



Environmental Justice

Adapted from Paul Kivel, Uprooting Racism, revised 4th edition, New Society, September 2017

One of the most critical national and international issues we face is global warming including such visible effects as ice cap melting, rising temperatures and sea levels, species and habitat destruction, unsustainable levels of consumption and increasing numbers of extreme weather events. Neither the problems nor the solutions are race-neutral.

Environmental racism refers to any policy, practice or directive that differentially affects or disadvantages (whether intentionally or unintentionally) individuals, groups or communities based on race or ethnicity. It combines with public policies and industry practices to provide benefits for whites while shifting costs to people of color. Numerous studies have shown that heavily polluting industries in North America such as mining and manufacturing, garbage dumps, toxic waste sites, medical waste incinerators and congested freeways are located disproportionately in communities of color in rural, urban and suburban areas and on Native American land.¹ Higher levels of air, water and land pollution lead directly to higher levels of asthma, cancer and other illnesses, i.e. increased mortality for children and adults. In addition, people of color are, in general, more likely to have jobs with higher exposure to contaminants such as pesticides, asbestos, lead, and other toxic chemicals.² Finally, people of color are most likely to experience lack of access to clean air and water and uncontaminated, affordable and healthy food.³

At the international level, the United States is the largest per capita consumer nation on earth – with less than 5% of the world’s population, the US uses about a quarter of the world’s annual fossil fuel consumption—including nearly 25 percent of the coal, 27 percent of the oil, and 27 percent of the world’s natural gas.⁴ US-based multinational oil, mining, agribusiness, lumber, fishing and manufacturing companies, along with their European, Japanese and Chinese counterparts, continue to pursue profits at all costs throughout the world. These companies destroy the environment and block efforts to cut back on consumption and address global climate change. The US military is the largest and most destructive contributor to global heating through the production of its equipment and armaments, the transport and size of its personnel, its deployment of people – and the use of environmentally-destructive weapons such as Agent Orange, white phosphorus, depleted uranium, land mines and cluster bombs.⁵

US foreign policy is based on the disposability of people of color for the benefit of white people. Our domestic policy mirrors this practice. Hurricanes Rita and Katrina, winter storm Sandy, droughts and massive forest fires in the Western US were devastating but predictable events.

Their damage was compounded by inadequately maintained levees and canals, dilapidated housing, poor emergency planning, police protection of white property and harassment of people of color, racially biased media coverage and racist municipal and state policies that gave priority to rebuilding white neighborhoods and tourist centers over the neighborhoods where people of color lived.⁶ Both internationally and domestically, the exploitation and destruction of the environment is intertwined with the exploitation and oppression of people of color.

Have you recently consumed coffee, tea, chocolate, bananas, meat, or mono-cultured crops?

Have you recently used transportation or heating systems that relied on fossil fuel?

Have you recently used a cell phone, computer, or other electronic device using heavy metals?

Do you wear clothes from environmentally destructive materials (e.g. cotton or polyester) made by people of color in dangerous and low-waged work?

We are all directly connected to environmental degradation and worker exploitation involved in these products which includes child labor, slavery, highly toxic working conditions and pollution, the destruction of vast areas of the natural environment, pollution of rivers, ground water systems, and other ecosystems, the extinction of a tremendous number of animal and plant species, the release of methane and CO₂ into the air, etc.

On the front lines of attack, communities of color have also been on the front lines of resistance. The people of color and indigenous people-led environmental justice movement has been engaging in creative and powerful struggle against environmental destruction and for the preservation of lives, land, and cultures. Under-staffed and poorly funded, they have had to work mostly on their own because most mainstream environmental organizations and funders, especially the largest and best funded are run by white people. People of color, (and majority world nations at the international level) have been systematically shut out of the conversations and decision making related to environment issues. Basic white racist assumptions continue to operate in the environmental movement. Some of these are:

White people know what's best

White people know how to get things done

People without education, money and connections are not qualified to lead organizations and organizing efforts

People of color have a limited and local point of view, while white people can see the broader picture

The way to make change is through political influence, lobbying, advocacy, lawsuits and the courts rather than mobilization and organizing

The way to address environmental problems is to educate the public and change individual habits of consumption.

Power is located in the individual, not the collective

Solutions must be market-based to be implementable and effective

To use a metaphor developed by social justice activists Victor Lewis and Hugh Vasquez, imagine the United States as a huge passenger ship.⁷ The ruling class is in first class on the deck



enjoying all the amenities and thinking themselves protected from any hardship. Most of us are in second, third or fourth class. We may have moved down a class during the recent recession but we are still getting by. Some of us are in fifth and sixth class and literally struggle to keep our heads above water. And many low-income people of color are at the very bottom of the boat in steerage, along with low-income white people cleaning the rooms, preparing the food, serving and doing the laundry for those at the top.

