

La Vida Verde: Hispanic Engagement in Natural Resource Conservation and Education (panel discussion summary)

Pedro Mazier Chavarria (panelist and author of this summary), Texas A&M University, 3406 Finfeather Road, #1412, Bryan, TX 77801; pmchavarria@tamu.edu

Roel R. Lopez (panelist), Texas A&M University

Roger Rivera (panelist), National Hispanic Environmental Council

Tulia Defex (panelist), Texas A&M University

Manuel Piña, Jr. (panelist), Texas A&M University

Maria R. Gutierrez (panelist), Texas A&M University

Session overview

Hispanic populations represent one of the fastest growing demographics in the United States, and yet there is little representation apparent in the “green” jobs—or those of natural resource conservation in the United States. Participation by Hispanics in conservation may have much less to do with appreciation for nature and conservation, and much more to do with socioeconomic and political mechanisms inherent in the dominant culture that may complicate, deter, or inhibit participation by other groups. Integration of this fast-growing demographic group into conservation practices is essential to successfully promote natural resource conservation and healthy, sustainable ecosystems. The panel presented points of view from community leaders, university professors, professionals from federal agencies, and university students on what factors have promoted their successes in conservation, and how we might go about in promoting changes that will more closely integrate this demographic group into the conservation arena.

Session introduction by Pedro Chavarria

Good morning and welcome to the George Melendez Wright panel session “La Vida Verde: Hispanic engagement in natural resource conservation and education.” My name is Pedro Chavarria and I am blessed with the opportunity to be the chair of this panel this morning.

This morning we have four outstanding speakers that will address the main topic of this session. Dr. Roel Lopez, Dr. Manuel Piña, Maria Gutierrez, and Tulia Defex, all of Texas A&M University. (A fifth speaker, Roger Rivera of the National Hispanic Environmental Council—was unfortunately not able to make it because of a rescheduled flight due to bad weather.)

But before I introduce our speakers further, I’d like to consider an overview of the theme we’ll be discussing this morning. As we’ve heard in this morning’s plenary session, we live in a world that is increasingly imperiled by global climate change. The detrimental effects of global warming are becoming more apparent with increased temperatures in the polar latitudes and other unusual patterns of weather observed worldwide.

A solution to this problem is not one that a single nation nor a single group of people can achieve on their own. The welfare of the environment is the responsibility of every citizen of our planet. The United States prides itself on being on the forefront of ecological

awareness and environmental protection, but, unfortunately, we are also one of the major contributors to environmental degradation. Socioeconomic and political disparities are drivers that inhibit the full participation of all of our citizens on many grounds—including those things which may serve to enhance awareness or garner the full participation of all of our citizens to protect the environment.

A report produced by *Newsweek* some years back reported that in 1900 only 500,000 Latinos lived in the United States. Today there are more than 40 million. With the continued on-going gain in population, by 2100, one in three Americans will be Latino.

The political consequences of these statistics are evident in light of environmentalism—a large body of a voting population that has the potential to either contribute to or detract from policies that serve to protect the environment. This begs the questions: How informed and educated are Hispanics in regard to issues of the environment? How involved are they?

When I came up with the title for this panel—“La Vide Verde,” which translates, roughly, to “The Green Life”—I meant it as a paradox, in contrast with “La Vida Loca.” Not “Living La Vida Loca,” like the bad Ricky Martin song—“Living the Vida Loca” like that place from which I came: the gang-infested, traffic-congested, paved-over place I call Echo Park.

I stand before you today, however, not as an apparent paradox or token statistic, but as a representative of a somewhat hidden truth: “We [Hispanics] do care.”

When I think of the “green life,” I think about the green thumbs that the hundreds and thousands of immigrant farm workers have, from laboring tirelessly over the green fields—to put those vegetables on our tables that we simply gather effortlessly from the local grocery store.

When I think of the “green life,” I think about the green-stained pants my father would bring home after mowing lawns or trimming hedges—one of the first jobs he took as a necessity, being a newly arrived immigrant with an education from his home country, but with an language barrier difficult to overcome.

When I think of the “green life,” however, I also think of those that have been blessed to work for the Forest Service or, in my case, the Green and Grey—as in the uniform that I’ve proudly worn in service to the National Park Service for close to six years.

