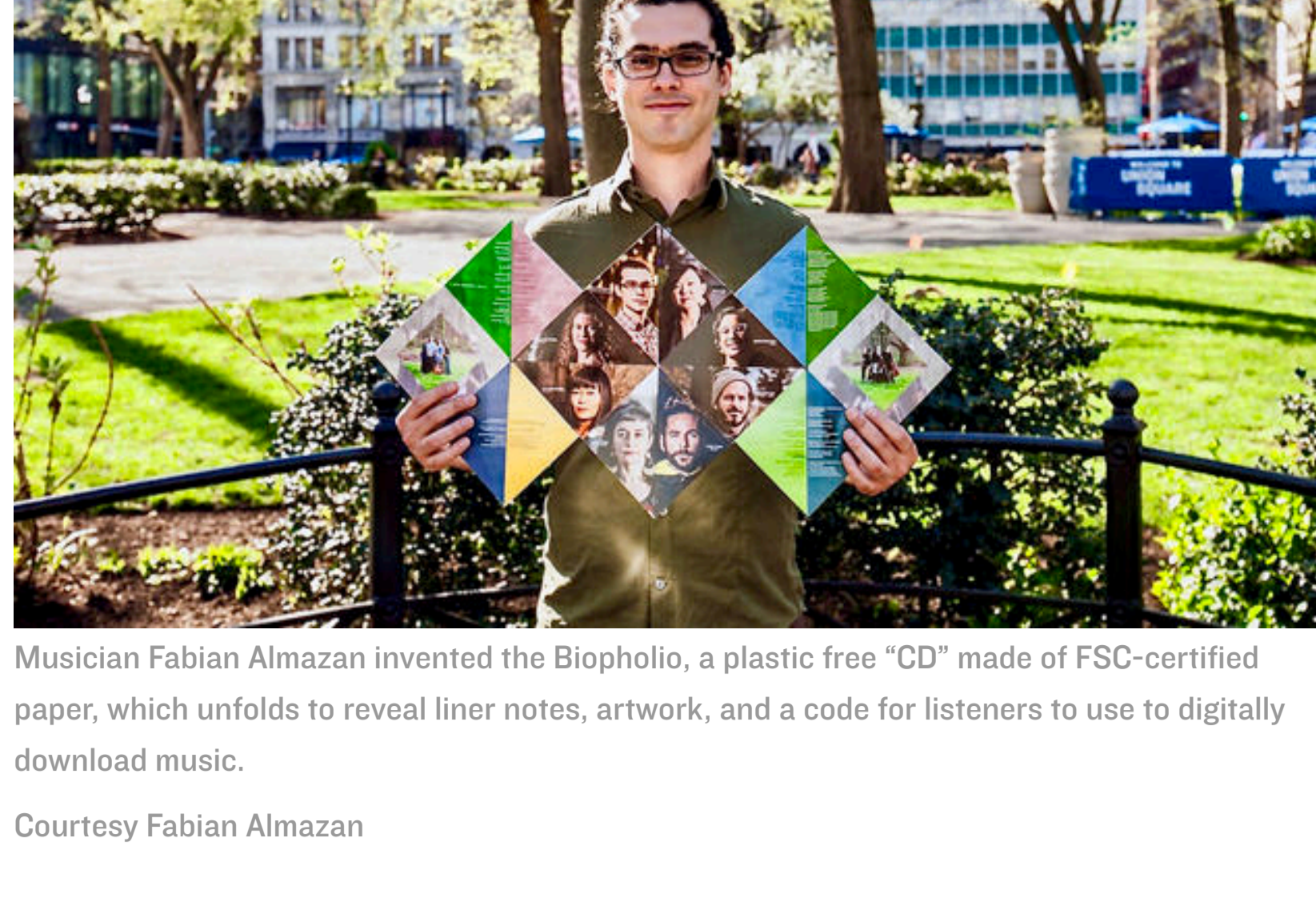


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Spinning Records Without the Vinyl

Jazz pianist Fabian Almazan started Biophilia Records to make great music—and environmental change.

