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The Removal of Beach Flats Community Garden: A Case of Environmental Racism (Episode 14)

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The Removal of Beach Flats Community Garden: A Case of Environmental Racism

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>>OtterPod theme music<<

Melissa Boose, Host: This is an episode of the OtterPod from CSU Monterey Bay.

Alexandra De La Cruz, Host: We asked our peers; "what comes to their mind when you hear environmental racism?"

00:00:13

[Palia Vang] What comes to mind when you think about environmental racism?

(CSUMB Student) Um, uh, I'm not going to lie to you if I'm being completely honest. This is a new term for me.

(CSUMB Student) I don't..unfortunately, I don't think too much about the environment like I should, but someone actually talked to me about environmental...What was it?

(CSUMB Student) Actually, I've never heard like that in my life. Like, I've never heard those two words combined like that.

(CSUMB Student) Very odd to put the word environmental and racism right next to each other, because it kind of sounds like it's just like, I don't know, a bunch of people, you know, having plant wars or like, you know, like plants versus zombies. Type of stuff.

(CSUMB Student) The students not cleaning up after themselves, leaving trash around.

(CSUMB Student) Right now blank. But mostly I think like, when we care more about a specific thing, um, in the environment, be it the ocean more than like, uh, wildlife or forest. Maybe I should look up the definition to know better.

(CSUMB Student) I don't think I can give you a good answer. Nope

00:01:16

Alexandra De La Cruz, Host: Hi. My name's Alexandra.

Melissa Boose, Host: And I'm Melissa.

Alexandra De La Cruz, Host: Today we're going to be talking about environmental racism and specifically the story of a community garden in Beach Flats, a primarily Latinx neighborhood in Santa Cruz, California, and by the end of this episode, you'll understand that environmental racism happens even in our backyard.

Melissa Boose, Host: As you heard, students at CSUMB have varying answers to the question "what is environmental racism?" Environmental law and justice scholars Cole and Foster define environmental racism as "the disproportionate impact of environmental hazards on people of color" (Cole and Foster, 2001).

Alexandra De La Cruz, Host: This definition fits with the examples we usually think of environmental racism. Oh, people are being racist in specific areas or yeah, it's big, crazy factories polluting areas where we marginalized groups. And although, yes, it is partially true, we have to pay attention to the five W's and H. Who does environmental racism affect? What are the ranges of ways that environmental racism can show up? And where is environmental racism more prevalent and how does it affect our communities?

Melissa Boose, Host: So, yes, while, environmental racism is big industries polluting the world and dumping trash in marginalized communities' land, environmental racism also can show up as denying marginalized groups access to nature and green space. We argue that it is environmental racism when indigenous people are removed from their land to establish national parks. We argue it is because of environmental racism that low-income urban communities lack parks and greenery. Targeting green space in marginalized communities for removal is also environmental racism, and that's what we are going to focus on today in our episode *The Removal of Beach Flats Community Garden: A Case of Environmental Racism*

>>*OtterPod theme music*<<

00:03:00

Alexandra De La Cruz, Host: Today we're going to be talking about Beach Flats Community Garden and its fight to be accessible to the Beach Flats and community locals in Santa Cruz County. But before we get into that, let's talk about green space and what counts as green space. Community gardens are one of the ways neighborhoods can access to fresh air, grow their own organic food, and become closer as a community (Cumbers, et al., 2018).

But how is the case of Beach Flats Community Garden an example of environmental racism? Green space is an open area in neighborhoods such as parks, green roofs, streams, and community gardens. Human geographer Nadja Kabisch explains that green space reduces cardiovascular disease, and improves overall physical and mental health (Kabisch, 2019).

It also strengthens the bonds between communities in highly populated cities and towns. Green space offers a way to form and remove oneself from the hustle and bustle of everyday urban life. A chance to step away from the noisy, congested, and overly polluted areas and reap the benefits of nature and fresh air. Community gardens are another great example of ways neighborhoods can have access to fresh air, grow their own organic food, and become closer to the community.

However, these benefits are not equally distributed, and in one study researchers have found that green space built in low-income communities adjacent to traffic areas, posed a health risk to community members. Additionally, the construction of appealing green space in low-income areas leads to increase in gentrification, often forcing out the original residents of those communities that are low-income people of color (Jennings, et al. 2019).

