

## **Poisoning the Planet: The Struggle for Environmental Justice**

David Naguib Pellow and Robert J. Brulle

*Contexts* 2007 6: 37

DOI: 10.1525/ctx.2007.6.1.37

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://ctx.sagepub.com/content/6/1/37>

---

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

On behalf of:



**Additional services and information for *Contexts* can be found at:**

**Email Alerts:** <http://ctx.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

**Subscriptions:** <http://ctx.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

**Reprints:** <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

**Permissions:** <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

**Citations:** <http://ctx.sagepub.com/content/6/1/37.refs.html>

>> [Version of Record](#) - Feb 1, 2007

[What is This?](#)

# poisoning the planet: the struggle for environmental justice

*Like good things, bad things are unequally distributed in America. Poor minorities get more than their share of environmental hazards—but they are fighting back.*

One morning in 1987 several African-American activists on Chicago's southeast side gathered to oppose a waste incinerator in their community and, in just a few hours, stopped 57 trucks from entering the area. Eventually arrested, they made a public statement about the problem of pollution in poor communities of color in the United States—a problem known as environmental racism. Hazel Johnson, executive director of the environmental justice group People for Community Recovery (PCR), told this story on several occasions, proud that she and her organization had led the demonstration. Indeed, this was a remarkable mobilization and an impressive act of resistance from a small, economically depressed, and chemically inundated community. This community of 10,000 people, mostly African-American, is surrounded by more than 50 polluting facilities, including landfills, oil refineries, waste lagoons, a sewage treatment plant, cement plants, steel mills, and waste incinerators. Hazel's daughter, Cheryl, who has worked with the organization since its founding, often says, "We call this area the 'Toxic Doughnut' because everywhere you look, 360 degrees around us, we're completely surrounded by toxics on all sides."

## the environmental justice movement

People for Community Recovery was at the vanguard of a number of local citizens' groups that formed the movement for environmental justice (EJ). This movement, rooted in community-based politics, has emerged as a significant player at the local, state, national, and, increasingly, global levels. The movement's origins lie in local activism during the late 1970s and early 1980s aimed at combating environmental racism and environmental inequality—the unequal distribution of pollution across the social landscape that unfairly burdens poor neighborhoods and communities of color.

The original aim of the EJ movement was to challenge

the disproportionate location of toxic facilities (such as landfills, incinerators, polluting factories, and mines) in or near the borders of economically or politically marginalized communities. Groups like PCR have expanded the movement and, in the process, extended its goals beyond removing existing hazards to include preventing new environmental risks and promoting safe, sustainable, and equitable forms of development. In most cases, these groups contest governmental or industrial practices that threaten human health. The EJ movement has developed a vision for social change centered around the following points:

- All people have the right to protection from environmental harm.
- Environmental threats should be eliminated before there are adverse human health consequences.
- The burden of proof should be shifted from communities, which now need to prove adverse impacts, to corporations, which should prove that a given industrial procedure is safe to humans and the environment.
- Grassroots organizations should challenge environmental inequality through political action.

The movement, which now includes African-American, European-American, Latino, Asian-American/Pacific-Islander, and Native-American communities, is more culturally diverse than both the civil rights and the traditional environmental movements, and combines insights from both causes.

## environmental inequalities

Researchers have documented environmental inequalities in the United States since the 1970s, originally emphasizing the connection between income and air pollution. Research in the 1980s extended these early findings, revealing that communities of color were especially likely to be near hazardous waste sites. In 1987, the United Church of Christ Commission on Racial Justice released a groundbreaking national study entitled *Toxic Waste and Race in*

the United States, which revealed the intensely unequal distribution of toxic waste sites across the United States. The study boldly concluded that race was the strongest predictor of where such sites were found.

In 1990, sociologist Robert Bullard published *Dumping in Dixie*, the first major study of environmental racism that linked the siting of hazardous facilities to the decades-old practices of spatial segregation in the South. Bullard found that African-American communities were being deliberately selected as sites for the disposal of municipal and hazardous chemical wastes. This was also one of the first studies to examine the social and psychological impacts of environmental pollution in a community of color. For example, across five communities in Alabama, Louisiana, Texas, and West Virginia, Bullard found that the majority of people felt that their community had been singled out for the location of a toxic facility (55 percent); experienced anger at hosting this facility in their community (74 percent); and yet accepted the idea that the facility would remain in the community (77 percent).

