

# Creating a Sustainable Chicago Region



**New Allies for Nature and Culture**

**Project Overview and Research Findings**

# Sustainability:

## What does it look like?



The key to sustainability? **A new way of thinking.** *New Allies for Nature and Culture* is helping to bring people together and inspire them to think about environmental and social issues in new ways. The result? **A better world for all, where both people and nature thrive.**

## New Allies for Nature and Culture

In June 2007, with a generous grant from Boeing, The Field Museum's division of Environment, Culture, and Conservation (ECCo), embarked on the *New Allies for Nature and Culture* initiative to foster new and creative alliances among environmental and social organizations that would ultimately lead to a sustainable Chicago region that privileges both biological and cultural diversity. Our goal was to use The Field Museum's recently opened *Ancient Americas* exhibition to inspire new solutions to contemporary issues. *The Ancient Americas* reveals the diverse range of experiences our predecessors had interacting with nature throughout history. It serves as a starting point for identifying and exploring our common concerns and helps us learn from the past about how to build on our natural and cultural resources to achieve a high quality of life for all our diverse residents that can be sustained by and for generations to come.

ECCo worked on this project with two partners: Lake County Forest Preserves and Friends of Ryerson Woods. Friends of Ryerson Woods received project funding from Grand Victoria Foundation. The partners' primary interests were to forge new alliances with environmental and social organizations in Lake County and especially to develop new strategies for connecting with Lake County's growing Latino population.

The *New Allies for Nature and Culture* initiative aimed to:

1. Assess and make visible the scope and nature of social change work in the Chicago region that links, or demonstrates the potential to link, environmental and social issues;
2. Identify common concerns that will help individuals and organizations make connections between environmental and social issues;
3. Promote new alliances between social, cultural, and environmental organizations that lead to innovative work that promotes holistic visions of sustainability; and,
4. Help build and promote an integrated vision for regionally-coordinated thinking, planning, and action that builds on the region's cultural and natural assets.



# Sustainability:

How do we get there?



## Project Overview

*New Allies* consisted of two stages: research and gatherings. During the first year, we conducted rapid ethnographic research with approximately 200 environmental, social, and cultural organizations across the region, using the anthropological methods of participant-observation, interviewing, and focus groups. Most of the organizations focus primarily on either an environmental issue—such as environmental conservation or environmental education—or a social issue—such as the arts, community development, affordable housing, or poverty. Some organizations, though, have been involved in projects that address both types of issues. For example, the Center for Neighborhood Technology has been a regional leader in sustainable development for the past thirty years. Another organization, the Civic Knowledge Project (CKP) at the University of Chicago, recently launched an “environmental and social action network” called Partnering for a Sustainable Chicago, to facilitate networking and education between organizations working on Chicago’s South Side that largely serve low income, African American communities. The Field Museum has partnered with the Civic Knowledge Project to use their listhost, website, and blog for ongoing communication between *New Allies* participants.

During the second year, we held a series of gatherings that brought together nearly 500 people from many of the organizations involved in the research. The events drew on the resources of the partner institutions as learning tools. For example, at the first Field Museum gathering, participants engaged in a self-guided tour of the new *Ancient Americas* exhibition that directed them to examine how the first people on this continent used culture to adapt to and change the natural environment. Then, in small group discussions, they related their thoughts on the exhibit to their experiences working for social change today. At the second gathering held at Ryerson Woods, participants were given a hands-on tour that explored maple syrup tapping and highlighted the historic connections between the natural and cultural development of the conservation area.





*The Ancient Americas self-guided tour, The Field Museum*

**Maple Syrup tour, Ryerson Woods**



## Research Findings

*New Allies* research revealed a number of shared interests held by environmental organizations and organizations that focus primarily on social issues. These include climate change, youth development, arts/creative practices, health and food, and economic development.

