



# Tendai Chitewere (1973-Present)

Associate Professor

**San Francisco State University**

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*Follow your passion, have a positive attitude and find people who will support you. They are out there.  
Tendai Chitewere, 2012*

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## Overview

Dr. Tendai Chitewere is an associate professor at San Francisco State University. She is broadly interested in the intersection of environmentalism, community, and justice. Her research focuses on individual, neighborhood, and government responses to social and environmental degradation by creating sustainable ways to engage with each other and the environment. Building on her research on ecological cohousing communities, and using political ecology to examine the relationship between being green and being just, her current research is focused on urban agriculture in the San Francisco Bay Area and the role of urban gardening and K-16 education. She is also interested in the consumption of green commodities as a means to affect environmental change and creating green lifestyles. She has a strong interest in qualitative and quantitative research design that supports participatory community-based research. Some of Chitewere's work include the following:

- Chitewere, Tendai. *COMSTRUCTING A GREEN LIFESTYLE CONSUMPTION AND ENVIRONMENTALISM IN AN ECOVILLAGE*. Diss. State University of New York, 2006.
- Chitewere, Tendai. "Equity in Sustainable Communities: Exploring Tools for Environmental Justice and Political Ecology." *Nat. Resources J.* 50 (2010): 315.
- Chitewere, Tendai, and Dorceta E. Taylor. "Sustainable living and community building in Ecovillage at Ithacac: The challenges of incorporating social justice concerns into the practices of an ecological cohousing community." *Environment and Social Justice: An International Perspective*. Ed. Dorceta E. Taylor. Emerald Group Publishing Limited, 2010. 141-176.
- Roberts, Nina S. and Tendai Chitewere. "Speaking of justice: Exploring ethnic minority perspectives of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area." *Environmental Practice* 13.04 (2001):354-369.

*This interview was conducted in 2015.*

## Early Life and Career

“Even as a child, I remember being concerned about the environment and what we were doing to it,” Tendai Chitewere says. Part of Chitewere's concern stemmed from her love of nature and the outdoors, where she spent a lot of time while growing up on a small farm in Zimbabwe. Environment concerns were also prevalent in her community; questions about drought and agricultural production were central to everyday life. Thus, at an early age, Chitewere saw how she could transform her passion for nature into a career that improves life for people, and for the earth itself.

Chitewere's academic and professional choices have reflected this. As an undergraduate at the State University of New York (SUNY) Oneonta, she majored in water resources while working various jobs. Chitewere says that her experiences at SUNY Oneonta supplemented her education, both financially and in terms of content. She worked as a 4-H environmental educator, as assistant director of Affirmative Action, and as a peer education coordinator. The latter job had a particular influence on her thinking; Chitewere says it made her realize the importance of education through mutual communication, especially in terms of environmental issues. “I believe that the way we can change the planet is one person at a time, and that what we need to do is educate each other about how we live and what impacts our lives have on the environment and vice versa,” Chitewere says. It also convinced her of the importance of communication within the environmental movement, particularly between mainstream environmental groups and environmental justice activists.

Chitewere got a master's degree in agricultural and biological engineering from Cornell University, and her Ph.D. in anthropology from SUNY-Binghamton, where her dissertation research focused on Eco-Village- a community in Ithaca devoted to socially and ecologically sustainable living. She was particularly interested in how the community reflected American environmentalism and its relationship to patterns of consumption and class. Chitewere acknowledges that it was novel for a Black African woman to study a white, upper-middle class American community from an anthropological perspective, but says that the environmental community needs a perspective reversal. Chitewere commented, “I found that what was missing [at Eco-Village] was something of the social justice priority, an awareness of the challenges people who can't afford to live this way face. I'm trying to point out that we really need to pay attention to how everyone lives and interacts with the environment. We also need more research on the mainstream environmental movement in general, and how to get people to communicate with, and understand, each other.”

