

INTRODUCTION TO

**ENVIRONMENTAL
JUSTICE**

THE RISE OF THE ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE MOVEMENT

Organized Protests

The origins of the Environmental Justice Movement can be traced back to the Civil Rights and Farm Labor movements of the 1960s and 1970s. However, the movement began to gain cohesion and momentum in the 1980s. In 1982, a local minister, his congregants and other community residents mobilized an ongoing nonviolent sit-in protest against the siting of a polychlorinated biphenyl (PCB) landfill in the overwhelmingly Black Warren County, North Carolina. Over 500 local residents joined by national civil rights activists were arrested. Despite their sustained organized protest, the effort was unsuccessful in halting construction and thousands of tons of PCB-ridden soil were intentionally dumped in an unlined landfill in their community. This event is often recognized as the catalyst for the Environmental Justice Movement and the coining of the term *environmental racism*, which is when communities of color are targeted for the placement of pollution-generating facilities, as well as the transport, storage and disposal of hazardous and toxic substances, and discriminated against in the unequal enforcement of environmental laws and regulations.

Warren County was not an isolated incident. Local activists, community organizations and faith leaders started the environmental justice movement in reaction to the vastly disproportionate siting of polluting facilities and widespread inequity in environmental enforcement and public health protections for low-income neighborhoods, Indigenous Peoples and communities of color. These patterns are often closely tied to historic practices of residential segregation, race-based land use and



zoning, and institutional racism. As a result, these communities suffer a disproportionate impact of environmental hazards, including proximity to polluting facilities, poor air quality, life threatening health impacts, and limited access to nature and clean drinking water. These environmental risks are compounded by neighborhood disinvestment, economic inequities, and barriers to participating in environmental and land use decision-making processes.

These ongoing disparities and inequities are the result of public policy decisions developed decades ago, and reenforced by present day policies and practices at the federal, state and local government levels. Harmful public policies can include neutral or benignly intentioned initiatives that positively impact some communities and negatively impact others. Harmful policies can also take the form of intentionally discriminatory initiatives that target low-income neighborhoods, communities of color, Indigenous Peoples and immigrant communities, known as institutional racism. This is influenced by implicit and explicit biases of decision makers and a lack of inclusion and understanding of the issues faced by these frequently ignored communities.

Research and Publications

In 1983, Dr. Robert Bullard published *Dumping in Dixie*, an early account of environmental injustice in the United States. Bullard documented that African American neighborhoods in West Dallas, TX and other southern communities were often chosen for toxic waste sites. Although African Americans made up only 25 percent of the Dallas population, all five city-owned garbage dumps, 80 percent of city-owned garbage incinerators, and 75 percent of privately owned landfills were sited in Black neighborhoods.

Also in 1983, at the behest of Walter Fauntroy, pastor, civil rights leader, and non-voting delegate representing Washington, D.C. in the House of Representatives (1971-1991), the United States General Accounting Office (GAO) published a report entitled: [Siting of Hazardous Waste Landfills and Their Correlation with Racial and Economic Status of Surrounding Communities \(PDF\)](#). This study provided more evidence to the claims made by the protestors in Warren County that they were being targeted because of their race for the siting of a toxic waste landfill. The GAO found that three out of four hazardous waste landfills examined were located in communities where African Americans and Latinos made up at least twenty-six percent of the population, and whose family incomes were below the poverty level.

In 1987, the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice (UCC) released the first national statistical study linking race and the environment, [Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States \(PDF\)](#) which exposed massive disparities in the location of uncontrolled hazardous wastes sites in, or near communities of color. The study concluded that although the socioeconomic status of residents appeared to play an important role, the race of the residents was the most statistically significant indicator of where these sites were located.

The graphic consists of four vertical bars of increasing height from left to right, positioned to the left of the title.

FOUR LEVELS OF RACISM

RACE FORWARD MODEL

Internalized racism lies within individuals. This type of racism comprises our private beliefs and biases about race and racism, influenced by our culture. This can take many different forms including: prejudice towards others of a different race; internalized oppression—the negative beliefs about oneself by people of color; or internalized privilege—beliefs about superiority or entitlement by white people.