### Common Concern **Climate Change**

Climate change has become a prominent issue internationally, nationally, and locally. In the Chicago region, environmental and social organizations are increasingly working together to conduct research about carbon emissions in cities, suburbs, and farm areas, and to work with people of different ages, ethnicities, and cultural backgrounds to promote lifestyle choices that can offset the human causes of climate change. In addition, many organizations are approaching the threat of climate change as an opportunity to rethink fundamental assumptions about our relationships with the environment and each other—and forming new alliances in the process. These organizations and networks are making connections between climate change and social issues as they advocate for policy and planning-level work that acknowledges and addresses underlying links between concerns like biodiversity conservation, dependence on oil and coal, urban sprawl, transportation, food production, water availability, air pollution, disease, poor education, underemployment, and crime.

### Local Effort **Climate Justice Chicago**



Coal-Fired Power Plant, Chicago

Climate Justice Chicago is a fledgling coalition of environmental and social justice organizations that came together in 2007. The organization is unique because its diverse membership includes groups working on issues such as nuclear energy, organic food, environmental health, and public education. Climate Justice Chicago attends explicitly to the connections between social and environmental issues, based on the perspective that the poor and socially marginalized are most likely to suffer the negative effects of climate change.

## Common Concern

### Youth Development

Diverse organizations across the Chicago region are increasingly recognizing the important role that nature can play in youth development. Many engage in environmental or hands-on science education that takes place outdoors. The important role of unstructured play and exposure to nature for youth development is also a prominent topic being addressed nationally through the Children & Nature Network and locally through Chicago Wilderness' Leave No Child Inside initiative. Our research revealed examples of youth development programs that value both nature and culture. Such programs approach science education through cultural heritage, provide recreational opportunities for children to learn about habitat restoration, or teach young people about civic engagement through environmental education.

### Local Effort **El Valor Science and Technology Camp**



Monarch Butterfly

To teach today's youth to love the natural world, we must show them how it relates to their lives. El Valor, a Chicago community-based organization, and its partners, Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie and The Notebaert Nature Museum, operate a summer camp that uses butterfly migration to teach children in the Mexican community about science and the natural environment. Chicago lies within the migration path of Monarch butterflies, which travel between the United States and Mexico. The Monarch has special meaning for some Mexicans and Mexican Americans, many of whom also travel between Mexico and the United States and are familiar with the butterfly from their homeland. Youth in this program learn about the Monarch butterfly's migration route and life cycle, while bolstering their technology skills by creating websites and video about what they've learned. Field trips to Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie and a curriculum from The Notebaert Nature Museum help the science come alive.



## Common Concern

### Arts/Creative Practices

The arts and other creative practices are fundamental ways through which people connect to issues of all kinds, including the natural environment. Our research revealed a number of ways in which these connections are made. Some educators use nature-related art in classroom settings or have students draw or journal in natural settings. Since the arts and artistic styles are strongly tied to culture, programs that link art with nature also have strong potential to connect to cultural heritage. People use nature and art to achieve emotional and spiritual wellness, better understand their past, build self-esteem, and re-connect with families. Gardening is a creative practice that uses an artistic perspective to order the natural world, build community, and instill a sense of pride. Art and design can contribute to the development of a more sustainable lifestyle, through initiatives such as the do-it-yourself movement and design that is specifically intended to address social and environmental concerns.

