

# Fighting Environmental Racism: A Selected Annotated Bibliography

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## Introduction

Environmental racism can be defined as the intentional siting of hazardous waste sites, landfills, incinerators, and polluting industries in communities inhabited mainly by African-American, Hispanics, Native Americans, Asians, migrant farm workers, and the working poor. Minorities are particularly vulnerable because they are perceived as weak and passive citizens who will not fight back against the poisoning of their neighborhoods in fear that it may jeopardize jobs and economic survival. The landmark study, *Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States* (Commission for Racial Justice, United Church of Christ 1987), described the extent of environmental racism and the consequences for those who are victims of polluted environments. The study revealed that:

Race was the most significant variable associated with the location of hazardous waste sites.

The greatest number of commercial hazardous facilities were located in communities with the highest composition of racial and ethnic minorities.

The average minority population in communities with one commercial hazardous waste facility was twice the average minority percentage in communities without such facilities.

Although socioeconomic status was also an important variable in the location of these sites, race was the most significant even after controlling for urban and regional differences.

The report indicated that three out of every five Black and Hispanic Americans lived in communities with one or more toxic waste sites. Over 15 million African-American, over 8 million Hispanics, and about 50 percent of Asian/Pacific Islanders and Native Americans are living in communities with one or more abandoned or uncontrolled toxic waste sites.

Bullard (1993) points out that "many of the at-risk communities are victims of land-use decision making that mirrors the power arrangements of the dominant society. Historically, exclusionary zoning has been a subtle form of using government authority and power to foster and perpetuate discriminatory practices."

A study by the Environmental Protection Agency concluded that socioeconomic conditions and race are the major factors determining environmental discrimination. Communities inhabited by poor whites are also vulnerable to toxic threats. In its two-volume report, *Environmental Equity* (1992), the Environmental

Protection Agency alluded to the difficulties of assessing the impact of environmental hazards on low income and minority communities. While admitting that those communities suffer a disproportionate share of the burden, there appears to be a general lack of data on the health effects of pollutants in those communities. The report asserts that environmental and health data are not routinely collected and analyzed by categories of income and race. Critics maintain that the information is available but the EPA considers it a public relations issue, not a civil rights issue, and, therefore, does not take the claims seriously enough to gather the necessary data by income and race. (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency 1992; Satchell 1992; Mohai and Bryant 1992.)

Some real life examples of hazards facing minority communities in the United States:

The largest hazardous waste landfill in the United States is located in Emelle, Alabama, a poor, predominantly African-American community. It receives toxic materials from forty-five states and several foreign countries.

Over 300,000 Hispanic farm workers and their families, including a large percentage of women of child-bearing age, are seriously affected by pesticide-related illnesses.

An industrial toxic waste site is located in a predominantly Hispanic neighborhood on the South Side of Tucson, Arizona. The air and water are polluted with toxic chemicals which have caused a high rate of cancer, birth defects, genetic mutations, and other illnesses among the inhabitants of the area. The community is tainted with twenty times the acceptable levels of trichloroethylene.

Waste disposal companies have been attempting to convince Native Americans to permit dumping on the reservations under the guise of improving the economic conditions. High rates of lung cancer and poisoned land have occurred on Navajo reservations as a result of uranium mining.

The South Side of Chicago, which is predominantly African-American and Hispanic, has the greatest concentration of hazardous waste sites in the nation.

Radiation exposure is a major health problem in the Marshall Islands, Bikini, and other Pacific Islands which have been used as test sites for nuclear and atomic weapons.

The portion of minorities living in communities with existing incinerators is 89 percent higher than the national average.

Pharmaceutical companies, oil refineries, and petrochemical plants are responsible for making Puerto Rico one of the world's most heavily polluted places.

Six of the eight municipal incinerators and five of the municipal landfills in Houston, Texas, are located in predominantly African American neighborhoods.

Communities where incinerators are proposed have minority populations 60 percent higher than the national average and property values 35 percent lower than the national average.

In communities with existing incinerators, the average income is 15 percent less than the national average and property values are 38 percent lower than the national average. (Commission on Racial Justice, United Church of Christ 1987; Lee 1990; De La Pena 1991; Satchell 1992; Lee 1993.)