December 19, 2017 | Melissa Denchak



Musician Fabian Almazan invented the Biophollo, a plastic free “CD” made of FSC-certified paper, which unfolds to reveal liner notes, artwork, and a code for listeners to use to digitally download music.

Courtesy Fabian Almazan

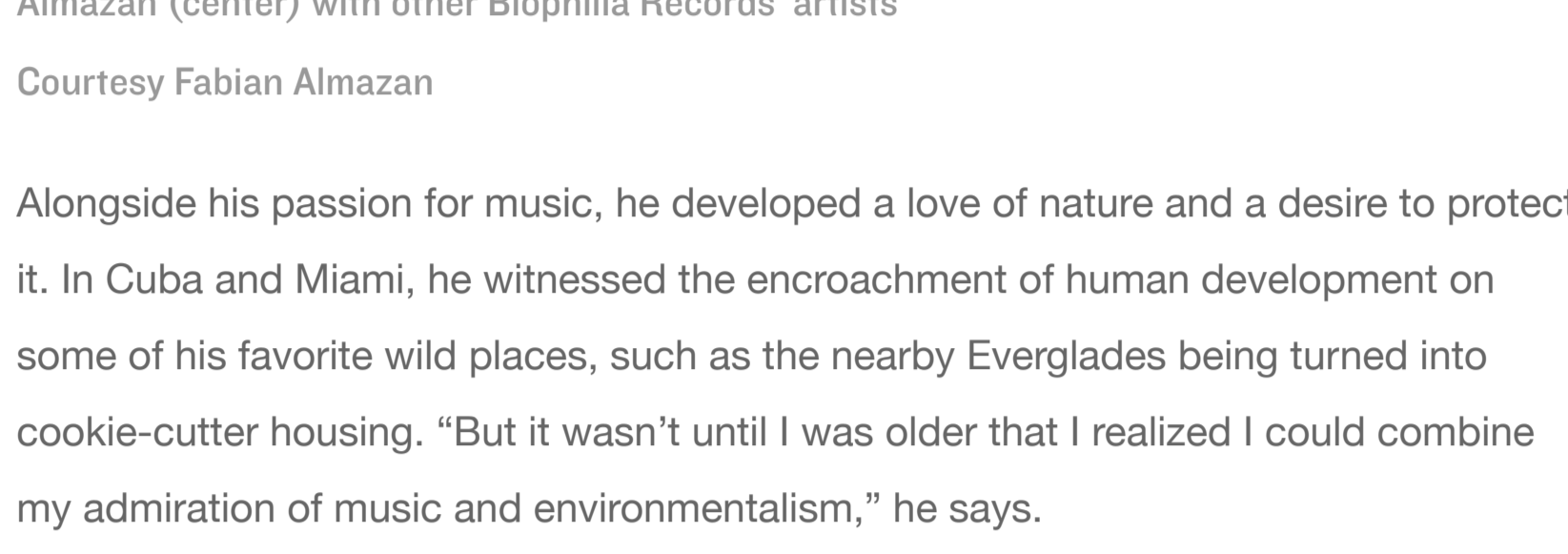
After nearly going extinct, vinyl has staged a **billion-dollar** comeback. This year, in a seventh year of double-digit growth, an estimated 40 million records have been pressed and sold globally, and the business forecast looks just as bright.

Most record label owners are embracing the trend. But not Grammy-nominated pianist and composer (and environmentalist at heart) Fabian Almazan. “There’s this current movement towards vinyl,” says Almazan, the founder of the Harlem-based jazz label **Biophilia Records**. “But I couldn’t in good conscience start a label and make vinyl and CDs knowing there are already hundreds of thousands of tons of plastic in the ocean, not to mention on land.”

To circumvent this challenge, Almazan created an innovative, origami-inspired product called a Biophollo. Made of FSC-certified paper and shaped like a CD sleeve, it unfolds to reveal liner notes, colorful artwork, and a code for listeners to use to digitally download music. Almazan is proud of his plastic-free invention but notes that “in an ideal world, we wouldn’t have a product at all.”