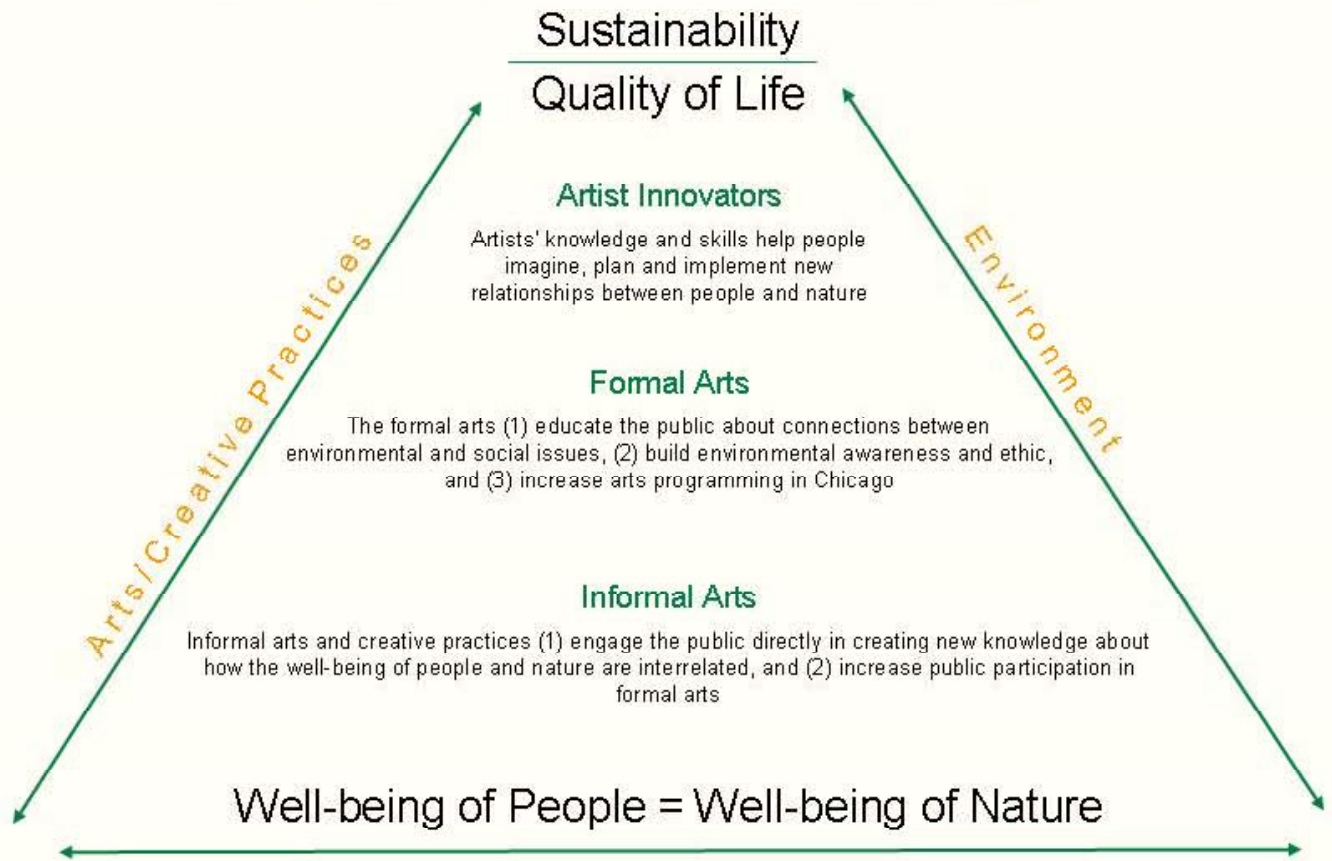
Individuals and organizations across the Chicago region engage in arts and creative practices to build connections between people and the natural environment in at least three ways. Formal arts educate people about the environment, highlight connections between environmental and social issues, promote an environmental ethic, and support Chicago arts and artists. Informal arts and creative practices of all kinds—from painting, drumming, singing, and writing to quilting, cooking, or rebuilding a bicycle—provide opportunities for people to express and create new knowledge about themselves, others, and the environment. Artist innovators use their knowledge and creative skills to help imagine, plan, and implement new relationships among organizations, people, and nature...



Lantern Parade, Lake County Forest Preserve

# Making Connections: Arts and Environment

Promoting mutually beneficial connections between the arts and environmental organizations



Local Effort **Jane Addams Hull-House Museum Hyperbolic Crochet Coral Reef**



Hyperbolic Crochet Coral Reef Exhibition, Chicago

At the turn of the century, Jane Addams and Hull-House offered local neighbors arts classes, kindergarten and day care facilities for working mothers, an employment bureau, and English and citizenship classes. Today, the Jane Addams Hull-House Museum continues to make connections between arts, creative practices, and critical social issues. In fall 2007, as part of the Chicago Humanities Festival—“A Climate of Concern”—the Museum curated an exhibition at the Chicago Cultural Center called the Hyperbolic Crochet Coral Reef. The exhibition presented a complicated issue—climate change—through crocheted models of coral reefs, some of which were created in crochet circles throughout the city. This was the first project in a new Hull-House initiative focused on “craftivism,” a new branch of the feminist movement that uses crafting as a medium for social change. The initiative revives the craft tradition of Ellen Gates Starr, who co-founded Hull-House with Jane Addams in 1889.