But when I think of the “green life,” I think about where we can all be in improving environmental awareness. I think about the Paradise that once was, and where it could be.

Perhaps the trail to Paradise is the folly of an optimist, but as Gandhi once said, “We must be the change we want to see in this world.”

So, before us this morning, are four speakers who will talk about and represent this change we want to see in this world. They will speak to us about what things in life have made them successful in their fields, where they are at the present moment, and what we can do to improve Hispanic engagement in natural resource conservation and education.

Roel Lopez presentation (summary)

Lopez discussed his role in academia and how to actively recruit prospective students in the sciences from the undergraduate to graduate level. He talked about a program called “Abriendo Puertas” which seeks to involve parents of prospective students, from the high-

school level or beyond, so as to facilitate making educated decisions about seeking a college education and diminish myths or cultural hurdles that might prevent success of their children in pursuing degrees in the sciences or a college education in general. Lopez talked about being actively engaged in mentorship with the students and facilitating success through diversified funding opportunities. His major point of emphasis was mentorship for students and encouragement of pursuit of higher education.

Tulia Defex presentation (summary)

Defex provided her perspective as an international student from Colombia who is pursuing her Ph.D. although already having a Doctor of Veterinary Medicine from her native country. She talked about economic hurdles and cultural barriers encountered. She also talked about cultural differences in environmentalism between U.S. and Latin-American countries—emphasizing that protection of the environment is something that is culturally ingrained in the native philosophy of Latin-American people because of the environment they live in and the socioeconomic conditions they must cope with. She suggested debunking myths and cultural stereotypes about how Hispanics don't care about the environment or how they might be seen as “backwards” in ecological awareness. Her major point of emphasis was facilitating involvement of international students by providing avenues of cooperation through enhanced communication and addressing issues of cultural stereotypes.

Roger Rivera presentation (summary)

Chavarria presented Rivera's talk on his behalf. He talked about Rivera's program with the National Hispanic Environmental Council and the National Park Service recently at New York and its relation to expanding the Minority Youth Environmental Training Institutes (MYETIs). He next spoke about Rivera's progress with the MYETI concept and his incorporation of “role models” to promote awareness for minority youth in pursuing careers in science and the environment. Finally, he talked about the field trips at the MYETI, the coursework students are exposed to (environmental testing of soils and waters, environmental justice, general ecology, geology, astronomy, wildlife science), and the benefits of the internship experience to recruitment into agencies involved in conservation. The major point was to facilitate involvement of minority youth in conservation education.

Manuel Piña presentation (summary)

Piña discussed his role on the faculty of Texas A&M and his role as co-program director for the Hispanic Leadership Program in Agriculture and Natural Resources (HLPANR) at Texas A&M and the University of Texas at San Antonio. He discussed the importance of the program in facilitating graduate studies for students with proven academic merit and great potential for leadership in agriculture and natural resource management. He gave examples of HLPANR successes but also pointed out that the program's funding has been cut off, and how graduates from the program are not always assured of positions with the Department of Agriculture in general or Forest Service in particular, despite the fact that that is the principal reason for funding the program. The major point he discussed was the ten-

uous situation of lack of funding, asking members in the audience for solutions to resolving this impending problem in the near future.

Maria Gutierrez (summary)

Gutierrez represented an example of a success story from the HLPANR program, but directed her attention to the role of Hispanic women in natural resource conservation and education. She talked about issues Hispanic women have faced in the past and face in their culture today—citing examples from her own life and how she was once discouraged to pursue a career in science or academia. The major point of her talk was to address the role of gender in Hispanic families and how to improve greater participation of women in science.

Session conclusion by Pedro Chavarria

Many of you in the audience may already be aware of and have heard of the Spanish expression “Mi casa, es tu casa.” In the case of the welfare of our planet, it is everybody’s casa, so we must seek to get every citizen involved in its protection.

As we’ve heard from our speakers today, there’s quite a bit of change that needs to be implemented in regards to improving Hispanic engagement in environmentalism. If we want to avoid the effects of unusual El Niños or La Niñas in the future from global climate change, we must step forward to make sure and better educate *all of our* niños and niñas today. With that, I want to thank all of you for coming today to our panel.