

September 2024

Rooted Connections: Understanding South Los Angeles Community Leaders' Relationship to the Urban Forest

The Challenge

The City of Los Angeles faces an equity issue: the distribution of public trees. Compared to L.A. City's average 21% tree canopy coverage, South L.A. communities average only about 13%, with some areas falling as low as 5%. This lack of trees contributes to the environmental injustices experienced daily by South L.A. residents. As the City and local decision-makers pledge to expand the urban canopy in high-need communities, it is crucial to elevate and prioritize the voices and perspectives of South L.A. residents who have been underrepresented and marginalized in tree planning and policy-making.

The Project

The South LA Tree Coalition (SLATC) partnered with USC Dornsife Public Exchange and USC Price School of Public Policy to conduct interviews with South L.A. community leaders to explore their perspectives on urban forestry and tree-related interests in South L.A. This project will inform SLATC's advocacy efforts moving forward and grow the direct representation of South L.A.'s diverse communities in tree-related policy and decision-making processes.



The Findings

Three key takeaways emerged from 34 interviews with South L.A. community leaders:

- 1** **Trees in South L.A. play a role in community leaders' perceptions of neighborhood identity, environmental conditions, as well as public health and safety.**

“So you've got long-term impact[s] as well, which is more heat, which can have physical and mental impacts on people in South L.A., as well as the long-term impacts of just not being in an environment where there's necessarily like amelioration of anxiety and stress.”

- 2** **Competing priorities, limited resources, and lack of awareness present barriers to tree-related planning efforts in the community.**

“We need to do something about [the lack of tree canopy in South L.A.], spend money, but that doesn't mean the money's there. At this point, I think we're competing... you're competing with public safety, competing with homeless, you're competing with housing, you're competing on a government level, it could be a lot of those things... I'm not saying that things aren't getting done, I'm just saying it's a struggle.”

- 3** **Community leaders value healthy tree canopy in South L.A. and envision a future with equitable and intentional greenery supported by community initiatives and proper maintenance.**

“[The urban canopy in South L.A. should be] three times what we have now, in the ground and growing and surviving. That would be from a tree standpoint, that would be a huge victory for South L.A. and something that I would be very, very, very happy to see happen.”

The Output

The project team produced an in-depth report and a summary video, highlighting many diverse perspectives that enhance understanding of tree-related interests and priorities in South L.A. This work will bolster future planning, policy, and advocacy initiatives led by SLATC and other community-based organizations.

The findings will be disseminated widely to local decision-makers, council districts, and neighborhood councils to amplify community voices and advocate for the removal of barriers to tree planting and planning efforts, with a focus on community-led initiatives.

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Acknowledgments

This research was supported by The Windward Fund, with assistance from the South LA Tree Coalition and Public Exchange at the University of Southern California (USC) Dornsife College of Letters, Arts, and Sciences. We are grateful to the community leaders of South Los Angeles who shared their invaluable insights and time with us. We would also like to thank Daniel Gallai from the Public Exchange team for supporting the coordination of participant interviews. We extend our appreciation to Kim Nguyen for his exceptional design work and to Jozhua Johnson for his stunning photography of South Los Angeles.

For More Information

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