenspaces are racialized people.

<sup>1</sup> Toronto Community Foundation. (2004) Toronto's Vital Signs 2004. Retrieved on April 28, 2006 from [www.tcf.ca/vital\\_signs/index.html](http://www.tcf.ca/vital_signs/index.html).

## why is it important?

Urban restoration projects provide an opportunity for city dwellers to become involved in restoring nature within their own landscape and help to develop an increased ownership for local nature. Participation in urban ecological restoration has been known to increase stewardship of the land, promote healthy relationships with nature that last long into the future and deepen people's sense of community involvement. These are all ways that benefit the restoration project long after the restoration crews have gone home.

Most urban ecological restorationists agree that public participation in urban ecological restoration projects is beneficial to both the community and the landscape. Involving diverse communities in the planning, implementation and monitoring of ecological restoration projects can bring new perspectives and strategies to urban ecological restoration, link new Canadians to the surrounding landscape of their new home and create linkages and relationships that empower other local community development projects.

## myths debunked...

The practice of inclusion isn't as simple as inviting diverse communities to participate in already established and planned ecological restoration projects. However, when trying to make their urban ecological restoration projects more inclusive, this is often the route that project leaders take. Bringing socially excluded people into an already defined project maintains the framework of exclusion without trying to break down the uneven power dynamics, hierarchies and systemic barriers that are inherent within the decision making process. As a first step, let's look at some of the reasons why racialized people are not involved by highlighting five prevalent myths.

Peake and Ray argue that the “skewed and highly urban character of the distribution of people of colour in Canada results in a low probability of white Canadians encountering or being aware of everyday experiences of racism and the ways in which race is normalized in representations of people and place.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Peake, L. & Ray, B. (2001). *Racializing the Canadian landscape: Uneven geographies and social justice*. Canadian Geographer. 45(1) p.182.

## **Myth #1 Racialized people are not interested in urban ecological restoration**

Evidence collected from studies in the early 1990's has shown that racialized people have high concerns about the environment.<sup>3</sup> However, the myth that racialized people are not interested in restoring urban greenspaces is perpetuated by low attendance at public meetings and other events related to urban ecological restoration. Many people, although highly interested, may not have the resources or time to engage in volunteer activities that do not reciprocate value through education, networking, payment or other opportunities. Peter Ratcliffe (2005) says that it is important to look at the underlying reasons for low attendance at meetings of racialized people as it may not be a lack of interest but some other social or cultural factor including the obvious barriers such as language, transportation and child care and less obvious ones such as poverty, unwelcoming meeting format and biased information sharing.<sup>4</sup>

Also, a testimony to the high levels of interest in environmental issues by racialized people is the great numbers of diverse community gardens that have been created in the city.<sup>5</sup> Within the community garden world in Toronto, race is on the table for discussion

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<sup>3</sup> Jones, R. & Rainey, S. (2006). Examining Linkages between Race, Environmental Concern, Health, and Justice in a Highly Polluted Community of Color. *Journal of Black Studies*. 36(4):473-496.

<sup>4</sup> Ratcliffe, P. (2004). *Race, Ethnicity and Difference: Imagining the Inclusive Society*. London: Open University Press.

<sup>5</sup> Baker, L. (2002). *Seeds of Our City: Case Studies from Eight Diverse Community Gardens in Toronto*. Toronto: Foodshare.

and principal community groups like Foodshare and the AfriCan Foodbasket are leading community building workshops and discussions around the topic of race, food and the environment. Although community gardening is not considered ecological restoration, many lessons can be learned from the framework of inclusivity adopted by the community gardening field.

## **Myth #2 Community engagement of racialized populations is best done through simple activities like volunteer tree planting.**

Not being included in the planning process tends to marginalize people further from the project. Initiating recruitment at the implementation stage of a project will not benefit either the local community development or the sustainability of the project.

“Being involved in the process is the whole point”  
says Shannon Thompson of Greenest City.