Chitewere is now an associate professor at San Francisco State University (SFSU), where she teaches in the Department of Environment & Geography. She cites becoming a faculty member as one of the highlights of her career; “It allows me to bring my research, which was exciting and timely, to a broader audience,” she says. The interdisciplinary nature of the program is also a perfect fit for her: It's good because the environment is not just one subject. There are economic, legal, scientific, and socio-cultural aspects. Part of what I try to do is take science and make it relevant to the people who are most affected by EJ issues.

## Importance of Mentoring to Career

Chitewere also loves being a teacher and mentor. “Ever since I was a peer educator, I realized how important education and mentorship are. There are very few careers where you have the joy of listening

to, and working with students.” Her desire to educate and mentor extends beyond being a professor; Chitewere was on the Board of Directors at Earth Team in San Francisco, an organization that helps high school students become environmental peer educators and foster the next generation of environmental leadership. She also worked with SF ROCKS, a program where SFSU faculty work with high school teachers to help teach earth science. A NSF-funded Climate Change Scholars program gave students, including underrepresented minorities, an opportunity to be research assistants in a climate change related research lab on campus. In addition, Chitewere is one of the members of a NIH BUILD grant. The main goal of BUILD is to affect institutional change in order to enhance the diversity of biomedical research, encourage and mentor a diverse group of students and academic researchers who examine health and health disparities in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Chitewere has many mentors of her own. She credits her mother with encouraging her and modeling both a good work ethic and environmental stewardship. Her mother gardened and produced much of their own food, and the experience of growing up in a rural Zimbabwean community at a time when Green Revolution technology was just arriving was itself influential. “I was very involved at a young age in traditional agriculture in my community, where we shared cows, harvested from each other's gardens, and constantly monitored the environment, she says. At the same time, we were trying all of these new technologies like high yield corn varieties; people were struggling to figure out why the saved seeds do not grow the next year, the way they had always grown.” In the academic realm, Chitewere also benefited from many mentors, including an undergraduate earth science professor, Art Palmer, who encouraged her through tough times of feeling out of place, and the members of her tremendous dissertation committee. While she acknowledges that the benefits she received from mentorship have been enormous, Chitewere also stresses that she was active in seeking out mentors for herself.

## **Challenges**

While Chitewere loves the niche she has created for herself in the environmental field, she says it has been and remains very difficult to work as one of the few minorities in the field. “It can be very isolating and lonely at times,” she says. “There are broad structural problems that can be discouraging. While my research is exciting and my job is fun, there's still discrimination out there, and we are still struggling to find ways to support and encourage more minorities who want to continue their education and become environmental leaders. We still have a long way to go.” Although significant, issues like these aren't enough to make Chitewere consider leaving the environmental field. “I do this because it's important, she says firmly. My energy and ideas for how we can make a difference are valuable. I have a lot of enthusiasm for asking tough questions, and I think the questions that I'm asking through my research are important ones.”

## **Contributions**

One of Chitewere's most significant achievements is her ability to live her life in the manner she encourages other to live theirs. “I don't own a car, I walk, use public transportation and a bicycle, I live in a very small apartment, and I grow some of my own food. It is not always convenient or easy, but necessary, she says. I have been fortunate to be able to do all of these things, and I still consume more than my share, but I think it's an achievement to be able to go without certain luxuries in order to practice

what I'm advocating. I really try to do what's good for the environment, get to know my neighbors, create a sense of community where I live, and reduce the amount of resources that I consume."

Chitewere says that minorities seeking careers in the environmental field need self-motivation, persistence, mentorship, and a positive attitude. "Having a mentor is especially important for minorities, even more so if you're like me and want to ask non-traditional questions in the environmental field, she says. You need to be motivated, and you need to find supporters. If you are working with someone who doesn't support the kind of work that you want to do, find someone else who does. Create a community for yourself, join the community of others who need you. Follow your passion, have a positive attitude and find people who will support you. They are out there."

## **For More Information**

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