The ship has a big hole in it, and those in steerage are living in water to their waist, struggling to stay alive. People higher in the ship may think they are immune to the water (pollution, climate change, natural disasters) pouring into the hole. But when the ship sinks – we all go down. Power and privilege may mitigate or postpone the impacts of environmental devastation, but ecologically all life is connected and interdependent.

The people at the bottom of the ship know the ship is sinking and have been organizing to save their communities, to fix the hole, and redistribute the resources on the ship. The people at the top also know it is sinking, but they don't want to publicize the fact. They are clearly benefiting from the way things are set up; they fear exposing their incompetent leadership and corruption and losing their wealth and power by riling up the rest of the passengers. They continue to mishandle the ship (for example, the Gulf Oil disaster), driving too fast through dangerous waters, refusing to slow down or alter course (encouraging new deep-water oil drilling). Their actions contribute directly to the hole in the ship getting bigger.

Most of the rest of us are willing to go along with the ruling class. We don't give credibility to the voices at the bottom of the ship or even if we do we think we can rely on those in power to take care of us, or for advances in science and technology to fix things. Perhaps we are just in denial, minimizing the danger and assuming we'll be unaffected by what is happening. But increasing cancer rates, larger-scale natural disasters, constant war for control of declining oil fields, and contaminated air, food and water belie the danger we're all in.

Today, Native Americans and other indigenous peoples are at the forefront of environmental struggles to stop fossil fuel and mineral extraction, to preserve cultural and sacred sites, and to defend the natural environment from further degradation. Indigenous Peoples hold ancestral rights to around 65 percent of the planet. They play a critical role as environmental stewards and as political actors on the global stage. The 2016 Standing Rock Sioux encampment and non-violent protests in North Dakota are only the most visible of the attempts by Native peoples to defend the plants, animals, lakes and forests that we depend on for water, air, and food. Indigenous peoples such as the Maya Q'eqchi in Guatemala, Mapuche in Chile and Argentina, Wixarika (Huichol) in Mexico, Navajo at Black Mesa, Arizona, U'Wa in Colombia, Miskitu in Nicaragua, Wampis Nation in Peru, Munduruku in Brazil, Cree in James Bay, Canada, and literally hundreds more are leading the struggle to protect and heal the earth from the ravages of corporations and ruling elites.⁸ We have a responsibility and an obligation to stand with them in these struggles to build a world that will be habitable for us and our children.



Endnotes

1. Robert D. Bullard. *Environmental Justice in the 21st Century*. Environmental Justice Resource Center at Clark Atlanta University, September, 2001. [online]. [cited December 23, 2016]. <http://courses.arch.vt.edu/courses/wdunaway/gia5524/bullard.pdf>. See the endnotes for extensive documentation of environmental racism and its health effects.
2. Researcher Harvey L. White states that “nonwhite workers are 50% more likely to be exposed to hazards in the workplace...;” Harvey L. White. *Race, Class, and Environmental Hazards*. California Environmental Protection Agency, 2003. [online]. [cited December 23, 2016]. <http://calepa.ca.gov/envjustice/Documents/2003/Appendices/AppendixB.pdf>.
3. For example, the phrase *food deserts* has been coined to describe urban areas where people of color don’t have access to healthy and affordable food because of corporate decisions to relocate grocery stores from city centers to the suburbs.
4. Worldwatch Institute Vision for a Sustainable World. “The State of Consumption Today.” Worldwatch Institute, November 2016 [online]. [cited November 27, 2016] <http://www.worldwatch.org/node/810>.
5. International Peace Bureau. *The Military’s Impact on the Environment: A Neglected Aspect of the Sustainable Development Debate*. August 2002. [online]. [cited December 23, 2016]. sdissues.net/SDIN/uploads/Mil-Envir%20JOBURG%20version.doc.
6. Jean Hardisty. *Hurricane Katrina and Structural Racism: A Letter to White People*. October, 2005. [online]. [cited December 23, 2016]. <http://www.jeanhardisty.com/errant-thoughts/hurricane-katrina-and-structural-racism-a-letter-to-white-people/>; Lee Sustar. "Hurricane Katrina Exposes Racism and Inequality." *Countercurrents.org.*, September 1, 2005. [online] [cited December 23, 2016]. <http://www.countercurrents.org/cc-sustar010905.htm>.
7. Personal communication.
8. Staff, IC Magazine. “Fifteen Indigenous Struggles You Need to Know About,” October 22, 2016 [online]. [cited October 25, 2016]. <http://www.truth-out.org/news/item/38064-fifteen-other-indigenous-struggles-you-need-to-know-about>.

