

**CITY GARDENS AND THE HMONG;
AN INQUIRY INTO ENVIRONMENTAL PERCEPTION**

by

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Thesis

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Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

In the fall of 1982, residents of suburban Cranston, R.I. heard gunshots coming from the woods nearby their homes. Worried, they investigated, only to find that the Indo-chinese group who had been coming en masse to garden on nearby farmland for the past year were shooting birds. As a community that prized its rural setting, forest and wildlife, the neighbors were outraged. The thought of shooting songbirds for dinner when chicken was available at any grocery store was atrocious. Since early 1981, Hmong-Laotian refugees had been coming to this Cranston farm to garden. Quiet, brightly-clothed people who did not speak much English, they had come and gone without great incident. The anomalous, somewhat uneasy coexistence of the garden and the neighborhood was threatened.

In 1983, and again in 1984, there was talk in the Providence Hmong community of abandoning the Cranston garden--hostility was too great; neighborhood teens had repeatedly rode their motorbikes through the field at night, destroying fences and carefully planted crops. Other types of vandalism, mostly theft, were also in evidence...

1.1 Goals

My aim here is to gain insights into cross-cultural differences in environmental perception. I have approached this goal through an inquiry into the traditional belief systems and adaptive strategies of the Providence Hmong refugee community. I have used community gardens as a medium through which to approach an understanding of the comparative role of land in Hmong economic, cultural, and spiritual belief systems, and through which to gain insight into the assumptions which underlie Western environmental theory.

I have defined environmental perception in this paper as the full range of developed attitudes, expectations and values of an identifiable group of people regarding the natural environment, rather than the more technical passive use of the word "perception" meaning only what is seen.

I have four primary goals:

- To understand the role of the community gardens in the Providence Hmong community
- To understand the implications of the move from isolated subsistence to Western industrial urban society for Hmong perceptions of the natural environment.
- To discuss cultural differences in values and attitudes regarding the natural environment as expressed through the gardens.
- To derive some general implications of a perceptual approach for environmental problem-solving

1.2 *Discussion of Literature*

In order to address these goals, I have drawn from two bodies of literature. The first includes the multiplicity of writings on "environmental perception". In the *Guidelines for Field Studies in Environmental Perception* of UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere project, editor Anne Whyte comments that:

Man's perception of the environment is considered so fundamental that it becomes the main point of departure for any analysis of man-environment relations.¹

This consideration is reflected by the social sciences. Understanding the ways in which people think about, are affected by and interact with the natural and built environment is dealt with in one form or another by a number of disciplines. "Ecological anthropology", "cultural ecology", "social geography", and "environmental psychology" are dif-

¹ Anne V.T. Whyte, ed.: *Guidelines for Field Studies in Environmental Perception*; MAB Technical Notes 5, (UNESCO, 1977; Paris, France) p.11