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Art To Match Our Environmental Messes

By Jenny Price
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Jenny Price, a writer and Los Angeles Urban Ranger, is the author of "Thirteen Ways of Seeing Nature in L.A.," and contributes regularly to the "Native Intelligence" column on LA Observed. She shares her thoughts on how to share the burdens and benefits of a Green Revolution.

In L.A., I recently became an artist. Accidentally.

Before I came to L.A., I thought of environmental art as decorative—though I rarely thought about it. My introduction to its power to actually green things up came when I encountered the quixotic campaign to revitalize the concrete L.A. River—which artist and

writer [Lewis MacAdams](#) launched with a few friends in the mid-1980s. In 2008, it's a gargantuan public project with a cast of thousands. Engineers, politicians, city planners, and activists are working to bring the river back to life—as are sculptors, painters, dancers, performance artists, photographers.

After all, this project requires a phenomenal act of imagination--to imagine the L.A. River as a river. Here is a river that Angelenos can't seem to find even when they're driving over it. It's L.A.'s lost river. To revitalize it, you have to convince people it still exists. That's a big job--to reconnect people to the central artery of the major watershed they inhabit, to restore their knowledge of the local water systems, to re-imagine the 51-mile river back into Angelenos' collective spirit of place. And that's a job for art.

Okay, I know I was a naive philistine before, but I've learned in L.A. what many of you already know: Environmental art is not commentary. It's not decorative. It's not marginal. In this new Green Age, we're trying to see the everyday environmental connections we've long made invisible—the energy and natural resources at the foundation of our lives and economies. And new, improved, sustainable urban landscapes will require new imaginaries.

The project to revitalize the L.A. River promises to maximize local water supplies and quality. It'll bring desperately needed park space to some of L.A.'s lowest-income and most park-poor communities. The 51-mile L.A. River Greenway through the heart of the L.A. area should serve as the backbone for a network of greenways and bikeways that can green and connect the megalopolis. It's quickly becoming the most ambitious, well-supported, and well-funded vision to address Los Angeles's environmental and social troubles.

And when Lewis MacAdams calls it a 40-year art project, he's being less metaphorical than accurate.

L.A. is hopping with environmental artists who are tackling big issues of sustainability, food production, land use, public space. Some work full-time, and some--like my alter ego Ranger Jenny with the Los Angeles Urban Rangers--are day-job activists, scholars, journalists, urban designers, and architects who stumbled into somewhat artier practices while trying to work on these issues.

On the more public-art and performance-art side, check out, for example, [Farmlab](#), [Fallen Fruit](#), [Los Angeles Urban Rangers](#), [Edible Estates](#), [Islands of L.A.](#), [Heavy Trash](#), [Finishing School](#), [Temporary Travel Office](#). That's just a start. L.A. has huge environmental messes, and ambitious projects to address them, and big art to match.


>L.A. River resources:

- [Los Angeles River Revitalization Master plan \(City of L.A.\)](#)
- [Friends of the Los Angeles River](#)
- [The River Project](#)
- [L.A. Creek Freak](#)

Photo Credit: Courtesy of Friends of the Los Angeles River



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