The son of a bass player, the Havana-born Almazan began studying classical piano as a child. He continued his tutelage in Miami, where he developed a passion for jazz, and later in New York City, where he studied at the Manhattan School of Music.

Almazan went on to perform in cities around the globe, release several solo albums, and contribute to film scores for directors including Spike Lee and George Lucas. He has also collaborated frequently with acclaimed jazz trumpeter Terence Blanchard.



Almazan (center) with other Biophilia Records’ artists

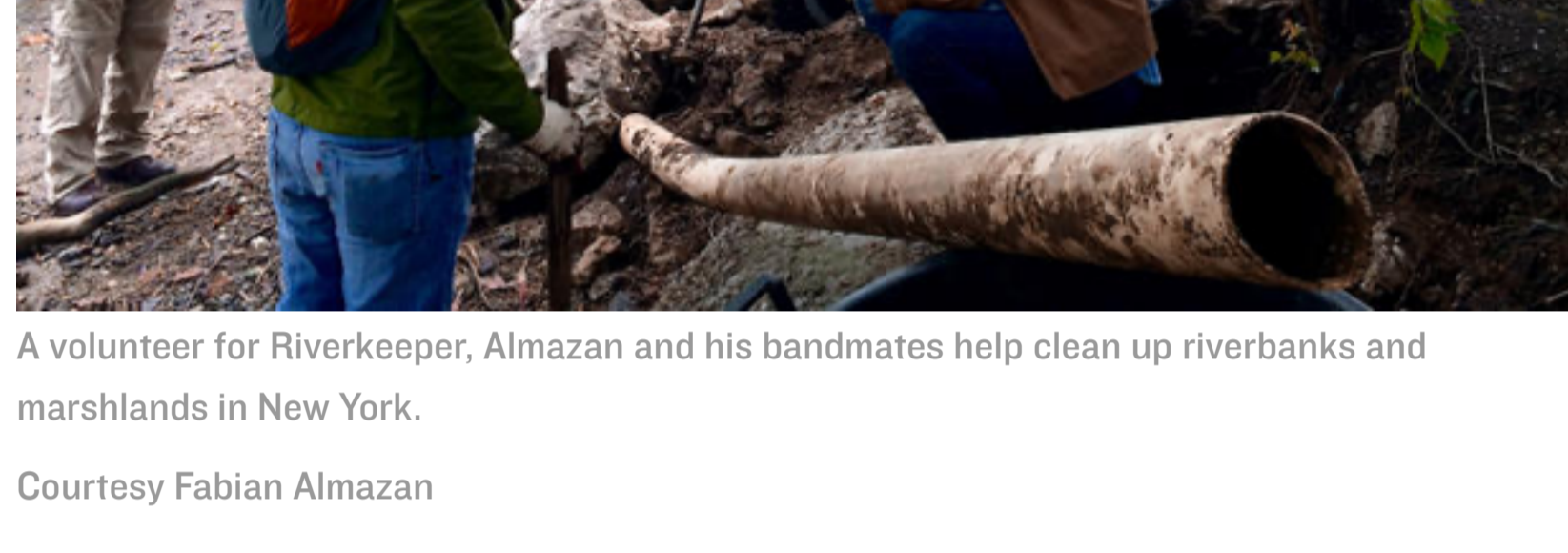
Courtesy Fabian Almazan

Alongside his passion for music, he developed a love of nature and a desire to protect it. In Cuba and Miami, he witnessed the encroachment of human development on some of his favorite wild places, such as the nearby Everglades being turned into cookie-cutter housing. “But it wasn’t until I was older that I realized I could combine my admiration of music and environmentalism,” he says.

Almazan’s label, launched in 2011 and inspired by evolutionary biologist Edward O. Wilson’s book *Biophilia* (which discusses the innate attraction of humans to other living systems), has allowed him to do just that. So have his performances with Blanchard in settings like southeastern Pennsylvania’s Longwood Gardens, which have reinforced his vision of “a world where these two things—music and conservation—can coexist,” he says.

