

Environmental Justice

The people who are least to blame for climate change will suffer its greatest consequences.

Wealthy countries and corporations account for the vast majority of pollution but externalize their environmental impacts upon poorer segments of the population.

Faced with the decision of where to place polluting infrastructure and dump hazardous waste, governments and corporations will choose poor and minority communities because they have the least political power. In fact, race is the most powerful predictor of hazardous waste dumping in the U.S. (Mohai and Saha) Through practices such as redlining, people of color have been kept segregated in undesirable neighborhoods and have little choice but to accept the burden of heavy pollution.

As the impacts of climate change become increasingly severe, the rich will utilize their resources to keep their heads above water, figuratively and perhaps literally speaking. For the less fortunate, sea level rise, flooding, storms, drought, natural disasters, and wildfires will inflict an outsized impact.

Putting an end to the disproportionate allocation of environmental burdens to disadvantaged communities is the goal of Environmental Justice (EJ) movements.

Environmental Justice as defined by the EPA:

“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.”

How can environmental justice be attained moving forward? Many point towards the Green New Deal as a reflection of the growing movement to recognize the intersection of social and environmental justice issues and the importance of addressing these challenges in conjunction with one another. At present, demand for EJ legislation remains small. Ultimately, environmental regulation will be crucial in controlling the distribution of environmental burdens. To that end, the public has to show their representatives that EJ is a voter priority. Awareness of EJ as a concept is the first step in that direction.

But, where government action is lacking, civil society can help fill the void. Traditionally, funding for environmental organizations has mostly gone towards wildlife and nature conservancy groups while EJ groups are left behind. (Faber and McCarthy 176). Greater support of local grassroots EJ organizations will help activists make a difference.

To help, look into supporting your local EJ movement, vote for lawmakers who stand for EJ and advocate for EJ legislation.

Citations

Faber, Daniel and Deborah McCarthy. "Breaking the Funding Barriers: Philanthropic Activism in Support of the Environmental Justice Movement ." n.d. 175-209.

Mohai, Paul and Robin Saha. "Racial Inequality in the Distribution of Hazardous Waste: A National-Level Reassessment." *Social Problems* (2007): 343–370.