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Interview

"We're All in This Together"

A Latina Legislator puts a new face on environmentalism.

by Jennifer Hattam

Growing up in eastern Los Angeles County, Hilda Solis sensed from an early age that her neighborhood was an unhealthy place to live. Bad air, traffic congestion, and industrial blight plagued the region, and over the years her mother lost many friends to cancer. When Solis was a teenager, her Mexican immigrant father worked as a shop steward in a battery-recycling plant, where he struggled to get even the most basic safety equipment, like masks, for his coworkers.



Representative Hilda Solis (D) is working to create parkland along the upper San Gabriel River in her Southern California district. Photo by Richard Radstone.

As an adult, Solis fought unsuccessfully to stop the expansion of a nearby landfill, and realized that her community needed more political clout. She ran as a Democrat for the state legislature—first the assembly, in 1991, and then the senate, where, in 1999, she helped pass the nation's first environmental-justice bill. Her legislation calls for "the fair treatment of people of all races, cultures, and income levels" in environmental decisions and directs the state EPA to begin more systematic monitoring of the concentration of polluting sites in low-income and minority communities. (In Los Angeles, 60 percent of the facilities that produce the most toxic waste are located in such neighborhoods.) Since then, some 20 states have passed similar laws.

In 2000, Solis challenged Marty Martinez, the conservative Democrat who represented her district in the U.S. House of Representatives—and won. (Endorsing Solis, the <i>L.A. Weekly</i> called her "as bright a light in the state senate as Martinez has been a dim bulb in the House.") Solis is now the first Latina to serve on the House Energy and Commerce Committee and is the ranking member of its Environment and Hazardous Materials Subcommittee. The assignment is appropriate: Her predominantly Hispanic district is marred by

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five landfills, four Superfund sites, 17 gravel pits, dozens of abandoned gas stations with leaking fuel tanks, and one of the country's most polluted watersheds, the San Gabriel Basin. Since arriving in Washington four years ago, the passionate but down-to-earth Solis has pushed for legislation to preserve open space, led a crackdown on polluting gravel pits, and continued her fight to make environmental justice a national priority.

Sierra: What's the biggest obstacle you face in getting support for environmental-justice policies?

Hilda Solis: When I was trying to get my bill through the state senate, there were a lot of people in denial, saying, oh, this doesn't affect me or my district. But environmental justice means *everybody*—equal treatment, equal protection. Why should Beverly Hills be able to restrict egregious projects, while projects that disrupt the ecosystem and our communities are coming into low-income areas? There has to be a level playing field, so people can have clean air, clean water, the ability to have a clean life, wherever they live. How could people not support that?

There's also this misconception that minorities don't care about the environment. But surveys show that over 80 percent of Latinos rate a better environment as a priority.

Sierra: Why do you think that Latinos and other minority groups are perceived as indifferent to the environment?

Solis: For one thing, the political process isn't available to all Latinos. Some new immigrants can't vote, and much of our population is under the age of 18. Others may have come from a country that's so corrupt, they don't want anything to do with politics, because they think that everything is for someone's personal benefit instead of for the community.

In other cases, people perceive environmentalists as just caring about trees and birds, and that doesn't always go over well with working-class families that are struggling to pay rent, to get good health care—or *any* health care. There hasn't been a concerted effort to come into these communities, to better understand their needs, and to explain why it's important to, say, preserve our watershed. Latinos are not traditionally prone to go out and protest, but when local issues affect them personally, they get more involved.

In one of my cities here, a group of parents was very concerned that there wasn't any park for their kids. They wanted a green space around the school. They made papier-mâché trees and flowers, and they had 200 parents show up to a school-board meeting—all about that one issue. So we can't say that their tenacity or interest is low.

Sierra: So would linking the environment to health, family, and educational issues be a better way to reach them?

Solis: Yes. Especially for groups who are not well-versed in

English. They're not necessarily going to understand a report about ambient air quality, but they want to know the bottom line: Is it safe for my kid to be out on a hot, smoggy day? What do I need to do to prevent an asthma attack?

If a mother has to take her kid to the emergency room every two or three weeks for asthma, it may be because they live near a gravel pit, where there's a lot of dust. If you explain that to a parent, believe me, they get it.

Sierra: Are there other reasons, besides health, that Latinos care about the environment?

Solis: Many immigrants are coming from rural countries, where they understand the balance in nature. Here, they're deprived. Because of economics, they don't have the luxury of going to Sequoia National Forest. There are children in my district who haven't even been to the beach. There's a tendency to think that those things are off-limits, when they shouldn't be. We need to educate our community, and have the environmental community take a stand with us.

Sierra: How can mostly white, middle-class groups like the Sierra Club best join that effort?

Solis: Environmental groups need to do a better job of hiring people from low-income communities and teaching them how to advocate. We have to have people who can speak the language and who understand Hispanic cultural mores.

The "anti-growth" message we sometimes hear from environmentalists on immigration and population strikes a negative cord. This country is not foreign to many people who make their home here. They're from the same continent, the same landscape. Often, they're fleeing environmental destruction in their homelands. I recently visited a mining community in Nicaragua that had been heavily impacted by U.S. corporations. Half the families had a member with cancer, but there are no protections for them. There has to be an attitude change. Immigrants doing menial jobs produce benefits for us all, so we're all in this together.

Sierra: What do you hope to accomplish this year?

Solis: I hope that we can inform the community more about their right—and responsibility—to contact their members of Congress with their environmental concerns. Obviously, the public is not fully aware of some of the Bush administration's proposals that actually cut back on enforcement. Mark Udall (D-Colo.) and I have introduced national environmental-justice legislation like the one I got passed in California. But this administration is not moving in that direction. They're actually preserving the rights of corporations over those of disadvantaged communities.

Sierra: What inspires you to keep fighting?

Solis: When I speak about preserving the San Gabriel River,

community people are very thankful. They tell me their memories of what it used to be like, how it's changed, and how we have to do something to improve it. That inspires me, as does the fact that so many people don't have a voice. And I'm their voice. People are starting to listen, thank God. We have a long way to go, but I'm hopeful that teaching people the skills to treat our environment better will make their lives better and healthier. Then we all win.

Jennifer Hattam is *Sierra's* associate editor.

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