## Common Concern

### Health and Food

A number of community-based organizations are working on issues related to health, both physical and mental. Some organizations are focused particularly on obesity and diabetes, which are increasingly receiving national attention as health problems. Health is also a focus of environmental justice groups, which have always addressed environmental health problems such as lead poisoning and toxic waste disposal. Many organizations engaged in health issues are participating in creative collaborations that explore a variety of new solutions, a number of them targeted at youth. Some are focused on increasing physical fitness, sometimes through outdoor activities. Others are working to transform school environments, including nutrition programs. A number of organizations are focused on food as an entry point into multiple social and environmental issues, from health to community revitalization to climate change. There also has been increasing focus on nature as a therapeutic tool, through horticulture therapy and job training programs in organic gardening and landscaping that help people re-connect to the earth, each other, and themselves.

### Local Effort **Illinois Local Food and Farms Coalition**



Humboldt Park, Chicago

Diverse coalitions have the power to make change. The Illinois Local Food and Farms Coalition, an association of 180 organizations ranging from religion-based social service agencies to mainstream environmental conservation groups, supported the passage of the Illinois Food, Farms, and Jobs Act of 2007. This bill, sponsored by State Representative Julie Hamos, created the Illinois Local and Organic Food and Farm Task Force, which has been charged with developing a comprehensive plan to grow a fully functioning Illinois local farm and food system. The long-term goal of this initiative is to connect urban and rural areas around food issues in ways that stimulate economic development, foster urban improvement, increase food security, and benefit public health, while simultaneously rebuilding Illinois' decaying rural communities. The statewide Coalition will be instrumental when the Illinois General Assembly considers Task Force recommendations in 2009.

## Common Concern

### Economic Development

“Green” economic development is definitely taking off in Chicago, ranging from building construction and retrofitting to job training and placement programs. There is a rising consciousness throughout the region that environmentally-sustainable economic development must include low-income communities. Carefully planned economic development creates the opportunity to address multiple issues simultaneously. For example, low-income neighborhoods that have problems with environmental contamination often lack fresh produce and other amenities. There are high rates of incarceration in these communities, which is a barrier to successful employment. Many programs in Chicago use the natural environment for job training and placement, particularly for populations that are difficult to employ, such as the homeless and those with prison records. These programs include landscaping, urban farming, honey production, and recycling. Some of them are government programs—such as Greencorps Chicago, which is run by the City—while others are run by nonprofit organizations, such as The Resource Center, which operates City Farm near Cabrini Green.

## Local Effort **Bethel Center**



Bethel Center, Chicago

How can thinking about the connections between issues improve our lives? Bethel New Life is a community development corporation in the West Garfield Park area of Chicago whose mission is to provide affordable housing, education, and wealth creation. They are also working toward environmental sustainability. From their work in the 1980s fighting against polluting smoke stacks, to their more recent efforts in green building, Bethel has been an innovator and leader in green approaches to economic and community development. In 2005, they opened Bethel Center, a transit-oriented green commercial building at the corner of Lake Street and Pulaski Road on a former brownfield site. The building is LEED Gold certified, and in addition to leased retail spaces, it houses centers for employment, technology, daycare, and financial services.

## Models for Connecting Environmental and Social Issues

Beyond issues, *New Allies* research also identified the following three models for connecting environmental and social issues.