Interpersonal racism (personally mediated) occurs between individuals. This is the bias that occurs when individuals interact with others and their personal racial beliefs affect their public interactions.

Institutional racism occurs within institutions and systems of power. This refers to the unfair policies and discriminatory practices of particular institutions (schools, workplaces, etc.) that routinely produce racially inequitable outcomes for people of color and advantages for white people. Individuals within institutions take on the power of the institution when they reinforce racial inequities.

Structural racism is racial bias among institutions and across society. This involves the cumulative and compounding effects of an array of societal factors, including the history, culture, ideology and interactions of institutions and policies that systematically privilege white people and disadvantage people of color.¹

¹ Founded in 1981, [Race Forward](#) brings systemic analysis and an innovative approach to complex race issues to help people take effective action toward racial equity. Race Forward is home to the Government Alliance on Race and Equity (GARE), a national network of local government working to achieve racial equity and advance opportunities for all.

National Organizing

Through these events and publications, the environmental justice movement gained momentum and communities sought legal and legislative action as environmental justice organizations formed across the country. In 1991, these leaders and organizations came together to host the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in Washington, D.C. Seven hundred people who identified as Native American, African American, Latino, and Asian Pacific Islanders, as well as international representatives, attended and adopted [17 Principles of Environmental Justice \(PDF\)](#) as a comprehensive platform for a national and international social movement of all peoples.

Although the environmental justice movement grew out of concerns about environmental racism, the environmental justice movement focuses on protecting all vulnerable communities including communities of color, low wealth white communities, and Indigenous Peoples.

ENVIRONMENTAL RACISM

is when communities of color are targeted for the placement of pollution-generating facilities, as well as the transport, storage and disposal of hazardous and toxic substances, and discriminated against in the unequal enforcement of environmental laws and regulations.

INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

It should be noted that “environmental justice claims arising in Indian Country within the United States differ from claims arising elsewhere given the inherent sovereignty still possessed by Native Nations. Environmental Justice claims raised by Native Nations ‘must be consistent with the promotion of tribal self-governance.’ This is because environmental justice claims arising from within Indian Country include not only racial considerations but also political considerations.”¹

Indigenous communities have always been at the frontline of environmental justice efforts globally. Sacred cultural connection to the land as stewards of most of the world’s biodiversity which is under tremendous assault as we face the ‘Sixth Great Extinction’ is intertwined with ongoing systemic oppression that has kept Indigenous communities both historically close to environmental activism and extremely vulnerable to environmental hazards and impacts.² Though the assaults have been withering, Native nations and Indigenous peoples have not shirked in their unyielding battle to defend our collective cultural, natural and ecological resources.

¹ Villa, Clifford et al. 2020. Environmental Justice: Law Policy & Regulation, Third Edition. Carolina Academic Press.

² Source: Indigenous Communities and Environmental Justice (Raymond Foxworth) <https://nonprofitquarterly.org/indigenous-communities-and-environmental-justice/>



17 PRINCIPLES OF ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

The Principles of Environmental Justice adopted at the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in 1991 (excerpts included below) continues to guide the movement today.