The community garden in Beach Flats is an essential source of food and enrichment to the predominantly low-income Latinx population. Many of the residents who care for the garden on a daily basis have been doing this for over 20 years. Many see it as a safe haven from the trials and tribulations of everyday urban life. And despite that, despite the central connections the residents of the Beach Flats have with their garden, it is under the threat of seize for corporate gain. Environmental injustice is far more common than it is made out to be. And as we will see in this case study of the Beach Flats Community Garden, it is also closer than it appears (Wolch, et al., 2014),

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>>*Soundbite: Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk Sounds*<< (Aguilar, 2020)

00:05:25

Melissa Boose, Host: Located 70 miles south of San Francisco. Santa Cruz, is an idyllic beach town, home to the Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk. You may know of the town from the eighties cult hit vampire film "The Lost Boys". Just steps away from the sparkling beaches and Boardwalk is the Latinx neighborhood called the Beach Flats.

00:05:40

>>*Soundbite: Canción de Santa Cruz*<< (Aguilar, 2020)

Melissa Boose, Host: The Beach Flats community is composed of neighbors who have migrated from Latin American countries such as Mexico and El Salvador. The Beach Flats is situated so close to Santa Cruz Boardwalk that you can hear the screams and laughter as people ride the 102-year-old wooden coaster.

The neighbors in the Beach Flats have limited access to green space and are surrounded by asphalt and parking lots. The Beach Flats Community Garden sits on property owned by the Seaside Company of Santa Cruz, which owns the Santa Cruz Boardwalk and lots of other real estate in Santa Cruz County.

The land used to be a dumping ground, but in 1994, neighbors cleared the space to create their community garden and take back the neighborhood. Currently, there are 25 gardeners who grow corn, beans, cilantro, and cabbage, and much more. For over 25 years, it has been an important space for education, food production, and passing along agroecological practices, traditions, and knowledge from Mexico and Central America (Aguilar, 2020).

00:06:31

>>*Audio from the documentary "No Place To Grow"*<< (Aguilar, 2020)

This social network that is established there, and they carry on that culture, it's their livelihood.

00:06:36

Melissa Boose, Host: A gardener named Alejandro describes how he became a gardener after many years of coming to socialize: “The kids started to say... ‘get a plot, teach us how to plant’, and since I brought them here all the time, they played here, the kids motivated me to do this... I think it’s important, that is, to teach them something... I taught them to make the little holes, to start planting in them... and it gives them a lot of joy when it starts to flower” (Glowa, et al., 2018).

00:07:02

Melissa Boose, Host: In March 2015, the gardeners received a letter from the Department of Parks and Recreation.

>>Soundbite: Parks and Rec Letter Translated for residents<< (Aguilar, 2020)

Melissa Boose, Host: The letter stated that the Seaside Company would be ending the lease for the garden in November and future changes would be explained at a later date. The letter was vague and confusing, and in English, which compounded confusion over the situation. The Coalition to Save the Beach Flat Garden formed and contacted city officials, collected over 4000 petition signatures, mobilized marches, and found opportunities to speak about the garden. One opportunity to spread information about the community's plight was the documentary "No Place to Grow".

Palia interviewed documentarian Michelle Aguilar, who followed the community as they fought for access to their beloved community garden against local corporate giant the Santa Cruz Seaside Company.

00:07:51

Melissa Boose, Host: Palia, what did Michelle have to say?

[Palia Vang] She had so much to say and it was so amazing being able to listen to it. Here's how it went.

00:08:00

[Palia Vang] How did you learn about Beach Flats Community?

(Michelle Aguilar) I was just finishing up grad school at UC Santa Cruz, and I was a part of a graduate symposium where a screening of a film called “El Cacao,” which was the first film that I made, and a graduate researcher actually saw my film, and she had been studying the Beach Flats Community Garden and doing research on bees and ladybugs and birds and just kind of how special that place was.

And she was, had become aware of the fact that the Beach Flats was likely to lose the land or lose the land that they had received this letter... and there was a lot of confusion around what the letter meant. You know it all kind of plays out in the film, but, she reached out to me after having seen my, my first film and said, you know, we kind of we need some like evidence, some video evidence of what's going on.

You know, the city isn't responding. No one's getting really any clear answers. Um, you know, would you mind kind of just showing up at the garden and, and documenting the fact that we're not getting any response?

Um, so I did that. So she was the one who kind of led me in that direction. And then once I showed up at the garden, I just totally fell in love with the place and the people that I met there and just really, really recognized how special it was to the community of Santa Cruz and just really in general. And, you know, I was at the point because I had just finished my previous film where I was looking for another story. And what I really appreciated about this film or about this story was it was it was right at the beginning. Right?

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[Palia Vang] So I was wondering if you can describe the community a little, like would you say it's very tight-knit and stuff?

(Michelle Aguilar) It felt like a big family. The garden space is really the, the central space where they meet and have, you know, birthday parties and celebrations. And yeah, it's just kind of the space where everyone comes together and everyone knows each other. They all help each other out. I mean, they share, you know, whatever crops are able to grow. You know, I think it's a place where they can feel very comfortable to celebrate their culture and express themselves, speak you know, their native language and.. and also very open to sharing their culture with others.