### 1) Creating “Communities of Choice”

One model could be described as creating “communities of choice”—a term taken directly from Bethel New Life (BNL). The Bethel Center—described earlier in this report—reflects BNL’s “Community of Choice” philosophy, which calls for sustainable development in which “residents have every option available that other residents of other communities enjoy.” According to CEO Steven McCullough, BNL takes a regional approach to their work—they think about the communities they serve as part of the broader Chicago region and aim to integrate them into this region. BNL’s goal is threefold: to develop the communities where they work in sustainable ways, provide community members with job training in a growing green economy, and ensure that residents have transit access to opportunities throughout the Chicago area.

The Gary Comer Youth Center, which provides extracurricular opportunities for low-income African American youth in the Grand Crossing neighborhood, takes a similar approach to youth development. Marjorie Hess is the manager of the center’s rooftop garden, which she views as a “stepping stone” to other opportunities, many of which are outside the community. Hess said that her goal is to expose the youth to the same issues that youth in wealthier neighborhoods are learning about. Her hope is that once they get used to the rooftop environment—a new type of experience in a new type of place—they may consider participating in a variety of other opportunities around the city, for example, at the Chicago Botanic Garden. Hess wants the students to understand that learning about things like gardening can lead to all sorts of advantages, such as college scholarships.

### 2) Environmental Projects as Holistic Approaches

Another model uses environmental projects as a basis for working holistically to address multiple community issues, using what may be thought of as a “wrap-around” approach—to borrow a term from the social service field. This model is being used by some traditional community-based organizations that do not identify “environment” as a primary focus area, such as the Steans Family Foundation. This foundation



funds community revitalization programs in Chicago's North Lawndale neighborhood, a low-income community that is primarily African-American. Executive Director Reginald Jones explained that when the foundation was originally established, it focused on education; but their initial experiences convinced them that significant change will come about only through a holistic approach that addresses multiple issues simultaneously. Recently, they made a significant investment in Windy City Harvest, a major urban horticultural project that will be situated on fifteen acres and include a number of partner organizations from throughout Cook County. According to Jones, the project will address a variety of issues, including "community wellness, composting, growing food, nutrition, horticulture, and green business."

This approach is increasingly being used by environmental justice organizations. Founded in 1994, Little Village Environmental Justice Organization (LVEJO) works primarily in the Little Village and Pilsen neighborhoods on the West Side of Chicago, which are economically depressed communities made up primarily of Latinos of Mexican heritage. In its early years, LVEJO focused on traditional EJ issues such as pollution and lead reduction. Recently, though, it has turned to urban agriculture and co-ops to improve health and create new, more enjoyable job opportunities for residents. This expanded focus is an effort to go beyond cleaning up the environment, to providing community members with new opportunities—in essence, to expand the definition of environmental justice to include, for example, economic development.

### 3) *Linking Nature and Cultural Heritage*

Another model approaches nature and the environment through the lens of cultural heritage. A number of community organizations are using this model for youth education. For example, the American Indian Center has been working in partnership with researchers from Northwestern University to develop a science education program that builds on Native knowledge of the natural world to improve learning outcomes. Similarly, community-based organization El Valor, located in the largely Mexican neighborhood of Pilsen, works in partnership with the US Forest Service and The Notebaert Nature Museum to run a science and technology summer camp for youth. Part of the curriculum centers on the migration of Monarch butterflies, which have special significance within Mexican culture and follow a similar migration path to that of many Mexicans living in Chicago. Likewise, God's Gang, which started in the 1970s at the Robert Taylor Homes public housing development, uses urban agriculture and organic farming—which they refer to as "heritage" farming—as a basis for reconnecting youth with their African roots.



Along similar lines, activist Naomi Davis is working to re-engage African Americans in environmental initiatives by combining the language of environmental opportunities with the African American legacy of environmental stewardship, through two organizations: Daughters' Trust consultancy and BIG: Blacks in Green™. The consultancy is developing a new paradigm for community development called "green village-building," which combines the green concepts of sustainable urbanism with development without displacement and African American traditions of self-reliance and close connection to the land. According to Davis, the goal is to create environmentally and economically sound neighborhoods that have culture, spirit, and soul. BIG is positioning Chicago's African American communities to take advantage of opportunities in the green economy, by partnering with schools and community organizations to create "epicenters" for green training and leadership development. BIG has begun to gain national recognition through its collaborations with the organization Green for All, which is leading the green economy movement.