Many people come to Canada with backgrounds and experiences working on environmental issues in their countries of birth and require valid Canadian experience to obtain employment in their new country. New Canadians want to share their skills in valuable experiences that will help them establish networks, learn about the Canadian context and apply their knowledge and education. Immigration policies over the last few years have resulted in a highly skilled and educated work force to which the job market has yet to respond. Volunteering, for someone with already limited resources, is difficult

and sometime impossible. If organizations are making volunteer planting the only way to become involved in an ecological restoration project in the city, they are limiting involvement to those who have the resources to participate and thus excluding further the racialized and marginalized populations of the city.

**Myth #3 Public forums, open meetings and information nights are the best ways to engage the public.**

Traditional methods of engaging the public in the planning process often do not afford racialized people opportunities and access to present their views and values about urban ecological restoration projects.<sup>6</sup> Public forums, open meetings and information nights, the most common ways that agencies engage the public, are usually attended by the same people time and again who loudly voice their opinions but who do not adequately represent the diversity of the population. A study commissioned by the USDA Forest Service in 2003, looked at the under representation of certain population in urban community forestry initiatives. It was recognized that the current models of outreach were not effective at connecting with people who have historically been non-engaged in and principal community groups like Foodshare and the AfriCan Foodbasket are leading community building workshops and discussions around the topic of race, food and the

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<sup>6</sup> Sandercock, L. (1997). *Towards Cosmopolis*, England: Wiley & Sons.

urban forestry initiatives and concluded that not enough resources were being directed towards reaching out to “all of the different colors and philosophies that are now America”.<sup>7</sup> A study similar to this one is needed in Canada.

The public participation models often used to encourage public involvement in the planning of urban ecological restoration work are based on the idea that everyone who attends a meeting has an equal chance to express their values and views about the project. According to a study by Milroy and Wallace on ethnoracial diversity and planning practices in Toronto, planners do not consider adapting public participation models outside of the traditional framework even if they do not meet the needs of a section of the population. The study found that planners consider their approach to public participation fair because everyone has the same chance to participate. However, public meeting formats generally focus on the expert’s knowledge and devalue other ways of knowing and knowledge sharing. Different cultures have distinctive ways of communicating that are not always accepted by people operating in traditionally western ways. If meetings are focused on a single way of communicating and knowledge sharing a portion of the

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<sup>7</sup> McDonough, M., Burban, L., Russell, K., (2003). *Dialogue on Diversity: Broadening the voices in urban and community forestry*. Retrieved on July 20, 2007 from [www.na.fs.fed.us/spfo/pubs/uf/diversity\\_rpt/diversity\\_rpt.htm](http://www.na.fs.fed.us/spfo/pubs/uf/diversity_rpt/diversity_rpt.htm) p.2.

population will not be able to share their ideas and values even though they are often different from those of the restorationists and can contribute to the discussion.

#### **Myth #4 Everyone has email.**

Public meetings are usually publicized through communication networks that are already biased against outside communities.<sup>8</sup> “You have to remember that many people do not have email or access to a computer even if this is the most effective way you have to communicate”, says Shannon Thompson, the program manager for Greenest City’s urban youth community gardening project in the Parkdale community.

#### **Myth #5 Urban ecological restoration means the same thing to everyone.**

When racialized people are not consulted there can be conflict around future management and stewardship of the site. Work with indigenous groups has shown that they often possess unique values and interests associated with land-use that are not economic but instead historic and spiritually based.<sup>9</sup> Leadership that reflects the values of the community and facilitates situations where those with less power feel safe enough to

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<sup>8</sup> Lopes, T. & Thomas, B. (2006). *Dancing on Live Embers Challenging Racism in Organizations*. Toronto: Between the Lines

<sup>9</sup> Sandercock, L. (2000). When Strangers Become Neighbours: Managing Cities of Difference. *Planning Theory and Practice* 1(1) 13-30.

speaking can balance this power dynamic in favour of those who are racialized or marginalized. However, the predominance of white leadership within the ecological restoration field in Toronto means that restorationists are operating under a particular culture and set of values that shapes the way restoration projects are planned, which projects are selected for funding, who is involved, the aesthetics of the landscape and the definition of nature.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Burayidi, M. (2000) Urban Planning as a Multicultural Canon. In Burayidi, M. (Ed.). *Urban Planning in a Multicultural Society* 1-15 Westport: Praeger.