00:10:17

[Palia Vang] What's unique about this community garden in your eyes?

(Michelle Aguilar) You walk into this community garden and it's it's so obviously different and rich and in the culture and the fact that they had brought these seeds over from Mexico and El Salvador and Honduras was obviously really special. And then the fact that the garden was so close to the ocean and they had cultivated this land and cared for this land for 25 years so that it could grow whatever they were planting, right? Because it was essentially like sand, you know, nothing could grow there for the fact that they, you know, use compost and just really were very much in tune with the needs of the land in order to, um, you know, produce the seeds that they were planting.

11:03

[Palia Vang] Did you think that the gardeners recognized the environmental racism aspect of the Seaside Company taking away their garden?

(Michelle Aguilar) I think...They live with it in so many forms in their life. I do think that they recognized it, especially, you know, once we are going to city council meetings and, you know, that was kind of a focal point of the conversation. And I think that that's why, you know, they really wanted to fight back.

It was something worth fighting for and it was much bigger than just that garden. Well, what's happening in Santa Cruz in that small community is happening all across the country. And, you know, I think these smaller stories can lead to bigger conversation.

00:11:45

Melissa Boose, Host: So you might be thinking with all that media coverage, protesting, and signature collecting, surely the garden was saved, right? Sadly, no. The Seaside Company first offered to relocate 95% of the garden to a smaller plot, then changed the offer to lease 60% of the current garden for three years.

>>Soundbite: Construction Truck Sounds<< (Aguilar, 2020)

On a March morning in 2016, neighbors of the Beach Flats Community awoke to city workers with bulldozers. Gates were put up around a large portion of their beloved garden. Mature avocado, peach, and lemon trees were torn from their roots. Rows of beautiful napa and chayote plants and vines were destroyed. The gardeners were devastated. The City Parks and Recreation director claimed that it was a miscommunication between staff because they had promised to relocate the fully developed plants and trees. But to the gardeners, it felt like a purposeful betrayal.

>>Soundbite: Gardener upset about garden removal<< (Aguilar, 2020)

Translation: It was here for years and now we don't have it? No. It's a crime.

00:12:42

Melissa Boose, Host: The portion of the garden reclaimed by The Seaside Company was paved over as a parking lot for work vehicles that service the Santa Cruz Boardwalk. Today, the garden stands on a smaller parcel of land that is still not owned by the gardeners. The uncertainty of the garden's future has led to a change in how the farmers utilize the land and the social structure of their community garden.

00:13:02

Alexandra De La Cruz, Host: The unclear future of the garden has led the gardeners to farm in a much more individualistic way. Alejandro, the gardener mentioned before, lamented on what it was a loss to lose lemon trees on one of the senior gardeners, Don Pedro's (plot). Don Pedro passed away before the changes to the garden and his lemons were harvested by the community. Alejandro noted that this was typically the case for larger plants and fruits. Those who planted them were willing to share their harvest. But with fewer of these plants in the garden, there is less opportunity for sharing and honestly, just not the room to grow larger trees again. In the last year, many gardeners moved away from planting collective crops, effectively changing the community dynamic of the garden (Glowa, 2018).

00:13:49

Melissa Boose, Host: The Beach Flats Community is just one example of environmental racism on a local level. Their status as a Latinx community made it more difficult to receive representation from the city when the garden was in jeopardy. The grassroots efforts of community leaders provided the opportunity for representation for this neighborhood, and an opportunity for voices to be heard.

00:14:08

Alexandra De La Cruz, Host: With the example of the Beach Flats we can see how important green

space is to foster good health and community. Threatening local green space and potentially removing it from the communities has been devastating effect on the community structure. It is important to remember that environmental racism happens on a large and small levels and can have devastating effects regardless on its size.

There are plenty of ways you can get involved to fight environmental racism, such as calling local lawmakers, joining in local protests, and helping to elevate the voices of those affected.

00:14:46

[Melissa Boose] This is The Removal of Beach Flats Community Garden: A Case of Environmental Racism, a podcast part of CSUMB's OtterPod. Executive producers of the OtterPod, a podcast part of CSUMB's OtterPod. Executive producers of the OtterPod are Dr. Sara Salazar Hughes and Dr. Chrissy Lau. Theme Music by Eric Mabrey, Research and script by Alexandra De La Cruz Reyes, Melissa Boose, Nizhoni Hawthorne, and Palia Vang. Hosted by Melissa Boose and Alexandra De La Cruz Reyes. Audio editing by Melissa Boose, Nizhoni Hawthorne, and Palia Vang.

Thank you so much to Michelle Aguilar for her informative answers and moving documentary. Michelle's work can be found at Small Pumpkins Productions dot com, and on social media at Small Pumpkin Productions.

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