# Working Together



## Building New Partnerships Based on Trust and Respect

*New Allies* has uncovered many initiatives throughout the region that are being forged by unusual partnerships. Together, organizations are developing innovative strategies for building sustainable communities. The vast majority of the organizations we spoke with recognize the benefits of expanding networks to include new types of partners. There is also a growing national movement uniting organizations that work on environmental, social, and cultural issues under the mantra that this is, to borrow words from *Orion* magazine, “not just the right way forward, it is in fact the only way forward.” But as we all know, it is not easy to build partnerships, especially with organizations that traditionally have worked on different issues in different communities. Indeed, *New Allies* has identified the issue of partnership-building itself as another type of common concern.

Our work suggests that the key to developing successful partnerships is to focus on building trust in addition to, and sometimes at the expense of, achieving specific outcomes. We’ve learned that partnerships are stronger when groups:

- Respect cultural differences and are mindful of historical and contemporary inequalities;
- Spend significant time planning and pay particular attention to developing an inclusive process; and,
- Remain flexible enough to re-evaluate and change course along the way.

The following guidelines may be helpful in developing strong partnerships based on trust and respect:

- Be clear and transparent about each partner’s goals, including what they stand to gain and where there are competing or conflicting interests;
- Establish an open environment that encourages people to discuss sensitive issues;
- Be open to constructive critiques about processes, beliefs, histories, and understandings;
- Respect and value traditional knowledge: everyone is an expert on their own lives, and diverse perspectives lead to creative solutions;
- Define issues and develop action agendas together to establish mutual self-interest;
- Discuss and establish common language to ensure smooth communication;
- Openly address funding issues from the beginning;
- Clearly define roles and responsibilities, between and within partner organizations;



- Engage each organization in every stage of work, if possible;
- Involve multiple representatives from each organization, for sustainability;
- Agree on a timeline and plan to meet regularly;
- Large, established partner organizations should commit to helping smaller partners build capacity and leadership.

These guidelines built on ECCo's previous work on collaborative research. To learn more about that work, visit our *Collaborative Research* website at <http://www.fieldmuseum.org/par/>.



Chicago Wilderness landscape

## Initial Results and Next Steps

While it is still too soon to evaluate the long-term impact of the *New Allies* initiative, we can begin to look at some immediate outcomes. So far, *New Allies* has resulted in a number of new collaborative projects that involve unlikely partners and has significantly influenced a number of other programs. In addition, some key Chicago-region policy and planning efforts are integrating *New Allies* concepts and tools into their work.

One of the most significant early successes involves a new collaboration between two significant consortia in the region, Chicago Wilderness (CW) and the Chicago Cultural Alliance (CCA). CW is a partnership of over 220 conservation organizations, and CCA is a partnership of over 20 ethnic museums and cultural centers. The Field Museum is a major participant in both consortia and was instrumental in their founding and development. For the last few years, we have been encouraging them to work together, but they did not see what they had in common. After our research identified youth development as a common concern, we linked CCA's focus on youth development with CW's recently launched Leave No Child Inside initiative, which aims to reconnect children with nature. This past spring, the CCA applied for and received a small grant from CW, for a youth education project involving cultural traditions of nature and outdoor play. The CCA also became a member of CW, and recently the Chicago Zoological Society, a member of Chicago Wilderness, joined the CCA to incorporate more cultural traditions into their zoo activities.

