

## **THE ACCESSIBILITY PROJECT REPORT**

Earth Day Canada

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

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Earth Day Canada (EDC) is a national Environmental Non-Governmental Organization (ENGO) providing year-round resources, user-friendly programs, and networking assistance to empower people living in Canada to improve the state of our environment. EDC is a registered charity with over 3,500 affiliated community-based organizations and 5,000 member organizations.

Our **vision** is that:

*Earth Day will remain Canada's strongest positive voice in promoting constructive and sustainable environmental values, actions and solutions.*

Our **goals** are to:

- Create positive public awareness for existing and developing environmental solutions.
- Empower and encourage Canadians to take environmental action in their communities.
- Address the challenges to Canada's environment by working in partnership to create programs that can be delivered by communities, organizations and individuals.
- Foster and Maintain the positive celebration of Earth Day annually

The Accessibility Project was initiated at EDC in recognition of the complexity of our audiences in Canada as well as an identifiable lack of involvement from culturally diverse communities in the formal environmental movement. The project is our attempt to examine the barriers people of diverse communities may face when accessing environmental resources and information.

A summer student was hired for ten weeks as Program Accessibility Coordinator to work towards our initial goals for the project listed below,

- Research any issues of access for Canada's culturally diverse communities, particularly relative to community group and NGO resources and programs.
- Help determine communications and program development strategies necessary to improve access to resources.
- Help to identify community-based social marketing tools and techniques targeting culturally diverse communities in Canada.

However, we soon realized that ten weeks provided an insufficient timeframe to examine all three goals forcing us to focus on the first of three. To continue with the project after the summer term, EDC established an Accessibility Committee that would revisit the original goals and develop program strategies.

In examining barriers of involvement and access we researched prior academic work on the subject and interviewed community representatives from ethno-specific organizations in the Greater Toronto Area. Our interviewees presented critical social analysis on access in the environmental sector. This report details the findings of this project and offers some recommendations for further study and program strategy.

This is a vital undertaking for EDC as we realize that in order to meet our goals to empower people in Canada to take environmental action, our programs and resources must be relevant and accessible to Canada's pluralistic communities.

## 2.0 Methods

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Our first step was to identify previous research conducted on issues relating to diversity, access and inclusion in the environmental sector in Canada. Our examination included relevant articles, publications, books and independent briefs listed on reputed foundations and research sites such as the Wellesley Institute and the Maytree Foundation. *(Please refer to the bibliography for a complete list of publications)* Although we gathered some useful and insightful data on our subject, existing information was scant and difficult to locate for the Canadian context. We then expanded our search to include interviews with individuals and groups representing ethno-specific and environmental organizations with a similar interest.

Due to time restraints, we aimed to meet with groups that were well established and represented large memberships. In our interviews, representatives were asked to comment on if and how they see communities accessing environmental resources. *(Our interview format is attached in Appendix A)* We also asked inquired about environmental initiatives that have proved effective and relevant for their communities. *(For a complete list of interviewees and notes please see Appendix B- notes are for internal use only)*

Over the course of interviews, we recognized the need for an environmental perspective to social access. We met with ENGOs within the GTA as they work on environmental issues and programming in such a diverse community. We noticed many ENGOs recognizing the need to better understand diverse community needs and met with interested groups to share experiences and thoughts on what causes barriers and how we can overcome them.

### 2.1 Limitations

The most apparent shortcoming of the study was the limited time to conduct interviews. While we strived to meet organizations that were National and attempted to promote the survey across Canada, the study is fairly limited to the Greater Toronto Area as it was easily accessible.

### 3.0 Results and Discussion

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As previously mentioned, the findings of this report have been primarily informed by secondary research studies and primary interviews with community workers and advocates representing ethno-specific and environmental organizations. These groups enabled us to better understand the varying social priorities of community groups and learn from direct experiences of previous work in this area.

Although a number of issues were raised throughout the study, patterns in our discussions were evident. To convey our results effectively we have clustered the findings into three broad themes- limited environmental discourse, misconceptions of ethno-specific groups, and socio-economic status. Findings that were useful to note but did not fall under these three themes are stated in the 'other' section.

#### 3.1 Limited Environmental Discourse

How we define our environment and what we consider environmental issues are crucial to how we develop our programs. In a majority of our interviews, our definition of environmental issues was cited as an area that needs to be revisited. Some stated that linking the environment to issues such as housing, access to healthy food and clean water for example, would increase its relevance to communities. This was a recurring theme in our discussions with community representatives.

