Environmental Justice

By Jo Cottrill

Definition:

The environmental justice movement emerged in the 1970s to bring awareness to and remedy the uneven distribution of environmental harms on marginalized groups.[1] In doing so, it examines the intersection of damage caused to both humans and the environment, as well as how the two influence and worsen one another. In broad terms, the goal of the movement is to prevent, in the words of the United States Environmental Protection Agency, any "population, due to policy of economic disempowerment, [from being] forced to bear a disproportionate share of negative human health or environmental impacts."[2]

Minoritization and environmental justice:

When examining human-caused toxicity in the environment, there is a clear pattern between the locations of these harms and the communities directly impacted by them. Racially marginalized communities are disproportionately affected by issues such as air pollution, toxic waste sites, and the usage of poisonous chemicals like those in pesticides. A study by Cole & Foster (2001) demonstrated that this is not only a frequent factor, but the single most common factor for determining where sites like these will be located.[3] The environmental justice movement further argues that the choices of these site placements are strategic, not merely coincidental, and are reflective of broader structural power inequities.[4]

These structural inequities have their origins in the long history of colonialism, which exists as another pillar of focus for the environmental justice movement. Colonialism has had an impact on the power and security of all minoritized groups. The environmental justice movement is also particularly focused on the destruction colonialism has caused to Indigenous communities.[5] In addition to the more general and frequently noted harms generated by colonialism, such as wars and enslavement, Indigenous communities have been directly harmed through its interference with their environmental cultural practices and the ways they interact with the earth.[6] With this context of coloniality in mind, the environmental justice movement seeks to not only respond to instances of environmental degradation but also its deeper roots, to work

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[1] Pellow, David Naguib. *What is critical environmental justice?*. John Wiley & Sons, 2017.
[2] United States Environmental Protection Agency, cited in Pellow, *What is critical environmental justice?*
[3] Ibid.
[4] Bullard, Robert D. "Anatomy of environmental racism and the environmental justice movement." *Confronting environmental racism: Voices from the grassroots* 15 (1993): 15-39.
[5] Gilio-Whitaker, Dina. *As long as grass grows: The Indigenous fight for environmental justice, from colonization to Standing Rock.* Beacon Press, 2019.
[6] Gilio-Whitaker, *As long as grass grows*; Whyte, Kyle. "Settler colonialism, ecology, and environmental injustice." *Environment and Society* 9, no. 1 (2018): 125-144.

toward building a more wholly equitable and just world alongside a healthier status of the environment.

Significance to civic/political engagement:

There are several routes through which these ends are achieved within the environmental justice movement. Some are centered around a formal, more policy-based approach, relying on the court system to provide redress to those being most immediately hurt by environmental harms (e.g., minoritized groups).[7] Other forerunners of the movement, in contrast, argue for the value of grassroots and social movement work, particularly in its ability to be more easily accessible for the communities involved.[8] Some noteworthy nationwide grassroots environmental justice organizations include the Indigenous Environmental Network, Climate Justice Alliance, and the Sierra Club. Groups like these adopt a variety of organizing strategies to create campaigns around local or wide-scale issues related to environmental (in)justice such as water crises, the construction of oil pipelines, pesticide usage, and much more. Both grassroots and policy-level approaches within environmental justice offer, and strongly encourage, opportunities for civic engagement as the communities on the receiving end of harm are able to have direct involvement with those entities causing it.

Further resources:

Articles:

Cutter, S. L. (1995). Race, class and environmental justice. *Progress in human geography*, *19*(1), 111-122.

Foster, S. (1998). Justice from the ground up: Distributive inequities, grassroots resistance, and the transformative politics of the environmental justice movement. *Calif. L. Rev.*, *86*, 775.

Sze, J., & London, J. K. (2008). Environmental justice at the crossroads. *Sociology Compass*, *2*(4), 1331-1354.

[7] Ewall, Mike. "Legal tools for environmental equity vs. environmental justice." *Sustainable Dev. L. & Pol'y* 13 (2012): 4.
[8] Yazzie, Melanie K. "Decolonizing development in Diné Bikeyah: Resource extraction, anti-capitalism, and relational futures." *Environment and Society* 9, no. 1 (2018): 25-39.

Books:

Bullard, R. D. (Ed.). (1993). *Confronting environmental racism: Voices from the grassroots*. South End Press.

Carson, R. (2002). *Silent spring*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

Gilio-Whitaker, D. (2019). *As long as grass grows: The Indigenous fight for environmental justice, from colonization to Standing Rock*. Beacon Press.

Other:

Environmental Justice - United States Environmental Protection Agency

Kent Environmental Council

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