

entry for: *Environmental Racism* (2002)

Environmental racism is the expression of racist assumptions in thought, action or patterns of inaction either in the formulation of environmental policy or the enforcement of environmental laws. In effect, environmental racism involves the manifestation of racist thinking or behavior concerning the distribution of environmental amenities on the one hand or pollution and toxic waste on the other.

The phrase "environmental racism" emerged in public usage to describe the circumstances surrounding a specific historical incident. In 1982 in North Carolina a plan was devised to collect 32,000 cubic yards of soil contaminated with PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls) from 14 different locations throughout the state and concentrate it in a toxic waste facility in Warren County on land that had been owned predominantly by blacks since the times of slavery. It appeared to local residents that this site had been chosen not because it was particularly environmentally suitable but rather because the site was located in a poor, predominantly black and politically powerless community.

State officials had not counted, however, on the outrage or effectiveness of local citizens. Residents organized and protested the siting of the toxic dump, and more than five hundred people were arrested in a large public demonstration focusing on the implicit racism reflected in the choice of the site's location. This incident came to represent to those concerned with social justice a blatant example of the way in which communities of color are often doubly victimized in environmental matters: first by being subjected directly to a disproportionate share of toxic pollutants in their midst and secondly by being systematically excluded from the decision-making process affecting their own health and safety. Both the pattern of toxic dumping itself and the process of exclusion in formulating environmental policy came to be known as classic examples of environmental racism.

This striking instance of environmental racism empowered other communities to examine their own circumstances. As communities of color across the country and around the world have come forward to give witness to similar patterns of environmental victimization and exclusion in decision-making processes environmental racism has come to be understood as a pervasive and endemic feature of modern industrial society. Perhaps most importantly, it has become apparent that while individuals may express environmental racism in their assumptions or behavior from time to time, it is more common for environmental racism to manifest itself as a form of institutional racism. Institutional racism is a pattern of collective thought, action or inaction characteristic of institutions like municipalities, state governments, private corporations, or national or

international regulatory and enforcement agencies. Thus, individuals in management or decision-making positions in these institutions may be personally quite free of any forms of racism, yet by acting to execute the established priorities of their institutions they may unwillingly or unwittingly perpetuate and extend patterns of environmental inequity and injustice -- in short, propagate environmental racism.

Numerous studies have emerged since the Warren County incident in 1982 to confirm and further elaborate the phenomenon of environmental racism. At the request of Congressman Walter Fauntroy, the United States *General Accounting Office* conducted a study in 1983 of eight southern states to examine the relation between the location of hazardous waste landfills and the racial and economic status of the surrounding communities. The results revealed a clear bias in the placement of the landfills: three out of every four landfills were located near predominantly minority communities. In 1987 the *Commission on Racial Justice* of the *United Church of Christ* published a study entitled, "Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States," in which it pointed to the fact that 60 per cent of black and Hispanic-Americans live in communities with uncontrolled toxic waste sites.

Further conferences convened by Professor Bunyan Bryant and studies conducted and compiled by sociologist Robert Bullard have confirmed multiple examples of environmental racism both in urban and rural settings around the United States. Whether it be through exposure to toxic wastes, air pollution, agricultural pesticides, nuclear waste or lead paint communities of color and minorities have experienced levels of risk far higher than the norm in the society as a whole. As Robert Bullard has summarized it:

A growing body of studies clearly show that communities of color bear a disproportionate burden of pollution problems in the United States. Communities of color are adversely affected by industrial toxins, dirty air and drinking water, and the location of municipal landfills, incinerators, and hazardous waste treatment, disposal, and storage facilities.

The phenomena of environmental racism is by no means confined to the United States. Indeed, some of the most egregious examples come from areas of the world formerly under colonial domination or currently subject to patterns of corporate exploitation with little or no governmental oversight or control. A striking example of this kind is the way in which the Ogoni people of eastern Nigeria have been treated by the Shell Oil Company with the active collaboration or passive consent of several successive regimes in Nigeria. For more than a decade the Ogoni people experienced damage to their health and welfare as a consequence of the extractive practices of Shell Oil in the region. In response they organized the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) with Mr. Ken Saro-Wira as President. On November 10, 1995 Ken Saro-Wira was executed by the Nigerian government on what many regard to be trumped up charges, despite the vocal objection of numerous international environmental and social justice and human rights organizations. In this instance, both the state institutions and the actions of a particular corporation were seen to be responsible for the pattern of environmental racism in eastern Nigeria.

To combat specific cases of environmental racism and counteract the institutional habits of thought, action and inaction that work to perpetuate it a substantial environmental justice or "ecojustice" movement is emerging within the United States and around the world. In October 1991 the *First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit* was held in Washington DC. Out of this meeting came a formal declaration of the "Principles of Environmental Justice," which clarified and gave public recognition the problem of environmental racism in America. Partially in response to this milestone declaration, in February of 1994, President Bill Clinton issued *Executive Order 12898*, directing that:

...each Federal agency shall 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....

In addition to this official governmental response, private environmental action groups and resource centers have been created to document instances of environmental injustice and empower communities to organize themselves to resist environmental racism. The *Environmental Justice Resource Center* (EJRC) of Clark Atlanta University under the direction of Robert Bullard has taken a leadership role in this respect. Professor Bullard has edited two editions of an important directory entitled: *People of Color Environmental Groups Directory*. In addition the National Council of Churches has provided resources for its member groups to act on ecojustice issues, and *The EcoJustice Network* and *The Working Group on Environmental Justice* have created active sites on the World Wide Web for public access to information about environmental justice and environmental racism.

Further Reading

Bryant, Bunyan I , *Environmental justice : issues, policies, and solutions*, (Washington, D.C. : Island Press, c1995).

Bullard, Robert D. *Confronting environmental racism : voices from the grassroots*, (Boston, Mass. : South End Press, c1993).

Bullard, Robert D. *Dumping in Dixie: race, class, and environmental quality*, (Boulder : Westview Press, 1994).

Resources on the World Wide Web

- *"Principles of Environmental Justice"* -- declaration of the *First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit* - October 24-27, 1991, Washington DC.
<http://ecojustice.net/document/principles.htm>
- The *Environmental Justice Resource Center* (EJRC) of Clark Atlanta University:
<http://www.ejrc.cau.edu/>
- *The Working Group on Environmental Justice:*
<http://ecojustice.net>

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June 2002