Biophilia Records’ artists include a diverse mix of musicians and groups such as Spanish singer/composer Lara Bello, bassist/composer Linda May Han Oh, and Awakening Orchestra. Almazan says his goal is not just to promote imaginative, meaningful music but also to spark conversation—and action—about the natural world and environmental justice issues in particular. Jazz has long been a vehicle for promoting civil rights, he notes, pointing to John Coltrane’s composition “Alabama” and Nina Simone’s “Mississippi Goddam,” and environmental injustice is one of the most important civil rights issues of our time. Moreover, musicians have a receptive audience—a base of fans already listening—through which to spread a message. “Our modern times call for artists to amplify the wrongness of all of the types of injustices being committed, whether they be racial, sexual, or environmental,” Almazan says.

Franz Matzner, NRDC’s deputy director for federal campaigns who moonlights as a **jazz journalist**, considers Almazan not only a leading musical voice of his generation, but also someone who is helping to expand jazz’s legacy of activism. And during this tumultuous time for civil rights, that role carries extra weight. “Since the Trump election there has been a surge of engagement from the jazz and creative music community—in the form of both protest albums and public discourse,” says Matzner. “Almazan has played a role there, too—joining educational panels at the New York City’s Winter Jazzfest and elsewhere, joining arms with the growing cadre of concerned artists who are drawing a direct line between pollution, human rights, and inequality.”

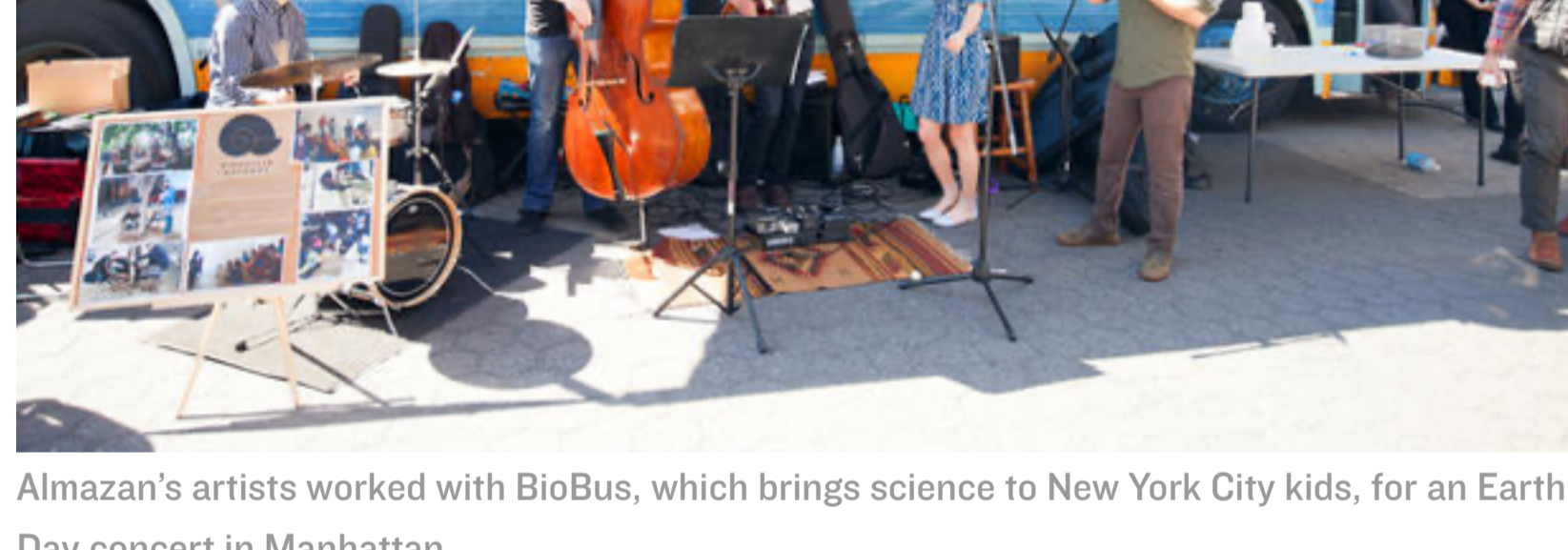


A volunteer for Riverkeeper, Almazan and his bandmates help clean up riverbanks and marshlands in New York.

