

Unequal Protection: Civil Rights and the Environment

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"A response to social and environmental issues at both the national and international levels is the environmental justice movement...it touches upon every sphere of human endeavor. And although we have embarked upon an era of environmental destruction unprecedented in modern times, and although social conditions for many in this country and throughout the world have failed to improve to any significant extent, the environmental justice movement, drawing its strength from both the grassroots and academia, has the potential to change the way we do business in this country and throughout the world profoundly."

–Bunyan Bryant, University of Michigan professor and pioneer of the environmental justice movement

Growing up in a southern, white suburban community allowed me frequent contact with the outdoors and green spaces. I never outgrew this attachment to the natural world, so when I entered the University of Michigan I was confident in pursuing a degree in environmental science. In the first couple years, I began to more fully embrace my identity as an Asian American, something I hadn't quite realized as a teenager. I was politicized through learning about the collective struggles of people of color and history of social movements in the United States. At the same time, I felt increasingly marginalized and isolated as a person of color in my environmental program. Why weren't there more non-white students in my courses? Why weren't any of my classmates the least bit concerned about the campus climate for students of color? Just as I was ready to abandon any inclination towards environmentalism, I took a class on environmental justice, and found out about a different kind of movement-- the Environmental Justice Movement--led by people of color doing environmental work in the context of dismantling multiple forms of oppression. Of course people of color were concerned with the environment, we had always worked on environmental issues, but perhaps more so as community, labor or civil rights issues. In that class, I was able to gain a deeper analysis of why communities of color (and poor whites) have disproportionate exposures to pollution, as well as critique the mainstream environmental movement and traditional methods of environmental protection. More importantly, through the environmental justice lens, I adopted a framework of how humans must relate to each other, to the earth, and to future generations.

Civil rights and environmental protection

The environmental justice narrative usually begins in Warren County, North Carolina. In 1982, over 500 African Americans staged a demonstration against the siting of a polychlorinated biphenyl landfill (PCBs) near a Black community. Though the attempt to block the landfill's construction failed and the majority of protestors were arrested, this event sparked the birth of the modern Environmental Justice movement across the country.

Following this incident, two landmark studies came forth to help quantify the environmental conditions in communities of color and low-income communities. One

was conducted by the U.S. Government Accountability Office, which reported that three out of four hazardous waste sites in the southeast region are located in Black communities. The other study, produced by the Commission for Racial Justice of the United Church of Christ, "Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States", found similar, more comprehensive results at the national level:

- * While socio-economic status plays an important role in the location of commercial hazardous waste facilities, race is the leading factor.

- * Three out of the five largest commercial hazardous waste landfills in the United States are located in mostly Black or Hispanic (Latino) communities; these landfills account for 40% of the nation's estimated commercial landfill space.

- * Cities with large Black populations like St. Louis, Houston, Cleveland, Chicago, Atlanta, [Detroit], and Memphis have the largest numbers of uncontrolled toxic waste sites.

- * About half of all Asian/Pacific Islanders and Native Americans live in communities with uncontrolled waste sites.

These studies reinforced the groundswell of grassroots activity in areas appearing to lack political power, bringing visibility to the discriminating pattern of unequal distribution of environmental hazards. Alongside milestone conferences at the University of Michigan, organizing efforts culminated in the 1991 First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit, drawing over 650 people. People of color from across the country came together to share and strategize around environmental problems in their communities, realizing that no racial or ethnic group was immune to the impacts of environmental racism. The Summit pushed the movement to the next level, beyond a strictly anti-toxics angle, to encompass a global movement that connected to issues of public health, poverty, land use, housing, transportation, economic development and globalization. Based on this multi-issue analysis, delegates adopted the 17 Principles of Environmental Justice that provides a guide for building the movement.

As a response to the growing concern and escalating empirical data, President Clinton signed the Executive Order 12898 (Federal Actions to Address Environmental Justice in Minority Populations and Low-Income Populations) in 1994. The Executive Order mandated all federal agencies to incorporate environmental justice into their policies and programs, and established an advisory council to make recommendations on how to implement the order.

Environmental (in)justice in Detroit

Dubbed Motorcity, Detroit has fed our nation's dependency on and obsession with automobiles. During its peak, the auto industry gave Detroit a huge economic prosperity and thousands flocked to the city to get a piece of the pie. If anyone had questioned the long-term impact that this mentality of economic and social development would have, few heeded the warning.

Not only did racism play a central role in the history of the city, it also left a legacy of toxic contamination few suburban communities have to live with. Certain communities have been made expendable to maintain the industrial processes needed to uphold the

American way of living. In effect, Detroit has become a dumping ground for environmental hazards and societal problems in its post-industrial wake.