# steps towards improving the social equity of urban ecological restoration

## 1. Investigate current practices and acknowledge inequitable decision making frameworks operating within the organization.

It is almost impossible to be inclusive with decisions if equality is not built into the process and the organizations leading the project. Urban ecological restoration projects that do not involve racialized people at all levels of decision making miss out on the value, ideas and support of a large portion of the community. Incorporating the involvement and input from diverse members of the community from the beginning will allow the project to succeed both ecologically and within the community. It is important to continually reevaluate and reexamine the relationships and practices throughout the project to ensure that equity is preserved at every step.

- Ask questions and reflect on who is being represented in your staff and volunteers and whose voices are making decisions. Are racialized people involved in all levels from planning of projects through to implementation on the ground?

Equity policies should be introduced as part of an inclusive mandate. Equity when hiring staff will reflect the diversity in the community and place racialized people into positions of power.<sup>11</sup> As restoration practitioners working under a traditional paradigm, it is impossible to be aware of how other communities think or feel about a restoration practice. With racialized people in power positions within the field of restoration, the cultural inequality around who makes the decisions or gains the resources will improve.<sup>12</sup>

**Developing an Equity Action Plan**  
Organizational change can be difficult however the benefits will be far reaching into the future. There are many resources to help organizations construct an equity action plan. The Ontario Healthy Communities Coalition has developed a resource toolkit that outlines strategies for organizational change.<sup>13</sup> As well, the Youth Environmental Network's Green Justice Resource Kit outlines the steps to develop an action plan for anti-oppressive organizational change.<sup>14</sup> Outside equity consultants can also help examine practices and work together with the organization to develop a new framework that is more inclusive.

<sup>11</sup> Ameyaw, S. (2000) Appreciative Planning: An Approach to Planning with Diverse Ethnic and Cultural Groups. In Byrayidi, M. (Ed.). Urban Planning in a Multicultural Society 101-115 Westport: Praeger.  
<sup>12</sup> APG. (2004). Alternative Planning: A Paradigm Shift Towards Developing an Inclusive, Healthy Toronto. Retrieved on April 28, 2006 from [www.ocasi.org/downloads/Alternative\\_Social\\_Planning.pdf](http://www.ocasi.org/downloads/Alternative_Social_Planning.pdf)

## *2. Discover your community, build partnerships and become an ally*

Partnerships are part of all urban ecological restoration projects. Linkages between government, non-profit organizations and the community are important for attracting volunteers and creating energy and interest within the community for the project. In areas where there is less community involvement, volunteers are often transported in to plant trees and steward the site even though they were not involved in the conception or planning of the project and will probably not use the space after completion. Partners that are involved in the decision making process from the beginning will be able to contribute and access more from the project in the end.

The current framework at play in most restoration projects involves the expert restorationists leading the discussion and directing the project. A more community driven approach requires the expert step back and act as a facilitator to give members of the community the chance to share their own knowledge and make decisions about their local space. This approach requires providing the resources and backup support to augment the project. Projects that are led by the community, especially in central urban settings, are more likely to survive and marginalized people are more likely to have a voice in directing the project.

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<sup>13</sup> OHCC (2004). Inclusive Community Organizations: A Tool Kit. Retrieved on April 28, 2006 from <http://www.healthycommunities.on.ca/publications/ICO/index.html>

<sup>14</sup> YEN (2004). Green Justice Resource Kit. Retrieved on June 28<sup>th</sup>, 2006 from [www.youthactioncentre.ca/docs/Green%20Justice%20Guide%20Part%201.pdf](http://www.youthactioncentre.ca/docs/Green%20Justice%20Guide%20Part%201.pdf)

