The Northwestern University Conference on Human Rights (NUCHR) is Northwestern's leading voice for human rights on campus. We provide a forum for the discussion of both global and local issues through the lens of human rights. Through programming events, seminars, service learning trips, and our culminating conference, NUCHR provides an academic arena for all members of the Northwestern community to critically discuss and challenge human rights issues. The undergraduate student-organized conference unites student delegates from across the country with distinguished academics, activists, and diverse members of the Northwestern community. The topic of our conference changes annually, and this year we examined the relationship between the environment and human rights. While many Northwestern organizations have an environmental focus, NUCHR brought a different perspective to the topic, demonstrating that environmental issues are human rights issues.

This year, NUCHR’s 11th annual, three-day conference included two keynote speakers, three panels, and an educational trip into Chicago. Our keynote speakers included Winona LaDuke, a Native American rights advocate and twice vice-presidential candidate, and Njoki Njehu, a Kenyan human rights activist and founder of the Daughers of Mumbi Organization. Throughout the course of the conference, we examined three major topics through our panel discussions. First, we framed environmental issues as human rights issues by focusing on the disproportionate impacts that accompany almost all instances of environmental degradation. From rising sea levels to tar sands oil extraction, these are problems that affect the world’s most impoverished and marginalized communities the most. Another portion of our conference was devoted to examining the compatibility of economic development and environmental preservation, focusing on the implications of both on human rights. Lastly, we learned about solutions to environmental problems on both an international and local scale. To address the local portion, our conference included an experiential learning trip into Chicago to visit environmental justice organizations that are focused on remedying the injustices explored in earlier parts of the conference.

On Friday, January 17th, NUCHR members, conference delegates, and conference speakers all traveled to various locations in Chicago to experience the work of community activists first hand. Organizations visited include the Southeast Environmental Task Force, Pilsen Environmental Rights and Reform Organization (PERRO), Blacks in Green (BIG), and Sustainable Englewood Initiatives. These organizations have worked on problems ranging from closing hazardous, coal-fired power plants to resisting enormous piles of pet coke that pile up on Chicago’s south side. Trip-
goers heard from these activists about the environmental problems their communities face and what actions they have taken to resolve the problems.

In addition to these site visits, participants in the trip also took part in our Friday evening banquet, where we heard from delegates and Northwestern students about the environmentally related work that they have completed already. Student presenters included Mark Silberg (Northwestern University) and Jared Naimark (Stanford University). Ending the evening on this note was an excellent way to leave students with realistic ideas of how they can become involved in finding sustainable solutions to environmental problems.

With ISEN support, NUCHR was able to make this educational field trip possible. ISEN funds covered nearly the entire cost of transportation for the day. Thus, 40 delegates, 25 NUCHR members, and 5 speakers were able to participate in this excellent opportunity to confront environmental problems and associated solutions first hand.