Since 1990, social scientists have documented that exposure to environmental risks is strongly associated with race and socioeconomic status. Like Bullard’s *Dumping in Dixie*, many studies have concluded that the link between polluting facilities and communities of color results from the deliberate placement of such facilities in these communities rather than from population-migration patterns. Such communities are systematically targeted for the location of polluting industries and other locally unwanted land uses (LULUs), but residents are fighting back to secure a safe, healthy, and sustainable quality of life. What have they accomplished?

local struggles

The EJ movement began in 1982, when hundreds of activists and residents came together to oppose the expansion of a chemical landfill in Warren County, North Carolina. Even though that action failed, it spawned a movement that effectively mobilized people in neighborhoods and small towns facing other LULUs. The EJ movement has had its most profound impact at the local level. Its successes include shutting down large waste incinerators and landfills in Los Angeles and Chicago; preventing polluting operations from being built or expanded, like the chemical plant proposed by the Shintech Corporation near

David Naguib Pellow teaches ethnic studies at the University of California, San Diego. Robert J. Brulle teaches environmental policy at the School of Environmental Science, Engineering, and Policy at Drexel University.

a poor African-American community in Louisiana; securing relocations and home buyouts for residents in polluted communities like Love Canal, New York; Times Beach, Missouri; and Norco, Louisiana; and successfully demanding environmental cleanups of LULUs such as the North River Sewage Treatment plant in Harlem.

The EJ movement helped stop plans to construct more than 300 garbage incinerators in the United States between 1985 and 1998. The steady expansion of municipal waste incinerators was abruptly reversed after 1990. While the cost of building and maintaining incinerators was certainly on the rise, the political price of incineration was the main factor that reversed this tide. The decline of medical-waste incinerators is even more dramatic.

municipal waste incinerators in the United States	
year	number of incinerators
1965	18
1970	25
1975	45
1980	77
1985	119
1990	186
1995	142
2000	116
2002	112

Source: Tangri 2003

medical waste incinerators in the United States	
year	number of incinerators
1988	6,200
1994	5,000
1997	2,373
2003	115

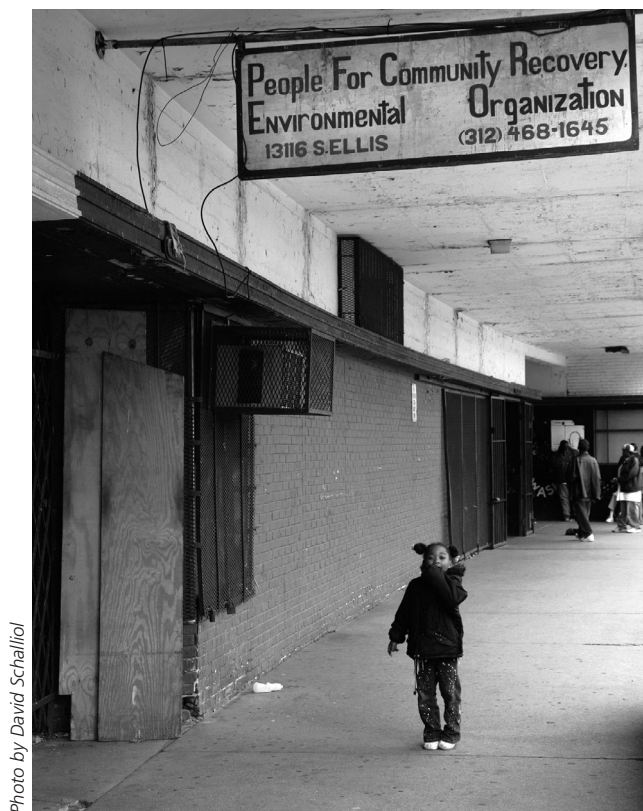
Source: Tangri 2003

Sociologist Andrew Szasz has documented the influence of the EJ movement in several hundred communities

throughout the United States, showing that organizations such as Hazel Johnson's People for Community Recovery were instrumental in highlighting the dangers associated with chemical waste incinerators in their neighborhoods. EJ organizations, working in local coalitions, have had a number of successes, including shutting down an incinerator that was once the largest municipal waste burner in the Western Hemisphere. The movement has made it extremely difficult for firms to locate incinerators, landfills, and related LULUs anywhere in the nation, and almost any effort to expand existing polluting facilities now faces controversy.