Smaller delivery agencies often have closer ties to the community around them and are able to communicate and share information through channels that are unavailable to larger agencies or groups. Creating partnerships and providing the resources for local groups to take the lead will allow more local people to learn about an urban restoration project and participate in the planning of their local spaces. Lopez and Thomas suggest that in working towards equity it is important to provide those who are racialized or marginalized with the tools and resource to

The Alex Wilson Garden is a unique example in Toronto of a community driven restoration project incorporating marginalized people. Located in a high traffic area in the downtown core, the area around the garden is frequented by the homeless, disenfranchised youth and the after bar crowd. A garden, especially one with a “small woodland, prairie and hedgerow, where birds and insects can find food and shelter”<sup>15</sup> would not have thought to have been a likely success in this landscape. However, this garden is thriving. Marginalized members of the local community were directly involved in the planning and implementation of the project. The ownership and responsibility that they felt about the garden resulted in a successful garden that is flourishing under the long-term stewardship of the locals. Johnson, a garden supporter and green city activist says that the feeling of ownership is a direct response to the site representing the values and interests of the marginalized caretakers.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Johnson, L. (2002) *Tending the Earth: A Gardener's Manifesto*, Toronto: Penguin. p.143

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*

build capacity and make change within their own communities.<sup>17</sup>

However, without resources, both financially and organizationally, many community projects fail. Larger organizations would benefit from allocating a portion of their funding to community driven ecological restoration projects run by smaller delivery agencies that work directly with the community but do not have the financial or other resources to establish a sustainable ecological restoration program on their own. Success in community driven projects depends on long-term partnerships and resources set aside for capacity building.

- Take the time to identify the residents and leaders in the community and allot resources towards developing relationships with racialized groups rather than depending on old, standby partnerships.
- Partnerships need to be two-way streets with benefits and knowledge coming equally from both the community group and the department undertaking the ecological restoration project.
- Become an ally - acknowledge power differentiations and follow a path of equity acting against oppression.

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<sup>17</sup> Lopes, T. & Thomas, B. (2006). *Dancing on Live Embers Challenging Racism in Organizations*. Toronto: Between the Lines

### *3. Use non-traditional ways of accessing local knowledge and spreading information about the project.*

Public meetings and open houses around urban ecological restoration projects often involve the expert presenting their ideas to a group of concerned citizens. At these meetings, there is little room for community involvement in the planning of the site and the people attending are generally those who already have knowledge and interest in ecological restoration. This format can exclude a portion of the population who are already disempowered by not providing for alternative ways of speaking out.

Residents of the City of Victoria and the Common Ground Community Mapping Project are using community mapping to develop a Greenways Plan for the city. “Community mapping provides an inclusive and graphic framework for people to affirm and pool their experiences and knowledge about their home place.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Common Ground Community Mapping Project [www3.telus.net/cground/aboutus.html](http://www3.telus.net/cground/aboutus.html)



- Facilitate community information sharing opportunities that focus on valuing information from experts and non-experts alike.
- Use language that is accessible and be aware of the needs of non-English speakers.
- Approach community outreach creatively through storytelling sessions, community arts or community mapping workshops.
- Don't rely on current contact lists. Get the message out through multiple channels such as community bulletin boards, partner organizations and even door to door visits.
- Plan enough time for inclusive community consultations when submitting funding proposals

4. *Broaden the definition of urban ecological restoration to include creative and more socially aware projects*

Western perspectives traditionally view nature as separate from human society, something to be preserved and protected. Not all cultures agree with this definition and therefore feel that the current idea of ecological restoration is separate from their ideas of the natural world. The current narrow definition of urban ecological restoration used by

most restorationists could be broadened to include much more creative plans that are more conducive to working with the resources, landscape and land use of an urban area. Adapting our view of the environment to include social dimensions of urban nature will increase participation of marginalized and racialized populations.<sup>19 20</sup>

People working in the environmental field are often alienated from those working in the social service sector and are often unaware of the more subtle issues and social priorities of their city. Where ecological restoration and social justice work intersects is within the environmental justice movement that marries together the environmental and social issues of concern. However, the Canadian environmental justice movement has been limited and in urban areas is virtually non-existent. Gosine