The question of environmental philosophy was also raised with some discussion focused on how this issue is positioned within a Canadian context. The need to consider Canadian society as a multicultural environment and not expect cultures to adapt to pre-defined notions of Canadian values was raised. This was stated in the context of recreational activity, for example, activities are concentrated on leaving neighbourhoods on camping trips as opposed to exploring local areas. Current environmental solutions are designed for particular lifestyles, for example, geared towards people with houses and cars. It was stated that environmental programming should reflect a cross section of lifestyles and values.

Although many interviewees recognized multi-lingual resources as an effort to make information accessible to diverse communities, they pointed to the need to examine the language and terminology in materials as well. If these are not relevant or do not acknowledge difference in lifestyles and values, translation alone will not make programs and services accessible.

#### 3.2 Misconceptions of Ethno-specific Communities

The idea that ethno-specific communities are not interested in environmental well being is a common misconception among mainstream ENGOS. This was said to hinder efforts to involve them in planning processes and only seek participation for one off events such as tree planting or clean-ups. One participant stated:

***Inclusion has to start from the planning process with diverse memberships of committees and boards... groups can't just look to outreach to cultural groups at the end of the process to boost event participation rates.***

We found that a large number of groups are interested in environmental programming and initiatives, however, lack the resources such as information and funding were cited as reasons for non-participation. The majorities of ethno-cultural groups are small organizations, managed by a couple of staff or sometimes only by volunteers, and usually operate on modest budgets. As a result, most of them lack resources both financial and organizational to focus on new initiatives. In fact, many groups cited lack of resources as their key limitation for getting involved in environmental initiatives.

In her study titled 'Planning for Inclusive Urban Ecological Restoration' Allegra Newman points to evidence of interest in environmental programs by racialized communities but states that this misconception of environmental disregard is fueled by low attendance at volunteer meetings or public forums. She states that "many people, although highly interested, may not have the time or resources to engage in volunteers activities that do not reciprocate value" (Newman, 2008). One can also point to less obvious reasons for non-engagement such as transportation, language, lack of child care, or selective promotional avenues such as e-mail.

These findings were echoed in a number of our interviews where it also became evident that because of an absence of formalized meeting or event structure, initiatives undertaken by diverse communities are not recognized by mainstream organizations. A number of interviewees said there was a need for ENGOs to recognize work, practices and lifestyles that differ culturally and are environmentally sustainable.

### **3.3 Socio-economic Status**

A popular point of discussion at our interviews was the lack of acknowledgement of differing socio-economic status in environmental messaging and programming. Some groups found environmental or 'green living' such as buying organic produce to be unaffordable and inaccessible. They also pointed to a lack of cost-effective solutions in mainstream messages saying that cost is often cited as a '*secondary bonus to living green and doing the right thing*'.

Some stated that it was important for environmental discourse to speak to people with little choice over the day to day functions of their lives. For example, promoting public transportation and not using a car is a great message; however, it does not consider the challenges of people living in peripheral city areas with low public transport options that work outside of the 9-5 work day. Most messaging was found to assume that people have and can afford choices.

There was also the note of materialistic gain and value that is attached to these in immigrant or newcomer communities. For some, the act of migration is an attempt for a 'better life' categorized by traditional symbols of affluence. Migration is also positioned along with loss of the 'homeland' to attain this affluence. Messages to opt out of materialistic affluence are received differently and with some disdain by groups who have sacrificed to get to the point where they can afford these possessions.

### 3.4 Other findings

These are discussion points that were raised that did not necessarily fall under any specific theme but were worth noting:

- Policy framework must be made stronger to reduce wastage and inefficiencies at government and municipal levels.
- Work to eliminate systematic racism that may be unintentional but still creates major barriers to participation.
- We need to focus on work that bridges the gap from information to action (especially with kids taught in school to implementing things at home).
- Explore the possibility of taking a recreational path to explore environment as many cultures are not introduced to such lifestyles (e.g. camping, canoeing etc.)
- A re-education of ENGOs needs to take place where the intersections between environment, culture and action are examined.
- We need to move away from the notion that development is synonymous with consumption. Progress is not based on consumption and we can conserve and use limited resources to create healthy progressive lifestyles.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

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Ensuring that programs are accessible to and inclusive of diverse communities is a commitment on the part of any organization to partake on an ongoing, evaluative process. The 10 week project allowed us a brief and limited understanding of the complexity around increasing diversity in the environmental sector. However, to overcome our time limitations, EDC, through the Accessibility Committee, will carry forward the work after the summer term and continue to focus on building accessible programs.