Courtesy Fabian Almazan

Biophilia Records invites fans of its artists to volunteer alongside them at events hosted by local environmental nonprofits, such as New York’s Riverkeeper, an organization devoted to protecting the Hudson River and New York City watershed. While interacting with artists one on one, fans clean up marshlands, pull trash from riverbanks, and plant trees. Sure, some people show up just to hang with their musical crush, but Almazan says that with this hands-on approach, “everyone comes out with a sense of pride that they did something that helped. They come out more informed.”

Artists from the label have also brought this ethos to their performances, as when they partnered with the BioBus—a mobile lab that brings science to the kids of New York City—to give a solar-powered Earth Day concert in Union Square.



Almazan’s artists worked with BioBus, which brings science to New York City kids, for an Earth Day concert in Manhattan.

Courtesy Fabian Almazan

Perhaps the most radical ways Biophilia Records stands for the environment, however, is through its commitment to selling digital albums only. It’s a tricky stand to take within the struggling music industry, where a plethora of free, streamable music makes it difficult for artists to sustain themselves. With CD and record sales one of the most reliable means for musicians to earn income and promote their work, Almazan admits that some artists are reluctant to get behind his label’s no-plastics policy. And many music fans still like having a tangible product.

As for his own music, Almazan will sometimes write songs with an environmental subject in mind. His piece “H.U.G.s.,” whose title stands for “historically underrepresented groups,” muses on the disproportionate environmental challenges faced by communities of color. Another,

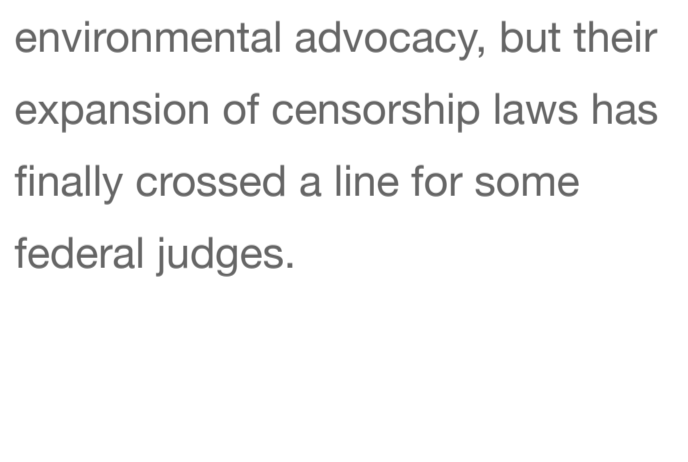
“**Hacia el Aire**” (“Toward the Air”), took inspiration from the work of the Earth Conservation Corps, a Washington, D.C.-based organization that empowers young people from low-income neighborhoods. Corps participants rehabilitate local waterways as well as bald eagle populations. “Sadly, there’s so much violence in the neighborhoods these kids come from that they would name the eagles they released after friends who were shot. ‘Hacia el Aire’ is a symbolic gesture toward that.”

In 2018, Biophilia Records will release albums from at least four new artists, and Almazan is also planning a flurry of new volunteer events. He’s pleased that more listeners are starting to understand the label’s mission. “Even people who are reluctant to buy Biophilia Records because we don’t offer CDs or vinyl, I’ve seen them open up and say they realize the situation is getting to a critical point and we have to change our approach,” he says.

It’s that kind of engagement Almazan wants to see more of. Ultimately his dream is to host fully solar-powered concerts in places like botanical gardens and natural history museums, where the scientists on staff can directly speak to music fans. “I want to bridge the scientific and environmental communities with the artistic ones, to bring everyone together so we’re all talking to each other about what we’re doing.”

