

ENVIRONMENTALLY SPEAKING Peter Schwartzman**The Environmental Justice movement: what it is and why it matters**

(Part I of II)

In simple terms, there are two strains of environmentalists right now. One is a group you've probably heard of — the "mainstream" activists who are made up of largely white, upper-middle class people that are dedicated to "saving the rainforest," sparing ANWR (that is, the Alaskan National Wildlife Refuge) from oil drilling, and keeping snowmobiles out of Yellowstone. The second group you may never have heard of — the environmental justice (EJ) advocates who consist of labor, community and civil rights activists, migrant farm worker organizers, and defenders for the rights of indigenous people. It is the EJ advocates who battle to keep their neighborhoods free of toxic emitters, their homes free of lead paint, and politics free of racist and classist laws and decisions pertaining to the environment. Both environmental groups overlap to some degree and increasingly (albeit slowly) they are beginning to work together to protect the environment in a more holistic way. Yet, while the mainstreamers get most of the press (and the criticism) from the corporate-controlled media, it is the latter group of EJ advocates that probably deserve a much more thorough hearing, particularly because their battle is one of basic human rights and equity. All of us have a vested interest in learning more about the struggle of EJ advocates because their battle is one that we all face, now or in the immediate future.

Environmentalism, the progressive movement to protect and conserve the environment, has been alive in the United States for at least a century. The creation of the first national park in 1872 in northwest Wyoming (better known as Yellowstone) represents the dawning of an era of preservationists that began more than a century ago. Although these early visionaries had serious flaws, such as Native Americans had to be displaced (often meaning extinguished) before these "wilderness" areas could be protected, they understood that humans are not able to survive in a world where they own and extract everything that the Earth has to offer. These environmentally-minded pioneers and their descendents worked tirelessly to get laws enacted that protected lands from development (e.g., Wilderness Act of 1964), species from extermination (Endangered Species Act of 1973), and water and air from adulteration (e.g., Clean Water Act of 1977 & Clean Air Act of 1970). Since the early 1970's when national environmental legislation went through a very active period, not much of significance has occurred other than the extremely important phasing out of lead, both in gasoline and in paint. Yet, it is during this lull in legislation that perhaps the most important development has taken place, largely below our collective radars.

The genesis of the environmental justice (EJ) movement during the 1980's and its growth thereafter reminds us that it is often the impoverished and marginalized communities that bring about positive change for all. Despite being largely outside the spotlight, the accomplishments of this nascent movement have been striking. A key contribution made by the EJ movement has been the observation that stark inequalities exist between groups of citizens of the United States in terms of environmental quality and access to services. A second area of EJ's success revolves around its ability to raise awareness about the connection between many health problems and exposure to environmental contaminants such as PCBs, dioxin, ozone, and pesticides. Another one of its impressive feats consists of the growing corpus of scholarship that studies and documents the prevalence of environmental justice violations and civil

rights shortfalls in the United States and elsewhere. And, finally, perhaps the most significant contribution made by the EJ movement is its ability to bring groups, often separated by space and primary interest, together into a coalition working towards peace and justice under a unified environmental umbrella. EJ advocates are able to make this final step because they recognize that all environmental problems are interconnected and that they affect everyone. For example, since pollutants do not stop at neighborhood or city boundaries because air, water, soil, and organisms are always in motion, if some of our homes are vulnerable, then it is safe to say that all of our homes (and habitats) are vulnerable.

Environmental advocates ask numerous important questions as well. The following questions not only exhibit the scope of their interests but also suggest the relevance of their concerns to all of us: (1) Which members of our population are exposed to hazardous, neurotoxic, and carcinogenic pollutants?; (2) Are some segments of our population (such as the unborn, newborn or elderly) more vulnerable to these exposures than others?; (3) How are LULUs (locally undesirable land uses) distributed in a region/city? Does their distribution correspond with communities based on ethnic, economic, or other categories? What considerations are taken when deciding where the next hazardous facility will be located?; (4) Are there ways to restructure industry, commerce, or society so that fewer (rather than more) hazardous chemicals are necessary?; (5) What diseases are prevalent in our society and what environmental factors lead to or exacerbate the symptoms and lethality of these disorders?; (6) Is it ethical to distribute environmental ills inequitably in society?; (7) What laws and regulations should be enacted and enforced in order to create a society where people are not victimized by industrial "progress" and consumerist behavior?; and, (8) How can communities best be mobilized to work towards creating healthy and environmentally-friendly neighborhoods and ecosystems that we can all benefit from and cherish? It is answers to these and similar questions that have the ability to empower all of us to be educated, concerned, and connected citizens and stewards of the planet.

