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Carbon emissions

And the winner is...

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A much-criticised city turns out to be one of America's greenest

AP

FROM the air, Los Angeles hardly looks like an environmental paragon. It sprawls heroically, seeming to begin well before passengers from the east are told to fasten their seatbelts. On warm days a thin brown haze hangs over the city. Its most striking feature is its freeways—rivers flowing with glass and steel that turn red and white at night. Yet on May 29th the Brookings Institution reported that the residents of the "neon-lighted slum", as Raymond Chandler called it, generated less carbon per person than any other metropolis in continental America.

Sorry? Los Angeles is, after all, a symbol of environmental degradation. It became car-oriented well before most other cities. "If I lose my car it's like having my legs cut off," explains the doomed hero of the 1950 film "Sunset Boulevard". These days the metropolis is renowned for jammed freeways. Talk to the mayor of almost any Western city and they will outline their plans for avoiding Los Angeles' fate.

Brookings's number-crunchers calculated carbon footprints mostly by studying highway traffic and household energy use. They excluded local traffic and industry because the statistics are bad. Top of their green list is Honolulu, in Hawaii, whose residents accounted for 1.36 tons of carbon each in 2005. Los Angeles, at 1.41 tons per person, narrowly beats Portland, Oregon, which is widely proclaimed as an über-green city. New York comes fourth. At the bottom of the table, spewing out more than twice as much carbon per person as Los Angeles, is Lexington, Kentucky.

Weather is one explanation. Six of the ten most virtuous metropolitan areas are on the west coast, where Pacific breezes lessen demand for heating and air-conditioning. The worst scores for energy use go to places like Cincinnati and Washington, which have appallingly humid summers and bitter winters. Urban areas in the Midwest receive black marks because so much of their electricity comes from coal. In Los Angeles just under half does, and that will drop steeply as new environmental laws come into effect.

Another reason is that Los Angeles sprawls less than it appears. It may be a low-rise city, but a surprising number of people pack into its "dingbat" houses and bungalows. As Robert Bruegmann, a Chicago urbanist and connoisseur of sprawl, points out, this is especially true of the city's many immigrants. Almost one in four Latino households in the metropolis has more than one person to a room.

It is these suburbanites who are really virtuous. Places such as New York and Portland have pockets of abstemiousness—just 9% of Manhattanites drive to work alone, compared with 75% of Angelenos. Yet they are let down by their hinterlands, which sprawl much more extravagantly than do the outskirts of Los Angeles. Big houses on half-acre lots, common in New York's commuter belt, are rare in southern California.

These days Los Angeles is trying to improve its environmental image by encouraging developers to build blocks of flats. The Brookings report suggests this approach is wrong, or at least inadequate. The metropolis should build more bungalows rather than force families who want them to live farther inland, where temperatures are higher. There is plenty of room for more concrete on the coast. Between Orange county and the city of San Diego, for example, lies little besides tomato farms and a military base. To save the planet, fire up the bulldozers.