## building institutions

The EJ movement has built up local organizations and regional networks and forged partnerships with existing institutions such as churches, schools, and neighborhood groups. Given the close association between many EJ activists and environmental sociologists, it is not surprising that the movement has notably influenced the university. Research and training centers run by sociologists at several



universities and colleges focus on EJ studies, and numerous institutions of higher education offer EJ courses. Bunyan Bryant and Elaine Hockman, searching the World Wide Web in 2002, got 281,000 hits for the phrase "environ-

mental justice course," and they found such courses at more than 60 of the nation's colleges and universities.

EJ activists have built lasting partnerships with university scholars, especially sociologists. For example, Hazel Johnson's organization has worked with scholars at Northwestern University, the University of Wisconsin, and Clark Atlanta University to conduct health surveys of local residents, study local environmental conditions, serve on policy task forces, and testify at public hearings. Working with activists has provided valuable experience and training to future social and physical scientists.

The EJ movement's greatest challenge is to balance its expertise at mobilizing to oppose hazardous technologies and unsustainable development with a coherent vision and policy program that will move communities toward sustainability and better health. Several EJ groups have taken steps in this direction. Some now own and manage housing units, agricultural firms, job-training facilities, farmers' markets, urban gardens, and restaurants. On Chicago's south-east side, PCR partnered with a local university to win a federal grant, with which they taught lead-abatement techniques to community residents who then found employment in environmental industries. These successes should be acknowledged and praised, although they are limited in their socio-ecological impacts and longevity. Even so, EJ activists, scholars, and practitioners would do well to document these projects' trajectories and seek to replicate and adapt their best practices in other locales.

## legal gains and losses

The movement has a mixed record in litigation. Early on, EJ activists and attorneys decided to apply civil rights law (Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act) to the environmental arena. Title VI prohibits all government and industry programs and activities that receive federal funds from discriminating against persons based on race, color, or national origin. Unfortunately, the courts have uniformly refused to prohibit government actions on the basis of Title VI without direct evidence of discriminatory intent. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has been of little assistance. Since 1994, when the EPA began accepting Title VI claims, more than 135 have been filed, but none has been formally resolved. Only one federal agency has cited environmental justice concerns to protect a community in a significant legal case: In May 2001, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission denied a permit for a uranium enrichment plant in Louisiana because environmental justice concerns had not been taken into account.

With regard to legal strategies, EJ activist Hazel Johnson learned early on that, while she could trust committed EJ

attorneys like Keith Harley of the Chicago Legal Clinic, the courts were often hostile and unforgiving places to make the case for environmental justice. Like other EJ activists disappointed by the legal system, Johnson and PCR have diversified their tactics. For example, they worked with a coalition of activists, scholars, and scientists to present evidence of toxicity in their community to elected officials and policy makers, while also engaging in disruptive protest that targeted government agencies and corporations.

## **national environmental policy**

The EJ movement has been more successful at lobbying high-level elected officials. Most prominently, in February 1994, President Clinton signed Executive Order 12898 requiring all federal agencies to ensure environmental justice in their practices. Appropriately, Hazel Johnson was at Clinton's side as he signed the order. And the Congressional Black Caucus, among its other accomplishments, has maintained one of the strongest environmental voting records of any group in the U.S. Congress.

But under President Bush, the EPA and the White House have not demonstrated a commitment to environmental justice. Even Clinton's much-vaunted Executive Order on Environmental Justice has had a limited effect. In March 2004 and September 2006, the inspector general of the EPA concluded that the agency was not doing an effective job of enforcing environmental justice policy. Specifically, he noted that the agency had no plans, benchmarks, or instruments to evaluate progress toward achieving the goals of Clinton's Order. While President Clinton deserves some of the blame for this, it should be no surprise that things have not improved under the Bush administration. In response, many activists, including those at PCR, have shifted their focus from the national level back to the neighborhood, where their work has a more tangible influence and where polluters are more easily monitored. But in an era of increasing economic and political globalization, this strategy may be limited.

## **globalization**

As economic globalization—defined as the reduction of economic borders to allow the free passage of goods and

money anywhere in the world—proceeds largely unchecked by governments, as the United States and other industrialized nations produce larger volumes of hazardous waste, and as the degree of global social inequality also rises, the frequency and intensity of EJ conflicts can only increase. Nations of the global north continue to export toxic waste to both domestic and global “pollution havens” where the price of doing business is much lower, where environmental laws are comparatively lax, and where citizens hold little formal political power.