Studies suggest clear relationships between a high concentration of minority populations, or low average incomes, with an unhealthy environment. Poor people do not have the economic means to leave their neighborhoods for resettlement elsewhere. Housing discrimination often makes it difficult to find alternative dwellings at affordable rates. Industries that pollute are attracted to poor neighborhoods because land values, incomes, and other costs of doing business are lower. The industries are drawn to poor neighborhoods where political power and community resources to fight back are weak or lacking. Higher income areas are usually more successful in preventing or controlling the entry of polluting industries to their communities. (Mohai and Bryant 1992.)

The effects of pollution and environmental hazards on people of color, the poor, and the working class have been overlooked by environmental policy makers because it was perceived that those communities were politically powerless and would not protest the siting of such facilities. African Americans, for example, were seen as "less informed, less aware and less concerned with environmental issues than whites" (Taylor 1989). However, recent studies indicate that poverty and lack of empowerment is a better indicator of environmental racism than race itself. These studies, which measured the broad environmental perspectives of African Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans, showed that, when considered broadly, without specific emphasis on a particular environmental aspect, concern among racial minorities and the poor is as strong and active as in the larger population.

Structural barriers and lack of adequate resources within the communities account for the low level of activism by minority groups. When citizens in the contaminated communities are adequately informed about the hazards, their level of awareness and opposition to the toxic facilities results in active protest. (Ostheimer and Ritt 1976, Noe and Snow 1989, Caron 1989, Booth and Jacobs

1990, Mohai 1990.) The mainstream environmental movement has been criticized for its glaring lack of minority representation. Critics claim that these organizations fail to recruit minority memberships and have not addressed the daily environmental hazards in minority communities. With the possible exception of organizations like Natural Resources Defense Council, Greenpeace, and Earth Island Institute, mainstream environmental organizations appear to be more interested in wilderness and wildlife preservation, resource conservation, and population control than in human environmental hazards. (Baugh 1990, Adams 1992.)

One of the first steps toward addressing the problem of environmental racism was the establishment of the Conference on Race and the Incidence of Environmental Hazards held at the University of Michigan in January 1990. This conference gave national visibility to the public debate on environmental racism and served as a catalyst for residents of polluted communities to organize. This is not a situation that lends itself to overnight solutions or simple policy formulations. As the papers at the conference illustrated, there are historical, economic, political,

and ethical ramifications of environmental racism which require bold action and equitable environmental decision making. Activists in communities around the country are using the strategies of the civil rights and antiwar movements of the 1960s and 1970s for the environmental struggles of the 1990s. The movement's goal is to remedy past injustices and promote fairness in local, national, and international environmental decision making (Bryant and Mohai 1992a, 1992b; Grossman 1992; Taylor 1992).

Citizens who are tired of being subjected to the dangers of pollution in their communities have been confronting the power structures through organized protest, legal actions, marches, civil disobedience, and other activities. Community newsletters, pamphlets, magazines, classes, lectures, and videocassettes have made it possible to recruit large numbers of people. In addition, minorities are using the power of the ballot and economic pressures to make their stands (Kuzmiak 1991). Minority voter blocs are forming around the country to exercise clout in many areas where their opinions are not usually sought. They have the strength in numbers and the activist skills to form effective coalitions with environmental organizations to promote effective change. In addition, the Black Congressional Caucus has a strong record of solid support for environmental issues. Mainstream organizations would benefit from the skills and savvy of the grassroots organizations by forming coalitions to press for establishment of desirable environmental agendas (Jordan and Snow 1992).

Carol Merchant (1992) sees this revitalized protest activity as an attempt to solve the human health and welfare problems which are rooted in the "malign side-effects of industrial capitalist development." The movement is attempting to resolve the contradictions between production of goods and reproduction of their daily lives in healthy neighborhoods with an acceptable standard of living through regulation of aspects of production or economic restructuring. Snow (1992) appeals to the environmental nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to recruit minorities into their ranks:

Efforts must be made to expand the national constituency for conservation through deliberate recruitment of leaders from minority and low income communities and through focused efforts to address environmental issues of particular concern to these communities. . . . This effort could be initiated through the development of a new conservation fellowship program designed to groom minority and low income students for positions of professional leadership among conservation NGOs. But the effort must go farther and must include the deliberate engagement of environmental issues of greatest concern to nonwhite citizens, coupled with recruitment of