The following is a list of potential actions that the committee can undertake in the near future:

### **4.1 Internal**

- Create a strong mandate for the Accessibility Committee including revisiting EDC programming to find ways to cater it to diverse groups.
- Create advisory committees for various EDC programs to evaluate materials.

### **4.2 Collaboration and Partnering**

- Seek to create stronger links between the environmental sector and social welfare sector, in turn creating strong connections with other NGOs.
- Develop a coalition of interested groups to inform programming and improvement – perhaps with environmental groups that are working on similar accessibility projects within their organization and with ethno-specific groups.
- Seek to create alliances with media, culture/language specific and mainstream, to increase awareness of environmental projects.
- Create connections of environmental issues with other societal issues such as housing and food making more prominent how they are interconnected.

### **4.3 Building Resources**

- Developing an equity resource guide drawing on successful and equitable projects within the environmental sector- ensure relevance to EDC programs
- Community resource guide including - numbers that residents can call if their garbage isn't picked up\*\*

### **4.4 Added Funding and Project Ideas**

- Propose for resources to create a workshop series that focus on education within the sector

### **4.5 Research related**

- Continue to seek out academic perspective on accessibility issues in relation to the environmental sector.
- Further research environmental justice and racism within the Canadian community and see how it affects or relates to involvement by cultural communities and immigrants.

## **APPENDIX A**

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### **Interview Format**

1. What is the estimated membership of your organization?
2. Are there any forms of regular correspondence or newsletter?
3. When were you established? What is your primary target region?
4. Are you aware of Earth Day Canada or any initiatives run by Earth Day Canada?
5. Does your organization have an environmental policy?  
If no, would you be interested in exploring ways to incorporate environmentally conservative methods in the workplace?
6. Does your organization take part or run any environmental initiatives, events or activities?  
If yes, what initiatives?
7. Does your organization promote and/or incorporate environmental awareness / conservation within your organization on a continual basis?
8. Would your organization be further interested in incorporating resources for environmental sustainability as part of your programming?  
If yes, do you have any specific suggestions on how we can make this happen?
9. What do you think are the barriers due to which your membership isn't involved / aware of environmental initiatives and resources available to them?
10. How do you think we can overcome these barriers to better inform / outreach to your membership?
11. What do you think would encourage your membership to be more actively involved in environmental initiatives?
12. Any other suggestions/comments?

## **APPENDIX B**

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### **List of contacted organizations**

- **Chinese Canadian National Council (CCNC)  
Toronto Chapter**
- **Clean Air Foundation**
- **Council of Agencies Serving South Asians (CASSA)**
- **CultureLink**
- **Ducks Unlimited** (via phone)
- **Food Share**
- **Learning for a Sustainable Future** (via phone)
- **South Asian Family Support Services (SAFSS)**
- **Parkdale Intercultural Association (PIA)**
- **Human Endeavour**
- **Social Services Network**
- **Vietnamese Association, Toronto**

## APPENDIX C

### Secondary Research: Selected Data Sources

**PUBLICATION TITLE:** ETHNIC DIVERSITY SURVEY

**PUBLISHED BY:** STATISTICS CANADA, 2003

**SOURCE:** MAYTREE FOUNDATION

- Participation in groups/organizations increased with time lived in Canada.
- Visible minorities are three times more likely to feel uncomfortable or out of place than those who are not visible minorities.
- First generation are more likely to participate in ethnic or immigrant organizations

**PUBLICATION:** ETHNO-CULTURAL ORGANIZATIONS AND THE ENVIRONMENT

**PUBLISHED BY:** SUSTAINABILITY NETWORK AND SUSTAINABLE TORONTO

- Out of the 27 contacted groups, 20 responded of which 6 were already engaged in a number of environmentally focused activities, 8 groups lacked experience but were keen to support environmentally related issues, 2 groups were non-committal while 4 groups declined to participate.
- Upon revisiting the sites of the 8 groups that were interested but hadn't participated in previous environmental initiatives, none of them had progressed to include environmental programming since 2001.
- Publication identified several barriers that often limit the communities' participation in development programs have been identified. Some of these include:
  - Language problem
  - Lack of contact with environmental advocates
  - Lack of awareness about the relevance of environmental issues in community wellbeing
  - Lack of information and opportunity
  - Lack of knowledge about how these communities can contribute
  - Lack of resources - both financial and organizational
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**PROGRAM:** COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT FOR MULTICULTURAL ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP PROGRAM (CDMES)