Today, Detroit is mostly populated by people of color (including 80% African American, 5% Latino) and faces a multitude of challenges including, high unemployment, poverty, an inadequate school system, and rising health care costs. Clearly, these issues are exacerbated by the poor condition of the city's land, air and water. Below are some examples of what communities in Detroit are dealing with:

- * If you've ever driven on I-75 south of downtown Detroit, it's hard to miss the smell coming off the landscape of industrial stacks and facilities. Residents of the Delray neighborhood, located in the highly industrialized area of southwest Detroit, are neighbors with Marathon Oil, Great Lakes Steel, Detroit Edison, wastewater treatment plants, and a dozen other industrial facilities.

- * Recently in Mexicantown, the Detroit Public Schools built Beard Elementary School (renamed Roberto Clemente Learning Academy) on top of a site contaminated with PCBs, lead and arsenic. The community was faced with the unfair choice between fighting for children's education and a safe environment.

- * On the near east side, the Greendale community continues to bear the burden of exposure from the irresponsibility of Canflow Environmental Services, a company that dumped industrial wastewater in the sewage system, which overflowed in residents' basements and backyards with sludge, chemicals and human waste.

- * Southwest Detroit and south Dearborn, an area largely populated by Latino and Arab Americans, is also the site for the proposed Detroit Intermodal Freight Terminal (DIFT) by the Michigan Department of Transportation. This project would eliminate several homes and local businesses to accommodate an expanded facility and over 5,000 more freight trucks into an already burdened area with rail, trucks and industry. Community residents having been organizing and raising concerns about negative impacts to the community, including health concerns from increased air pollution, which has been completely ignored by the state.

- * Further east, Master Metals left a legacy of lead contamination and hazardous waste. Soil samples from lawns and nearby property reveal significantly high levels of lead. Studies show that among infants and young children, lead poisoning has been associated with development and behavioral disorders and juvenile delinquency.

- * In Hamtramck, possibly one of the most ethnically diverse parts within the city, residents are exposed to the mercury, dioxin and other toxic emissions coming from the Hamtramck Medical Waste Incinerator. Local community members have been vocal in their opposition of the incinerator and are in the process of demanding it to be permanently shut down.

After reviewing the evidence of unequal exposure, one can't help but feel like whole generations of people are being cheated from the basic right to live in a clean and safe environment. Anecdotes of high asthma rates, cancer, respiratory problems and other illnesses are common in many of these neighborhoods, and the above vignettes are but a few of many environmental problems facing Detroit.

Fortunately, a number of organizations and community members have taken up the fight and continue to build upon the momentum created by past victories of the environmental justice movement in Detroit. One such victory happened in the mid-1990's when a coalition composed of residents, area block clubs, environmental, and

environmental justice organizations successfully shut down the Henry Ford Medical Waste Incinerator.

Critical questions

Environmental justice is about pushing the limits of our way of thinking, and demands that we change how we operate as a society. It exposes manifestations of racism and oppression in the context of the environment, and challenges the stereotypical notion that people of color and poor people don't care about the environment. It questions the way we handle environmental problems through a risk-assessment approach, which allows health concerns to fall to the wayside. It pushes us beyond identity politics because the survival of our communities is dependent upon the integrity of the land, air and water.

In Detroit, one of our biggest challenges is to overcome the myth that environmental justice will destroy the economy. Instead, I would argue that the current approach to building our economy is destroying lives. We've become so dependent on the auto/manufacturing industry that many of us, along with our politicians, are too willing to compromise our health and quality of life to gain a few employment opportunities from an industry that uses automation to stay ahead in business.

The 1994 executive order was an attempt to institute a system of accountability at the federal level, and not surprisingly, the current Bush administration has been unresponsive to complaints of environmental racism. This necessitates the need to look to the state level, and New York, New Jersey and California have initiated environmental justice policies. To date, Michigan has no legal remedy to address environmental injustice. Launching similar policy goals in Michigan would be one step toward establishing accountability.

As a movement, we need to continue tackling the critical questions that appear before us. The early years of the environmental justice movement was cutting edge because it broadened our understanding of the world and gave communities an effective way to organize and to improve their communities. But like any movement, the environmental justice movement cannot just be about redress and protest politics. Though protesting has its place, we get stuck in becoming victims. In the face of seemingly insurmountable obstacles, power structures, and god-like corporations, our communities are facing their most lethal struggles. For exactly this reason it is all the more critical that we have a vision and build. How are we moving towards realizing a vision of self-determination for our communities?

I once heard a Detroit youth activist say, "Out of system failure comes endless possibilities," as a way to approach Detroit's crisis. In my mind, these possibilities can come out of the environmental justice movement.

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