

# Get the Lead Out

## Activists target polluters, negligent landlords

negotiations between bioprospectors and local people—especially indigenous groups—the playing field is far from level. In addition, most countries lack adequate laws to regulate commercial use of plant, animal, and marine substances.

“Discovery of new drugs for the benefit of humanity is completely legitimate,” says Lucía Gallardo of Acción Ecológica, an Ecuadorian environmental organization calling for a moratorium on bioprospecting. “But we oppose what’s behind that research, which is the drive for patents and establishing exclusive, monopoly rights to biological resources.”

Nélida Gómez, a specialist in natural-product chemistry at the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute, says bioprospectors must understand a plant’s ecology to minimize damage from collecting, and governments must develop sound policies with input from legal experts, scientists, and indigenous people.

Such policies may be a long way off. But the ayahuasca case, says CIEL’s Wisner, “has taken on a very significant importance” in drawing attention to the practice of patenting nature. —*Barbara J. Fraser*

**W**hen Melissa Gardner’s son was four years old, a test showed that he had too much lead in his blood. The test turned out to be wrong, but the scare inspired her to fight for families who weren’t so lucky.

Childhood lead poisoning is rampant in Gardner’s hometown of Omaha, where ASARCO operated one of the country’s largest lead refineries for almost 100 years. After a successful lawsuit by local citizens, the multibillion-dollar mining company shut down its Omaha plant in 1997. The refinery is no more, but its toxic legacy—lead, zinc, and arsenic discharged into the soil and groundwater—remains. “More than one third of all children tested in the area near the plant have lead poisoning,” says Gardner, chair of the Sierra Club’s Missouri Valley Group.

Nationwide, 4.4 percent of preschoolers—890,000 children—suffer from lead poisoning, a condition that has been linked to learning disabilities, reduced IQ and attention span,

### What You Can Do

If your home was built before 1978, it probably contains lead-based paint. Any child under age six who may have been exposed to it should have a blood lead test. Keep areas where children play dust-free and clean by wiping surfaces with soap and warm water. Do not attempt to remove lead-based paint yourself. The Alliance to End Childhood Lead Poisoning provides more suggestions online at [www.aecip.org](http://www.aecip.org).

These tips can help reduce ongoing lead exposure, but stopping the lead-poisoning epidemic requires legislative action. Ask your senators to support the Lead Poisoning Expense Recovery Act of 1999 (S. 1821), a bill that would allow the federal government to recover cleanup and medical costs from manufacturers of lead-based paint. (See “Express Yourself,” page 88, for addresses.)

stunted growth, and aggressive behavior. While industrial facilities such as the ASARCO plant—and 70 percent of Superfund sites—pollute surrounding communities with lead, most children are poisoned by lead-based paint and

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## RADICAL . . . OR ROUTINE?

lands legislation. But while Hansen and company paint Clinton’s proclamations as radical, the truth is they’re downright routine.

Over the past century, every president except Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan, and George Bush has designated or expanded monuments under the Antiquities Act. Teddy Roosevelt set aside 11 monuments in just two years after the act was passed—including the Grand Canyon and the Grand Teton, both of which were later upgraded to national parks. Zion, Bryce Canyon, and Olympic national parks also started out as monuments. In 1976,



Grand Canyon-Leshan National Monument

Jimmy Carter set aside 17 national monuments in Alaska, encompassing 58 million acres of public land.

Americans overwhelmingly support wilderness and national parks. Even in supposedly outraged Arizona, an independent survey commissioned by the Sierra Club

found that 58 percent of residents supported their new parklands. So it’s no surprise that the Clinton administration is pushing ahead with discussions over the designation of even more monuments—and that while conservative politicians are seeing red, most Americans are seeing green. —*Reed McManus*

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lead-contaminated dust in their own homes. Lead paint was banned for residential use in 1978, but it persists in almost two-thirds of U.S. houses.

"Lead poisoning is one of the most common environmental health problems for children," says Bruce Lanphear, a pediatrician at Children's Hospital Medical Center in Cincinnati. "Elevated blood levels of lead have an adverse effect on virtually every organ in the body."

Poor children are eight times more likely to be poisoned than those from more-affluent families, while African-American children are five times more likely to be poisoned than white children. In an effort to combat this environmental injustice, the Missouri Valley Group held two community workshops in November with free lead screening for children and tips for parents on how to keep their homes and yards lead-free. The same month, the group drew 150 people to a town-hall meeting to discuss legislation that would eliminate residential lead haz-

ards and to consider ways to pressure ASARCO to clean up its mess.

Momentum is growing to make companies and landlords take responsibility for lead hazards. Senators Robert Torricelli (D-N.J.) and Jack Reed (D-R.I.) have introduced a bill (S. 1821) that would allow the federal government to sue manufacturers of lead-based paint for the costs of providing housing, education, and medical care to victims of lead poisoning. In October, Rhode Island became the

first state to sue the makers of lead paint for the cost of treating affected children and cleaning up homes. Massachusetts already requires landlords to clean up lead hazards, and activists in other states are lobbying their legislators to pass similar laws.

Last year, thanks to the efforts of Wisconsin Citizen Action (WCA), Milwaukee enacted the Community Lead Safe Zones ordinance, which requires pre-1950 rental units in two central-city neighborhoods to be in-

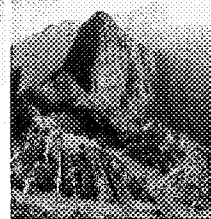
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spected within a year. (Homes built before 1978 often contain lead paint; those built before 1950 almost always do.) Landlords who have maintained their properties well—by cleaning up flaking and peeling paint, for example—will be reimbursed by the city for the costs; those who haven't will shoulder much of the expense themselves.

"This ordinance is unique because it's targeted to the parts of the city where it can do the most good, and because it puts the onus on landlords to get their act together," says Larry Marx, WCA's executive director.

A landlord's association spent tens of thousands of dollars fighting the ordinance, but activists prevailed by enlisting the parents of poisoned kids to deliver a powerful message: Stop using children as lead detectors. "We let children live in toxic houses, then act shocked when they have elevated blood levels of lead," says pediatrician Lanphear. "We need to screen houses for lead rather than use children as canaries in coal mines." —Jennifer Hattam

## Banking on a Green Economy

Environmentalists now have an opportunity to put their money where their principles are. Founded two years ago in Ilwaco, Washington, Shorebank Pacific assures customers their money will support businesses that use conservation measures to increase profits.

Through its EcoDeposits program (with assets of \$11 million), Shorebank Pacific extends credit to companies that reduce waste and pollution, embrace energy efficiency, use sustainable-forestry methods, or invest in resource-saving technology. The bank is a partnership between Shorebank Corporation of Chicago, one of the nation's most successful community-development institutions, and EcoTrust, a conservation group based in Portland, Oregon. Its mission is to build a "conservation economy" in the Pacific Northwest by helping rural communities move away from resource-deplet-

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