The Lake County partners—Lake County Forest Preserves (LCFP) and Friends of Ryerson Woods (FRW)—also have begun to see successes in achieving their goals to build relationships among environmental and social organizations in the area, and to develop strategies for reaching out to the growing Latino population in Lake County, which doubled between 1990 and 2000. Through the *New Allies* research process, they established new connections with a number of community- and faith-based organizations that work with Latinos; the gatherings then brought people from these organizations and many of Lake County's environmental organizations together to begin to explore common ground. *New Allies* has helped the Lake County partners think more broadly about the methods they use to connect to diverse populations. For example, one conversation that we had during a focus group held at Ryerson Woods about immigration included a discussion about whether conservation organizations should be involved in immigration activities such as marches to gain the trust of the Latino community and better connect the protection of



natural areas to the protection of people. *New Allies* has led to the formation of New Allies Lake County, a network spearheaded by FRW and the Waukegan Public Library involving nearly thirty organizations interested in the intersections between environmental and social work that now meets regularly. In addition, FRW has started participating in activities run by organizations working in the Waukegan community, including the Waukegan Public Library and Holy Family Parish, a major Catholic church serving the Latino population.

Other examples of collaborations and projects spawned or influenced by *New Allies* include:

- The Boeing-funded “Bold Plans, Big Dreams Community Showcase” project, a capacity-building initiative involving community tours that is a partnership between The Burnham Plan Centennial, the Local Initiative Support Corporation (LISC), O-H Community Partners, and the Chicago Cultural Alliance.
- A statewide 2009 “Go Green @ Your Library” campaign, sponsored by the Illinois Library Association. Library staff are currently seeking funding for this project, for which ECCo plans to create multi-media toolkits and a training program that will help libraries advance public understanding of what it means to “go green.”
- A series of arts and environment networking events, organized by the City of Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs, ECCo, Chicago Wilderness, Friends of Ryerson Woods, and The Notebaert Nature Museum.
- A partnership between ECCo, the City of Chicago Department of Environment, the USDA Forest Service Northern Research Station, Northwestern University, and community-based organizations to engage diverse residents in the Chicago Climate Action Plan.

Building on The Field Museum’s world-renowned science resources and collections, as well as its expertise in translating science into public education, ECCo has compiled *New Allies* research into multimedia tools that demonstrate connections between environmental and social issues. The tools will be available on The Field Museum website in early 2009. They will be advertised to organizations throughout the region that serve over 10,000 people. The tools will help organizations educate their staff and constituents about nature-culture connections, learn new ideas for putting these connections into action through community-based projects, and foster new collaborations that will benefit both people and nature.



Our challenge at this point is to continue translating our research findings and the momentum of the *New Allies* initiative into more innovative collaborations and, more ambitiously, into a coordinated movement toward regional sustainability that will effect true systemic change. We are beginning to address this in part by working closely with CW on a Green Infrastructure Vision (GIV) that will be integrated into the 2040 Regional Plan being developed by the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning. GIVs are visions for conservation development that prioritize the protection and maintenance of natural areas in land use planning, by focusing simultaneously on their benefits to nature and people. They have been popular in Europe and are becoming increasingly popular in the U.S. *New Allies* aims to develop the Chicago region GIV in a more integrated fashion that considers not only the direct services provided by nature, such as floodwater storage and clean air, but also the relationship between land management and social issues such as transportation, housing, and economic development.

For The Field Museum, the process of imagining, implementing, and evaluating *New Allies* has helped anthropologists and conservationists who work within ECCo—a relatively new division—develop a common vocabulary and a clearer understanding of how we can build on the connections between our two focus areas of environmental conservation and cultural understanding to create a sustainable region.

### For more information:

Visit our website: [fieldmuseum.org/newallies](http://fieldmuseum.org/newallies)  
or contact The Field Museum's division of Environment, Culture, and Conservation  
at [jhirsch@fieldmuseum.org](mailto:jhirsch@fieldmuseum.org) or 312-665-7480

All image rights reserved.

---

<sup>1</sup> "From the Editors," January/February 2008, p.1

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.bethelnewlife.org/about.asp?id=02~Strategic\\_Plan](http://www.bethelnewlife.org/about.asp?id=02~Strategic_Plan)

<sup>3</sup> Timothy Ready and Allert Brown-Gort, *The State of Latino Chicago: This is Home Now* (Institute for Latino Studies, University of Notre Dame, 2005).