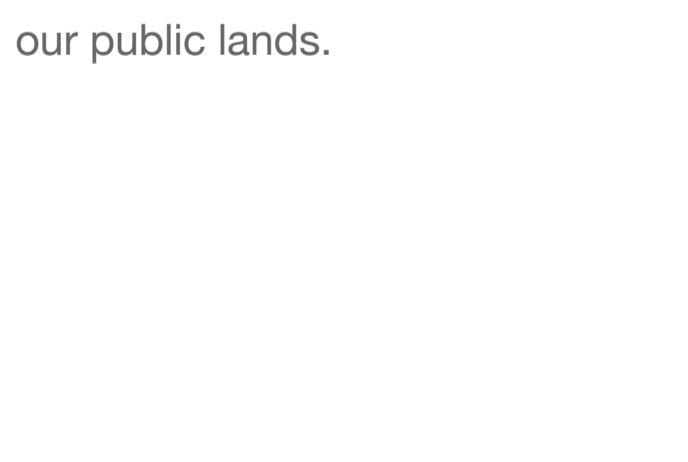
Both the environment and the arts are struggling, he says. And both are vital to sustaining harmony on earth.

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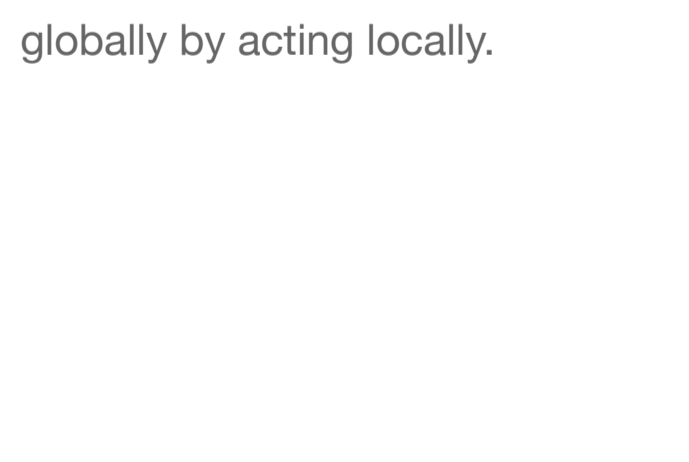
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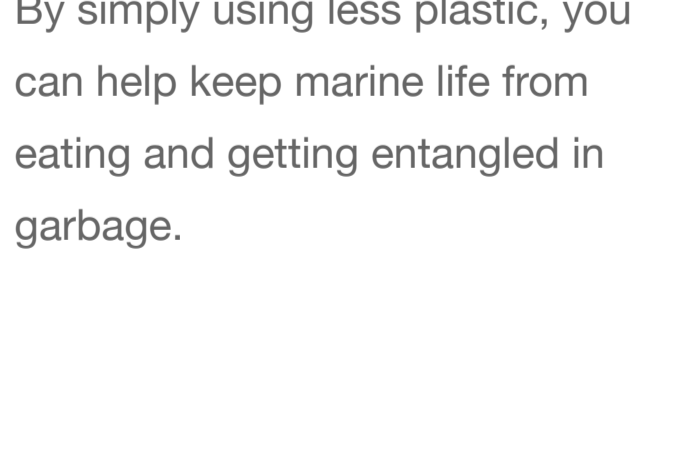
