

What is Environmental Justice?

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Warren County: Afton: PCB landfill protest, 15 September 1982, in the Jerome Friar Photographic Collection (P0090), North Carolina Collection Photographic Archives, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Environmental justice by definition is the “fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income, with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies.”¹ It means that everyone should be treated equally when it comes to positives and negatives in our environment. Benefits from our environment vary in a wide range of ecosystem services from physical things like water or food to more intangible things such as aesthetic and cultural value. The negative impacts from our environment are commonly seen as pollution. Our environmental quality is degraded by pollution - if our air and water are not clean, that puts us at risk for health-related issues.

Unfortunately, we see a lot of cases of environmental injustice in our country and across the world, especially in minority communities. A disproportionate number of landfills, factories, truck depots, etc. exist in these communities, putting them at risk for health-related issues. For example, in the 1980s, three out of four landfills in the southeastern U.S. were established in poor communities. As people living

¹ <https://www.epa.gov/environmentaljustice/learn-about-environmental-justice>

in these communities realized this mistreatment, they started what we now call the environmental justice movement.

The environmental justice movement originated in the 1980s and is rapidly expanding today. There is documentation of people coming together and fixing environmental issues before this, but the 1980s are pinned as the start of the movement because that is when the first protests occurred. In fact, we can narrow it down to one event that kickstarted the whole movement – a hazardous waste landfill that was created in Warren County, North Carolina in 1982.

Prior to the 1980s, polychlorinated biphenyl (PCBs) were being used in industrial and commercial application such as electrical equipment, plasticizers, pigments, and dyes. PCBs were banned in 1979 when scientists figured out that they were toxic. At that point, people were faced with the choice of how to dispose of these chemicals. Placement in hazardous waste landfills can cause a major environmental hazard because the chemicals can leach out of the soil, and into groundwater that is often the water we end up drinking and using. PCBs can also accumulate in plants, crops, small organisms, and fish.

In 1982, the state of North Carolina was faced with the question of where to dispose of 60,000 tons of PCB-contaminated soil, and decided that Warren County, NC would be a good place for a PCB landfill. Something that is important to this case is that the people of Warren County, NC were predominantly Black and brown, and many lived below the federal poverty level. The people living in this county were outraged; they didn't want 6,000 truckloads of PCBs in their county. In response to this, they decided to protest. Hundreds of people protested by laying down in front of the landfill where the chemicals were dumped to stop the trucks from going in. Over the span of about six weeks, people marched and peacefully protested. Approximately 500 arrests were made, which marked the first arrests dealing with environmental issues. Although the protestors didn't stop the implementation of this landfill, they did raise national attention to this issue and inspired what we know as the environmental justice movement.

As a result of the protesters public pressure, the governor at time, Jim Hunt, promised that as soon as the technology was available, they would clean up the site. Unfortunately, after ten years, nothing had been done and the protesters were consistent with their pressure and influenced Governor Hunt to take action on this issue. In the late 90s, the North Carolina General Assembly and the EPA agreed to fund the clean-up of this site. After 20 hard-fought years, the landfill was eventually detoxified and cleaned up reducing the risk of living near the landfill.

In Virginia, we are currently facing a number of environmental justice issues. Across the Commonwealth we have coal-fired power plants that increase the risk of asthma, heart and lung disease, and premature deaths for nearby residents, due to particulate matter in the air. In the southwestern portion of the state, coal mining has polluted the waters and has been associated with illnesses including cancers and birth defects among the people living near the mines. In the eastern region of the Commonwealth there has been increased levels of flooding in low-lying areas of Hampton Roads related to climate change. In all of these areas, the low-income residents often experience the worst of these effects because of lack of transportation or ability to relocate.

You may be wondering, how did this happen? Can this still happen today? Well, it can and it does. As mentioned earlier, living near pollution-producing facilities puts people at greater risk for their health. Further, we see that a lot of these facilities are disproportionately being placed in minority communities. One of the reasons for environmental injustice is likely related to inadequate representation. At meetings, minority communities are often poorly represented and often given inadequate opportunity to voice their concerns. In poorer communities, hiring an attorney to sue the companies for the mistreatment is not an option because they cannot afford the cost of going to court. Further, there often may not be clear communication from our government about the health risks that occur from living near these facilities. To help overcome this level of injustice, relevant government agencies should promote communication with impacted communities about these risks.

On an optimistic note, there are good examples of where the environmental justice movement has caused progressive change. For example, in Virginia, every energy-producing facility is now required to consider environmental justice on a regular basis and take action to make their impact less harmful to the environment under the Virginia Clean Economy Act of 2020. This act was passed in hopes to minimize environmental effects in the way that we produce our energy. The hope is that if the energy is produced in a clean way, then the risk of living near an energy-producing plant won't be as much of a risk. Further, in 2019, Governor Northam created the Virginia Council for Environmental Justice to consider the implications and risks of environmental hazards. Another story for progressive change in Virginia is the halt of construction on the Atlantic Coast Pipeline compressor station located near Union Hill in Buckingham County on the top of unmarked burial sites of former enslaved peoples. A broader example of this is that we are starting to see states across the country such as Massachusetts, Montana, Hawaii, and Pennsylvania include in their state constitution that everyone has a right to a clean environment. These are examples of small steps on the road to improved environmental justice for Virginia and the country.

Overall, there are many examples of environmental injustices across the country and across the world. It is indeed unfortunate that the way that we live produces harmful and unwanted effects on our environment, including human communities. It is challenging to decide where to place these facilities that are a source of pollution, landfills, and other hazards. The environmental justice movement isn't arguing to completely eradicate all pollution because that's simply not feasible in our time. However, it is important to reflect on where these facilities are being placed so that not one group of people is being disproportionately and unjustly affected by these environmental hazards.

References:

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