Movement leaders are well aware of the effects of economic globalization and the international movement of pollution and wastes along the path of least resistance (namely, southward). Collaboration, resource exchange, networking, and joint action have already emerged between EJ groups in the global north and south. In the last decade EJ activists and delegates have traveled to meet and build alliances with colleagues in places like Beijing, Budapest, Cairo, Durban, The Hague, Istanbul, Johannesburg, Mumbai, and Rio de Janeiro. Activist col-

leagues outside the United States are often doing battle with the same transnational corporations that U.S. activists may be fighting at home. However, it is unclear if these efforts are well financed or if they are leading to enduring action programs across borders. What is certain is that if the EJ movement fails inside the United States, it is likely to fail against transnational firms on foreign territory in the global south.

Although EJ movements exist in other nations, the U.S. movement has been slow to link up with them. If the U.S. EJ movement is to

survive, it must go global. The origins and drivers of environmental inequality are global in their reach and effects. Residents and activists in the global north feel a moral obligation to the nations and peoples of the south, as consumers, firms, state agencies, and military actions within northern nations produce social and ecological havoc in Latin America, the Caribbean, Africa, Central and Eastern Europe, and Asia. Going global does not necessarily require activists to leave the United States and travel abroad, because many of the major sources of global economic decision-making power are located in the north (corporate headquarters, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the White House). The movement must focus on these critical (and nearby) institutions. And while the move-

---

**Nations of the global north  
continue to export toxic  
waste to both domestic and  
global “pollution havens”  
where the price of doing  
business is lower, where  
environmental laws are  
comparatively lax, and  
where citizens hold little  
formal political power.**

---



ment has much more to do in order to build coalitions across various social and geographic boundaries, there are tactics, strategies, and campaigns that have succeeded in doing just that for many years. From transnational activist campaigns to solidarity networks and letter-writing, the profile of environmental justice is becoming more global each year.

After Hazel Johnson's visit to the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, PCR became part of a global network of activists and scholars researching and combating environmental inequality in North America, South America, Africa, Europe, and Asia. Today, PCR confronts a daunting task. The area of Chicago in which the organization works still suffers from the highest density of landfills per square mile of any place in the nation, and from the industrial chemicals believed to be partly responsible for the elevated rates of asthma and other respiratory ailments in the surrounding neighborhoods. PCR has managed to train local residents in lead-abatement techniques; it has begun negotiations with one of the Big Three auto makers to make its nearby manufacturing plant more ecologically sustainable and amenable to hiring locals, and it is setting up an environmental science laboratory and education facility in the community through a partnership with a major research university.

What can we conclude about the state of the movement for environmental justice? Our diagnosis gives us both hope and concern. While the movement has accomplished a great deal, the political and social realities facing activists (and all of us, for that matter) are brutal. Industrial production of hazardous wastes continues to increase exponentially; the rate of cancers, reproductive illnesses, and respiratory disorders is increasing in communities of color and poor communities; environmental inequalities in urban and rural areas in the United States have remained steady or increased during the 1990s and 2000s; the income gap between the upper classes and the working classes is greater than it has been in decades; the traditional, middle-class, and mainly white environmental movement has grown weaker; and the union-led labor move-

ment is embroiled in internecine battles as it loses membership and influence over politics, making it likely that ordinary citizens will be more concerned about declining wages than environmental protection. How well EJ leaders analyze and respond to these adverse trends will determine the future health of this movement. Indeed, as denizens of this fragile planet, we all need to be concerned with how the EJ movement fares against the institutions that routinely poison the earth and its people.

## recommended resources

Robert Bullard. *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality* (Westview Press, 2000). The foundation of environmental justice studies, this book is a landmark work by the leading scholar in the field who is also the movement's most prominent advocate.

David Naguib Pellow and Robert J. Brulle, eds. *Power, Justice, and the Environment: A Critical Appraisal of the Environmental Justice Movement* (MIT Press, 2005). A hopeful but hard-hitting analysis of how far this young social movement has come and where it might be headed.

Andrew Szasz. *Ecopopulism: Toxic Waste and the Movement for Environmental Justice* (University of Minnesota Press, 1994). A groundbreaking study of the contemporary origins of environmental inequality in the United States and the story of how ordinary activists spearheaded a grassroots revolution to challenge this epidemic.

Neil Tangri. *Waste Incineration: A Dying Technology* (GAIA, 2003). A study commissioned by the Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternatives provides critical details concerning the rise and fall of the global waste-incineration industry.

United Church of Christ. *Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States* (UCC, 1987). The first national study to uncover the relationship between a community's racial composition and the location of waste sites.

*just don't get sick :*

Number of doctors in New York City  
elementary schools in 1970: 400  
Number today: 23