The Hispanic Development Council's Social Ecology project focused on "social work from an environmental perspective and vice-versa".<sup>19</sup> Through projects such as urban agriculture training to New Canadians and the creation of a native flower garden by senior tenants living in low-income housing, the HDC linked social and environmental issues and created community support for urban greening projects.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Alas, B. (2005) Practicing Social Ecology: A Guide for Members of Our Immigrant Communities. Retrieved July 20, 2007 from <http://www.hispaniccouncil.net/id6.html>  
<sup>20</sup> Ramos, D. (2005). Social Ecology Project Newsletter: Awakening Consciousness to Revive Our Health. Retrieved July 20, 2007 from <http://www.hispaniccouncil.net>

argues that because issues of racism and power, inherent to environmental justice work are not discussed within the Canadian environmental movement does not mean that issues of concern do not exist.<sup>21</sup>

There is a need to provide more resources for urban ecological restoration work that combines social issues with environmental ones, blurring the lines between the two. Community garden projects exemplify the connection between the environmental and social in urban greening work. With little economic investment, community gardens can result in huge community payback and environmental outreach that extends beyond the increase the connectivity between people and their environment and thus increase

Sustainable South Bronx in the United States trains local environmental stewards from neighbourhoods with high poverty and unemployment to work planning and implementing ecological restoration projects in their own landscape that in the last century became littered with brownfield sites. This program, based on community development through environmental improvement, is forging a new generation of locally based restoration workers with diverse values and ideas to contribute to ecological restoration projects in their own neighbourhoods.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Gosine, A. (2003). Myths of diversity. *Alternatives* 29(1):12-14.

<sup>22</sup> Sustainable South Bronx. (2007) B.E.S.T. Project. Retrieved from <http://www.ssbx.org/best.html>

beyond the garden itself.<sup>23</sup> Other projects that include job training, education and community support services can be possible other links between ecological restoration and the social responsibilities of a city.<sup>24</sup>

##### 5. *Build equality into site selection practices*

A study of urban restoration in New Zealand discovered a cultural and social stratification within cities according to green space with racialized people, having less access to green space and urban ecological restoration projects.<sup>25</sup> Urban ecological restoration sites are often selected based primarily on ecological factors as well as the amount of visible interest of the community in the project. Engaging only those members of the population who are already aware and interested in ecological restoration practices in areas of high ecological value perpetuates the lack of involvement by racialized and marginalized people. However, designating a portion of resources to community driven ecological restoration projects in specific areas of the

Connecting with racialized and marginalized groups within a community can also require more time and effort however it has often has greater results and long-term benefits.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup> pers. comm., Thompson, 2007

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Kilvington, M., Rosier, J., Wilkinson, R. & Freeman, C. (1998) Urban restoration: social opportunities and constraints Paper presented to the Symposium on Restoring the Health and Wealth of Ecosystems. New Zealand

city that have been identified as low-income and vulnerable will provide urban green space where it is most needed.

Introducing social and community development as a criteria for site selection will change which sites are selected for restoration. Brownfield sites and degraded landscapes in areas of the city with low income and high racialized populations should be the focus. However, there needs to be resources such as funds and staff time set aside to initiate a project and build capacity in communities with fewer resources including skill building exercises and leadership training.

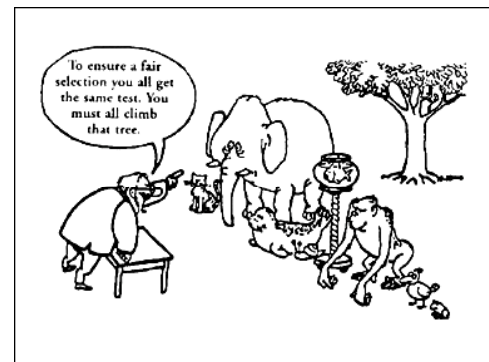
- Designate a portion of resources to community driven projects in areas of the city that have been identified as vulnerable.
- Examine social factors of the neighbour
- Set aside in the planning of the project resources and time for skill building and leadership training