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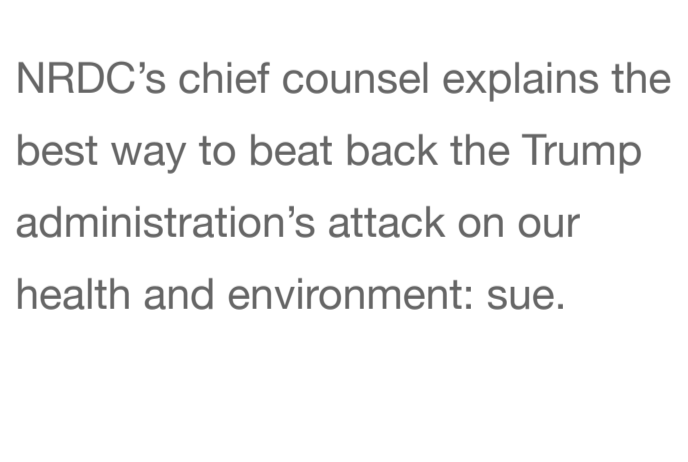
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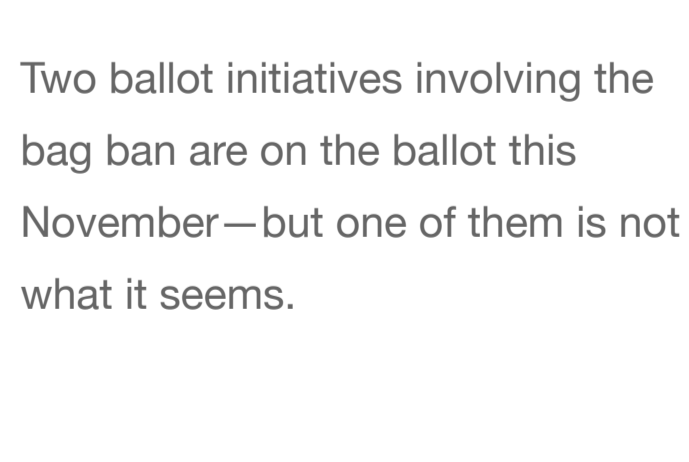
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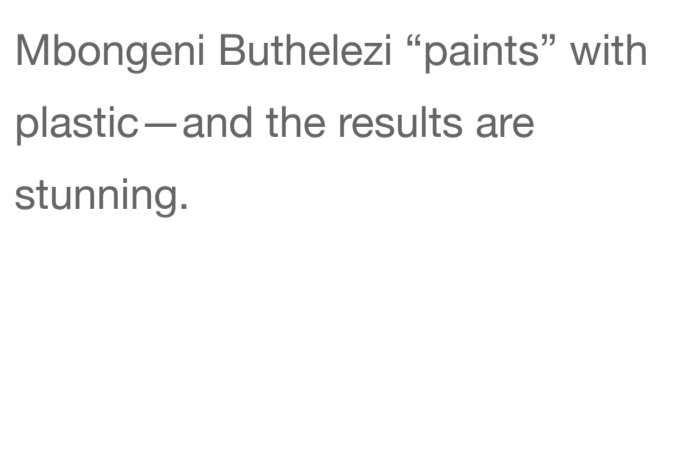
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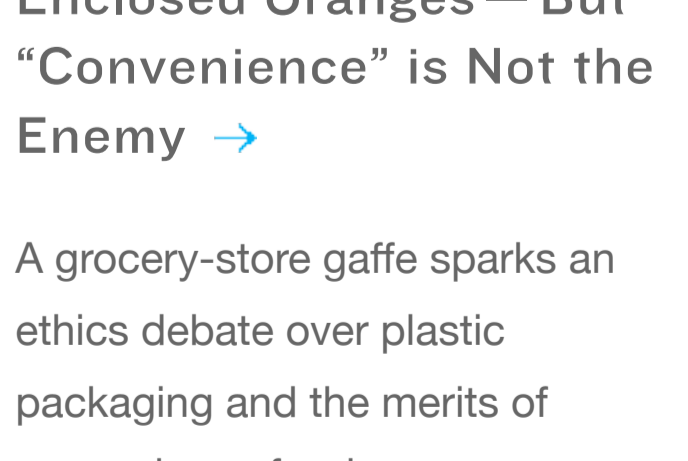
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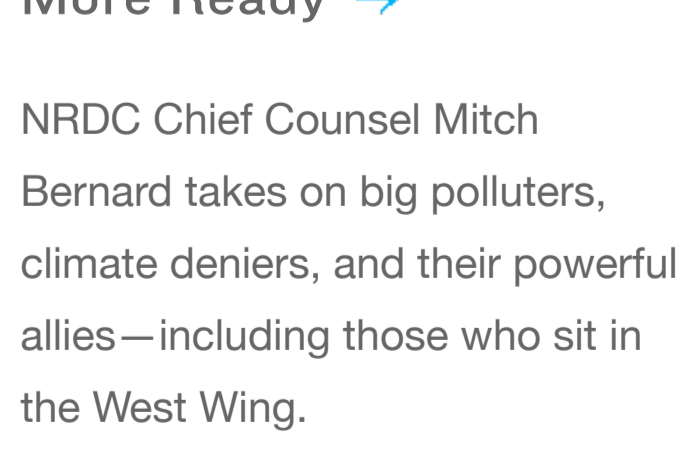