Environmental Justice

- ▶ Affirms the sacredness of Mother Earth, ecological unity and the interdependence of all species, and the right to be free from ecological destruction.
- ▶ Demands public policy be based on mutual respect and justice for all peoples.
- ▶ Mandates the right to ethical, balanced, and responsible uses of land and renewable resources.
- ▶ Calls for universal protection from nuclear testing, extraction, production and disposal of toxic/hazardous wastes and poisons that threaten the fundamental right to clean air, land, water, and food.
- ▶ Affirms the fundamental right to political, economic, cultural, and environmental self-determination.
- ▶ Demands accountability and cessation of the production of all toxins.
- ▶ Demands the right to participate as equal partners at every level of decision-making.
- ▶ Affirms the right of all workers to a safe and healthy work environment.
- ▶ Protects the right of victims of environmental injustice to receive full compensation and reparations for damages as well as quality health care.
- ▶ Considers governmental acts of environmental injustice a violation of international law, the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, and the United Nations Convention on Genocide.
- ▶ Recognizes a special legal and natural relationship of Native Peoples to the U.S. government.
- ▶ Affirms the need for policies to clean up and rebuild our cities and rural areas.
- ▶ Calls for the strict enforcement of principles of informed consent, and a halt to the testing of experimental reproductive and medical procedures and vaccinations on people of color.
- ▶ Opposes the destructive operations of multi-national corporations.
- ▶ Opposes military occupation, repression and exploitation of lands, peoples and cultures, and other life forms.
- ▶ Calls for education which emphasizes social and environmental issues.
- ▶ Requires that we, as individuals, make personal and consumer choices to consume as little of Mother Earth's resources and to produce as little waste as possible.

Federal Initiatives

In the 1990s, the federal government began to address environmental justice explicitly with the establishment of the Office of Environmental Equity at U.S. EPA in 1992 by EPA Administrator Bill Riley. Also in 1992, the National Environmental Justice Advisory Council (NEJAC), a federal advisory committee to EPA, was established to provide advice and recommendations to the EPA Administrator about issues related to environmental justice from a diverse set of stakeholders (community leaders, environmental NGO's, Tribal members, academia, local and state government, private industry and business) involved in the environmental justice dialogue.

Then in 1994, President Bill Clinton signed Executive Order 12898, *Federal Actions To Address Environmental Justice in Minority Populations and Low-Income Populations*. It ordered "each Federal agency to make achieving environmental justice part of its mission by identifying and addressing, as appropriate, disproportionately high and adverse human health or environmental effects of its programs, policies, and activities on minority populations and low-income populations in the United States and its territories and possessions, the District of Columbia, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, and the Commonwealth of the Mariana Islands." EPA also adopted the first federal definition for environmental justice to guide the implementation of regulation and programs.



Although a major milestone for environmental justice, this definition focuses on enhanced protections and involvement, but does not acknowledge the need to right past wrongs and consider potential benefits of decisions as well as impacts. Recognizing the weaknesses of previous federal attempts to stem ongoing practices of environmental injustice, in 2021, President Biden issued several Executive Orders specifically addressing environmental and climate justice, systemic racism, and established the Justice40 Initiative, promising to allocate forty percent of overall benefits from specific federal programs and investments to disadvantaged communities.

President Biden is committed to delivering 40 percent of the overall benefits of Federal climate, clean energy, affordable and sustainable housing, clean water, and other investments to disadvantaged communities that have been historically marginalized, underserved, and overburdened by pollution.

- The White House, December 2, 2021

Environmental Justice in the Conservation Movement

With the backdrop of federal environmental justice directives and policies as well as broadening anti-racist activism across the country and the world, many national environmental groups are recognizing that environmental justice is not just a current trend in conservation work, but fundamentally necessary to accomplish the daunting environmental goals related to the climate crisis, habitat loss and wildlife extinction. Environmental justice leaders are asking environmental groups to acknowledge that gains in the conservation movement have sometimes come at a cost to people of color and to achieving environmental justice for all.

In *The Rise of the American Conservation Movement, Power, Privilege, and Environmental Protection*, Dr. Dorceta E. Taylor shares that *“The conservation movement arose against a backdrop of racism, sexism, class conflicts, and nativism that shaped the nation in profound ways. Though these factors are not usually incorporated into environmental history texts, they are incorporated into this narrative because they are critical to our understanding of how discourses about the environment were developed, policies formulated, and institutions organized.”* In her book, Taylor documents the range of ways race, class and gender influenced the environmental movement in a manner that is antithetical to environmental justice such as promoting white leadership and exclusion, benefiting white wealthy communities at the expense of low income, communities of color, appropriating Indigenous peoples lands, and failure to recognize women and leaders of color within the Conservation Movement. Taylor describes how this history informs the environmental movement even today.



