Race and Environmental Injustice

By Reeve Basom
What does race have to do with the environment?

- Environmental injustice refers to the unequal distribution of environmental hazards.
- Minority and low-income communities are disproportionately burdened by environmentally degratory practices.
- However, race is the most significant factor in predicting the distribution of environmentally hazardous facilities and practices.
Environmental racism is:

“Racial discrimination in environmental policy making and the unequal enforcement of the environmental laws and regulations. It is the deliberate targeting of people-of-color communities for toxic waste facilities and the official sanctioning of a life-threatening presence of poisons and pollutants in people-of-color communities. It is also manifested in the history of excluding people of color from leadership in the environmental movement.” -Dr. Benjamin Chavis
Two main components of environmental racism

- Innaccessibility of major environmental movements to people of color
- Environmental hazards
Environmental justice demands two basic rights

- Freedom from pollution
- Freedom to participate in environmental decision making
Mainstream Environmentalism

• Environmental Elitism
  – Mainstream environmentalism is dominated by upper and upper-middle class whites
  – Narrowly defined issues, i.e. concerned with large scale conservation and regulation
  – Mainstream environmentalist discourse has not historically included social justice…
Elitism perpetuates environmental racism by:

- De-emphasizing immediate, community level issues that dominate the ecological priorities of many communities of color.
- Emphasizing issues that are inaccessible to those who are struggling for basic environmental justice and who therefore do not have the privilege of participating in a discourse that is concerned with larger-scale issues.
TABLE 1.1 Type of Environmental Groups and Issue Characteristics That Appeal to Black Community Residents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue Characteristic</th>
<th>Mainstream</th>
<th>Grassroots</th>
<th>Social Action</th>
<th>Emergent Coalition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Appeal to urban mobilized groups</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concern about inequality and</td>
<td>-/+</td>
<td>-/+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
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<tr>
<td>distributional impacts</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Endorse the &quot;politics of equity&quot;</td>
<td>-/+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-/+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and direct action</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Focus on economic-environment</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-/+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
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<tr>
<td>trade-offs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Champion of the political</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-/+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
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<tr>
<td>and economic &quot;underdog&quot;</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

-: Group is unlikely to have characteristic.
+: Group is likely to have characteristic.
-/+: Group in some cases may have characteristic.

Source: Adapted from Richard P. Gale, "The Environmental Movement and the Left: Antagonists or Allies?" *Sociological Inquiry* 53 (Spring 1983): Table 1, p. 194.
Inaccessibility of mainstream to people of color

under-represent

job blackmail - trade-off between and employment
path of least resistance - disproportionate
Exposure to environmental hazards

- Disproportionate siting of hazardous facilities in people-of-color communities
- Environmental job blackmail
- Official unresponsiveness

* Connects back to the manifestations of environmental elitism
What is the evidence for environmental racism?

- A 1993 survey found that 87% of studies done on the distribution of environmental hazards have revealed disparities based on race.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>sonja D. Kühnemann</td>
<td>Environmental Hazards, 1967–1993: Selected Studies of Real and Income Disparities in the Distribution of...</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
“Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States”

- Published in 1987 by the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice
- Race is the most significant variable in the national distribution of hazardous waste facilities
- As the number of people of color in a community increases, so does the probability of a waste facility within the community
Continued…

- Communities with one waste facility have double the minority population than communities with zero facilities.
- In communities with at least two hazardous waste facilities, the minority representation triples that of non-facility communities.
- Three-fifths of African Americans live in communities where abandoned toxic waste sites are located.
- Nearly half of all Native Americans live in communities with uncontrolled toxic waste sites.
The case of King and Queen County, VA

• County is 50/50 black and white
• 5 landfills sited between 1969 and 1990
• 4 in predominantly black communities, 1 in a predominantly white community
• All five communities raised opposition
• Only the protests of the white community were successful
• Courts recognized the disproportionate burden placed on the communities of color but held that racial discrimination had not been a factor in siting decisions
Environmental Job Blackmail

- People of color are not only more likely to have potentially hazardous jobs, but workers of color have higher rates of actual exposure to and consequential health problems as a result of work place hazards.

- Studies have shown that morbidity and mortality rates as a result of occupational hazard exposure are significantly higher for workers of color than white workers, often within the same industries.
Lead Poisoning

- Issue with wide acknowledgement of race as a factor
- 1993 estimates: 50% of children suffering from lead poisoning in the U.S. are African American
- Exposure levels are higher for African Americans than for whites both within and outside of urban areas and regardless of income level
Farmworkers and pesticides

- Agriculture accounts for 80% of pesticide usage in the U.S.
- 1990 Dept. Of Labor national survey results: 77% of farmworkers identified as minorities
- Serious health risks
- Underreported illness/poisonings
Environmental Justice Movement

- Has emerged and gained recognition within the last three decades
- Increasing success in integration of social justice into the environmentalism framework
Warren County, NC Protests

- Early grassroots environmental justice campaign in protest of a PCB landfill in a predominantly black community
- Helped spark the EJ movement
- Prompted study, “Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States”
- “Environmental racism” coined by Chavis
United Church of Christ
Commission for Racial Justice


- One of the first comprehensive studies documenting the condition of environmental racism in the U.S.
First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit

- Convened in 1991 in Washington, DC
- Representation of diverse ethnicities, faiths, disciplines, locations, etc.
- 3 main concerns
  - General environmental/social crisis
  - Particular types of pollution impacting communities of color
  - Historical and cultural experience of people of color in relationship to the environment
Results of Summit

- Networking
- United front with solidified goals
- 17 Principles of Environmental Justice
Injustices within environmental policy: the EPA

- Granting of local permits without investigating the equity of approved plan
- Higher penalties for infractions of environmental law in white communities than in minority communities
- Longer wait for hazards in minority communities to be placed on the Super-fund clean up priority list
- In 1992, EPA published a report to address the issue of environmental injustice
  - No new findings
  - Omissions and misrepresentations
  - Environmental Racism discounted and obscured*
New EPA Initiatives

- 1997 Environmental Justice Implementation Plan
- Office of Environmental Justice
- Office of Civil Rights
- Programs to increase participation of minorities
Federal Policy

- 1993 NEJAC (National Environmental Justice Advisory Council)
  - Integration of EJ into federal policy
- 1994 Executive Order 12898 (Clinton admin.)
  - Requiring all federal agencies to incorporate EJ as part of their mission
Synopsis

- Environmental racism as key component of environmental justice
- Grassroots
- Influence of civil rights
- Environmentalism + social justice
- New environmental discourse
Concluding example: Chester, PA

- 60% minority
- Dumping grounds for Delaware County (including Haverford, Swarthmore and Bryn Mawr)
- Releases 90% of all toxins produced in the county
- Grassroots movement took the PA Dept. of Environmental Protection to court under the Civil Rights Act
- Received federal approval to proceed as “environmental racism suit”
- Community still struggles, but is an example of increasing official acknowledgement of environmental racism
How can we reconcile the two viewpoints: 1) intrinsic rights of nature - we must be less anthropocentric, and 2) basic human rights are the first environmental priority?
Image sources

www.ejrc.cau.edu/ ejinthe21century.htm
www.xula.edu/.../ ej_summit_highlights.html
http://www.ejrc.cau.edu/execordr.html
www.txpeer.org/toxicictour/ huntsman.html
www.farmworkers.org/ pestieng.html