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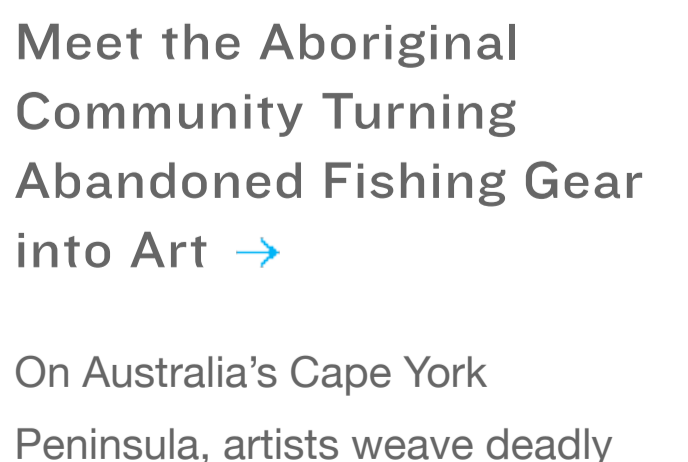
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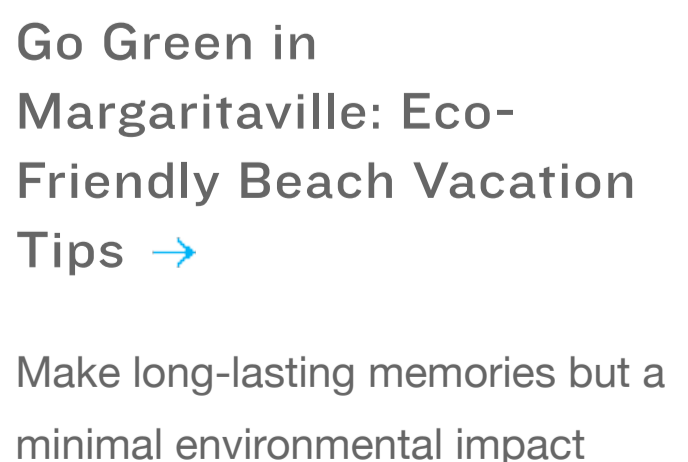
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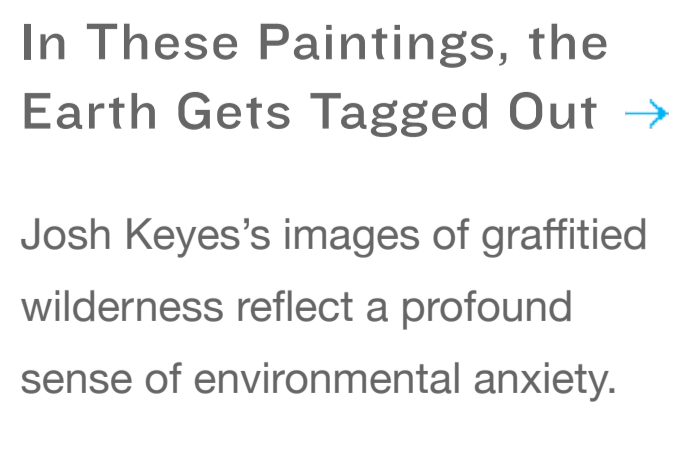
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