Since the emergence of environmental activism in the United States, white environmentalists have struggled to see how race is connected to the environment. For a long time, many environmentalists have ignored the connections, but in recent years, concepts like justice and equity have seeped into the environmental discourse as grassroots, people-of-color-led groups have stressed those interconnections.¹

– Dr. Dorceta E. Taylor

Now, with environmental justice being the frontier of the environmental movement, conservation organizations have been moving to strengthen their in-house capacities to advance environmental justice and build authentic partnerships with frontline communities and grassroots organizations. This work includes mobilizing to better define environmental justice in their work, taking ownership of their problematic pasts and founders and making a larger commitment to empowering communities and hiring environmental justice expertise. Conservation and environmental justice have an inseparable relationship. Conservation organizations cannot effectively and authentically achieve their goals without reconciling their commitment to environmental justice.

¹ Thoughts on Being in the Environment While Black. <https://www.resources.org/resources-radio/challenge-diversity-environmental-movement-dorceta-taylor-rebroadcast/>

Embracing environmental justice in the work comes with a commitment to the deconstruction of these inequities in history, location and terminology while listening to people from lower wealth neighborhoods, Indigenous Peoples and communities of color about the characteristics of their own plight, culture and experience. When conservation organizations work closely with impacted communities to integrate social equity into the core work of their mission, further gains can be made in both equity and environmental outcomes. Sierra Club describes this essential commitment. “Working both in the government and within historically marginalized communities,



the environmental justice movement has attempted to mitigate the disproportionate subjugation of these communities to the consequences of flawed environmental policies and practices. By approaching the broader environmental movement through these means, the environmental justice movement provides an avenue for social justice for all people, regardless of race, color, gender, or income, in the pursuit of a more cooperative and sustainable future.”

*“**Environmental justice** takes on the racial, social, and economic root causes of disparities. Attention paid to race, gender, culture, and class is critical to ensuring that those who are hardest hit by pollution can access opportunities, participate in policy decisions, and benefit from investments. In sum, environmental justice is the multicultural dimension of environmentalism.”*

– Deeohn Ferris²

² From a Non-Profit Quarterly Article by Deeohn Ferris (Environmental Justice: Moving Equity from Margins to Mainstream) <https://nonprofitquarterly.org/environmental-justice-moving-equity-from-margins-to-mainstream/>

Environmental justice is both a process and an outcome. How do we know when we have achieved environmental justice? As Dr. Bunyan Bryant describes,

“Environmental Justice...
refers to those cultural norms and values, rules, regulations, behaviors, policies, and decisions [that] support sustainable communities where people can interact with confidence that the environment is safe, nurturing, and productive. Environmental justice is served when people can realize their highest potential...where both cultural and biological diversity are respected and highly revered and where distributive justice prevails.”

— Dr. Bunyan Bryant

Equity outcomes cannot be achieved without an intersectional approach to the many issues faced by communities and their voices being brought to the forefront. When seeking an authentic approach to their unique experiences of discrimination and oppression held by different groups, a flexibility to define the local and regional context of these issues is important.

Dorceta Taylor shares that “environmental justice advocates want to see more than words to heal the wounds of the past. They want to see full accountability from environmental organizations about the concrete steps they have taken and what they have accomplished in making their organizations diverse, equitable, and inclusive. The future of environmental justice is one in which people of color are recognized as equal partners in environmental affairs, and it is one in which people of color can realize the adage coined at the outset of the environmental justice movement: ‘We speak for ourselves.’”¹

The next section describes some essential capacities needed to effectively advance environmental justice.

What does this mean for conservation work?

How can NWF advance Environmental Justice in each of these ways? To advance environmental justice in your work, seek opportunities to:

- Promote meaningful engagement, and community leadership and decision-making
- Honor different cultural contexts, values and priorities
- Reduce disproportionate impacts
- Increase benefits to underserved communities
- Address systemic and present-day injustices

¹ Sierra Club This article appeared in the January/February edition with the headline “Environmental Justice Demands Listening.”