One very important focus of EJ advocates and EJ scholars centers on environmental racism (ER). What precisely does one mean by "environmental racism?" One well-known EJ scholar states that ER refers "to those institutional rules, regulations, and policies or government or corporate decisions that deliberately target certain communities for least desirable land uses, resulting in the disproportionate exposures of toxic and hazardous waste on communities based on certain prescribed biological characteristics" (Bryant, 5). In addition to these areas of discrimination, ER is often also associated with people of color's lack of access and exposure to environmental amenities (such as, national parks, wilderness areas, and diverse wildlife) as well as the exclusion from environmental decision-making. In summary, ER represents those racist and discriminatory elements that are imbedded in how environmental hazards and benefits are distributed in society.

Many argue that the EJ movement began in 1982 in rural Monroe County, North Carolina. That year, in response to the state's decision to dispose of tons of PCB-laced soil in this predominantly African-American county, citizens organized and resisted. National attention was brought to this small county in north-central North Carolina, when more than 500 activists were arrested while protesting outside the

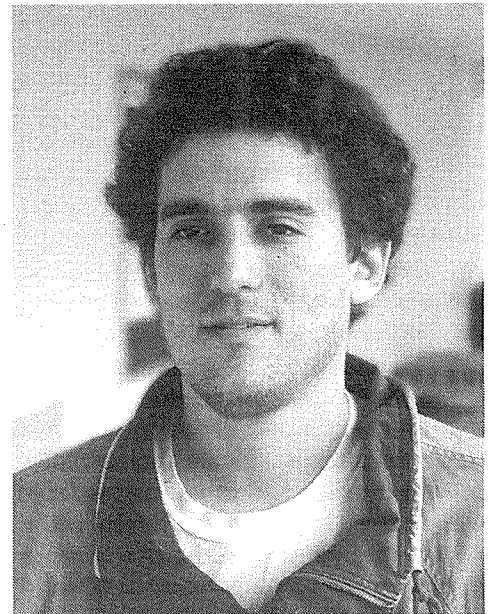
intended landfill. In response to this event, several studies commenced by a wide range of institutions and scholars each attempting to determine if environmental racism is widespread.

The evidence for environmental racism in our society is convincing. Two early studies were landmarks in EJ research. A 1983 study by the U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO), which had been requested by a Congressional representative that had been moved intellectually and spiritually by the Monroe County incident, concluded that African-Americans are disproportionately living in communities with landfills; in fact they were found to be in the majority in an astounding 75 percent of the communities where landfills were located. Just a few years later, a 1987 study by the Commission for Racial Justice, United Church of Christ (UCC), entitled *Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States*, concluded that "race was the most significant factor in determining the location of commercial hazardous waste facilities" (Resolving); socioeconomic status was also an important variable but not as significant as race. Disturbingly, the UCC report noted that 60 percent of African-American and Hispanic-American citizens live in communities with "uncontrolled waste sites" (Resolving). These findings and others like them led to the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit held in Washington, D.C. just a few years later in October 1991. Since this historical gathering of more than 600 community activists and EJ advocates, numerous other studies have added to initial findings. The following reports represent just small sampling of a wealth of research findings that have been published over the past ten or so years.

Researchers note that the LULU's are disproportionately found in communities of color. Bullard (2000) points out that in 1978, Chemwaste opened the nation's "largest hazardous-waste treatment, storage, and disposal facility" in Sumter County, Louisiana which is 69 percent black. Paul Mohai and Bunyan Bryant (1990) find that inhabitants of minority dominant communities were four times more likely to live near hazardous waste facilities. Bullard (1983) shows that during a 50-year period in the 20th century, Houston, Texas placed nearly all of city-owned landfills and incinerators in largely African-American communities despite the fact that the city was just 30 percent black over this time.

Other scholars find that communities of color (here defined as communities where people of color constitute a majority of the population) are also not dealt with fairly when it comes to enforcing environmental laws or penalties. Lavelle and Coyle (1993), reviewing 1,177 Superfund sites, find racial bias in two key areas: (1) government-imposed penalties against corporate polluters; and, (2) government response to environmental hazards found in a community. Schwartz (1997) corroborates these findings noting that governmental penalties for violating hazardous waste laws are 500 percent higher in predominantly white communities than communities of color.

The above studies offer compelling evidence that environmental racism is present in our society. It is through EJ scholarship of this sort that we see that we must seriously reconsider any conclusion that racism has been eliminated or isn't in desperate need of continued vigilance and remediation. While this should be upsetting to all of us, how we deal with this depends on a wide variety of elements (e.g., our willingness to act, our impulse to seek further education on the subject, our reluctance to engage in discussions about racism, etc.). EJ scholarship also forces us to question our "way-of-life" in



that it establishes that hazards are being produced and disseminated that expose all of us to harm — and to those not-so-fortunate or politically disadvantaged to potentially great levels of harm. There is no doubt that we must break down barriers of communication between mainstream environmentalists and EJ advocates if we are going to make progress in the area of environmental quality. ER research and activism provides an avenue for such engagement and collaboration.

Be sure to check out the second part of this essay on EJ. Next month's installment (which will appear in the July 28th issue) will look into the past successes of EJ movements, current manifestations of EJ advocacy, and suggestions of what the future may hold for EJ both here and elsewhere.

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