**SOURCE:** TORONTO REGIONAL CONSERVATION AUTHORITY, SUPPORTED BY TRILLIUM FOUNDATION AND ENVIRONMENT CANADA

- During its course, CDMES identified several factors that need to be considered while making connections with ethno-cultural communities. The following tips may be helpful while networking and communicating with these groups:
  - Try to communicate through personal contacts or through local leaders chosen from the target communities. Try to engage them with the program implementation process (perhaps by employing them for a short or long term) to assist in designing effective communication strategy suitable for the target communities.
  - It may be better to integrate religious organizations in outreach activities since often they play a critical role in providing leadership in the communities.
  - Also, community groups providing Adult ESL (English as a Second Language) and LINC (Language Instructions for New Canadians) services can be of help in engaging New Canadians.
  - Direct and interactive participation is always better than sending letters and flyers door to door. Interactive tools such as visual aids and hands-on workshops work well.
  - It is advisable to start with smaller target group and work your way up - slow and steady.
  - And most importantly, be sensitive to culture, gender and age issues.
  - Based on the conversation with 50 odd groups they offered a few broad-based observations:
    - The majorities of ethno-cultural groups are small organizations, managed by a couple of staff or sometimes only by volunteers, and usually operate on modest budgets. As a result, most of them lack resources both financial and organizational - to divert their activity focus on to new initiatives, including environmental. In fact many groups have

cited lack of resources as their key limitation for getting involved in environmental initiatives.

- Groups with limited or no environmental experience seem to lack knowledge about the sustainability issues. There is also a lack of awareness of the interrelationship between the environment, health and socio-economic well being.
- Members of many groups find it difficult to communicate in languages other than their native tongue.
- In cases where groups have shown latent support to undertake environmental work, many have raised concerns about the scale of action and commitment involved on their part. Lack of apparent clarity about the scale and commitment has restrained the groups from committing conspicuously.

**PUBLICATION:** DELIVERING EQUITY: COMMUNITY-BASED MODELS FOR ACCESS AND INTEGRATION IN ONTARIO'S HEALTH SYSTEM

**SOURCE:** WELLESLEY INSTITUTE

**LINK:** <http://wellesleyinstitute.com/files/healthequity/DeliveringEquityReport.pdf>

- Aboriginals have the worst health status of all Canadians.
- Article discusses in detail the disparities and statistics of health equity based on gender, race, financial status, sexuality and location.

**PUBLICATION:** COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT: EFFECTIVE AND EQUITABLE HEALTH PLANNING

**SOURCE:** WELLESLEY INSTITUTE

**LINK:**

<http://wellesleyinstitute.com/files/Gardner%20Vancouver%20IUHPE%20June%2007%20community%20engagement%20and%20regional%20planning.pdf>

- Article talked about ways to reach communities and get information to reduce/eliminate public health disparities.

### ***Successful Programs***

#### **COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT FOR MULTICULTURAL STEWARDSHIP PROGRAM**

([http://www.ec.gc.ca/ecoaction/success\\_display\\_stories\\_e.cfm?story\\_ID=12030112](http://www.ec.gc.ca/ecoaction/success_display_stories_e.cfm?story_ID=12030112))

- The Program was created to involve new Canadians and well-established visible minority communities in Toronto Region Conservation Authorities hands-on neighborhood-level ecological restoration projects. The program succeeded in recruiting 500 volunteers devoting more than 2,000 hours to the project.

#### **CHINESE ENVIRONMENTAL AMBASSADORS PROJECT –GREEN RESTAURANT PROJECT**

- The project involved promoting environmental awareness among Chinese communities in a culturally appropriate manner.

#### **INTEGRATED NEIGHBORHOOD TOUR PROJECT (INTP) RUN BY THE MULTICULTURAL NETWORK FOR ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE (MNEJ)**

- Worked with various ethno-cultural groups to educate communities about the significance of addressing environmental issues at the local level at they affect their daily lives.

#### **CANADIAN CENTRE FOR ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION**

Organization has an Immigrant Centre and assists immigrants to find information on Environmental Career Paths through [www.eco.ca](http://www.eco.ca). It also allows immigrants distance education training to ensure they meet needs to enter environmental industry once in Canada.