## definitions

### *Exclusion*

According to a toolkit produced by the Ontario Healthy Communities Coalition,<sup>26</sup> exclusion results from unequal access and acts as a barrier to social participation. A barrier to access is any obstacle that results in an uneven distribution of power, knowledge, skills, services and information and prevents full social participation. Often, these barriers to access are embedded in our cultural

policies, practices and norms and can be unconsciously perpetuated to exclude both racialized and marginalized people.<sup>27</sup> There is a need to question current social practices and frameworks to identify these barriers to participation and unequal distribution of power and allow for a more inclusive ecological restoration practice.



[www.ndpgenderequality.ie/publications/publications\\_05.html](http://www.ndpgenderequality.ie/publications/publications_05.html)

<sup>26</sup> OHCC (2004). Inclusive Community Organizations: A Tool Kit. Retrieved on April 28, 2006 from <http://www.healthycommunities.on.ca/publications/ICO/index.html>

<sup>27</sup> Sandercock, L. (2000). When Strangers Become Neighbours: Managing Cities of Difference. *Planning Theory and Practice* 1(1) 13-30.

### ***Social inclusion***

Inclusion is not always the obvious response to 'fix' exclusionary practices. Inclusion often means the people working inside try to make those people considered outside become involved without examining the underlying cultural, historical issues that are creating this uneven power dynamic. Equality is a term which includes the hidden issues of power and discrimination that prevent participation in social processes.<sup>28</sup> Equal practices therefore must be sensitive to power imbalances built into the historical framework of ecological restoration but do not rely on inclusion as the necessary response to years of exclusionary practices.

### ***Racialization***

The term racialized, refers to people who are subjected to negative and unequal social impacts because of a societal categorization.<sup>29</sup> Racialized people are often excluded because of their perceived visible characteristics such as race, culture, skin colour or ethnic heritage. Although these socially constructed categories are not based on specific biological traits, we are socialized to treat people differently because of these physical perceptions. Racialized is not equal to the term race as it does not denote a specific group of people.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Reeves, D. (2005). *Planning for Diversity: Policy and Planning in a World of Difference*, England: Routledge.

<sup>29</sup> Lopes, T. & Thomas, B. (2006). *Dancing on Live Embers Challenging Racism in Organizations*. Toronto: *Between the Lines*

<sup>30</sup> Teelucksingh, C. (2006). *Toward Claiming Space*. In Teelucksingh, C. (Ed.). 1-18 *Claiming Space: Racialization in Canadian Cities*. Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press.

## **resources**

- APG. (2004). *Alternative Planning: A Paradigm Shift Towards Developing an Inclusive, Healthy Toronto*.  
[www.ocasi.org/downloads/Alternative\\_Social\\_Planning.pdf](http://www.ocasi.org/downloads/Alternative_Social_Planning.pdf)
  - Alas, B. (2005) *Practicing Social Ecology: A Guide for Members of Our Immigrant Communities*. [www.hispaniccouncil.net/id6.html](http://www.hispaniccouncil.net/id6.html)
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[www.na.fs.fed.us/spfo/pubs/uf/diversity\\_rpt/diversity\\_rpt.htm](http://www.na.fs.fed.us/spfo/pubs/uf/diversity_rpt/diversity_rpt.htm)
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  - Common Ground Community Mapping Project  
[www3.telus.net/cground/aboutus.html](http://www3.telus.net/cground/aboutus.html)
  - Lopes, T. & Thomas, B. (2006). *Dancing on Live Embers: Challenging Racism in Organizations*.
  - Youth Environmental Network <http://www.yen-rej.org>
  - Sustainable South Bronx. (2007) B.E.S.T. Project. [www.ssbx.org/best.html](http://www.ssbx.org/best.html)
- Contact Allegra Newman at [allegra.newman@gmail.com](mailto:allegra.newman@gmail.com) for more information