The environmental justice movement was born in response to environmental racism, when communities of color began to organize around environmental policies, plans and systems that systematically exposed them to disproportionate levels of toxins and pollution while depriving them of access to environmental amenities. In addition to fighting for the just distribution of environmental amenities and burdens, the EJ movement has grown to encompass procedural justice as well, working to redistribute power over ownership and decision-making processes.

One of the earliest events that mobilized environmental justice activists and, arguably, galvanized the environmental justice movement was a 1982 protest against the siting of a toxic landfill in a mostly Black community in Warren County, North Carolina. Largely organized by the NAACP and the United Church of Christ, the protest resulted in the arrest of over 500 protestors. While the protest did not prevent the state from siting the toxic landfill in the community, it mobilized activists and communities across the country to begin taking stands against environmental racism.

Five years later, Robert Bullard together with the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice published the landmark report *Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States* which systematically analyzed the racialized nature of exposure to hazardous waste sites across the country. While there have been many watershed moments in the EJ movement, legal decisions around EJ still largely rest on protections put in place by the Civil Rights Act of 1964 which stipulates that federal agencies cannot discriminate on the basis of race, color or national origin.

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**Principles of Environmental Justice**

At the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in 1991, delegates drafted and adopted 17 principles of Environmental Justice, including:

- Environmental Justice affirms the fundamental right to political, economic, cultural and environmental self-determination of all peoples.
- Environmental Justice demands the cessation of the production of all toxins, hazardous wastes, and radioactive materials, and that all past and current producers be held strictly accountable to the people for detoxification and the containment at the point of production.
- Environmental Justice demands the right to participate as equal partners at every level of decision-making, including needs assessment, planning, implementation, enforcement and evaluation.
- Environmental Justice affirms the right of all workers to a safe and healthy work environment without being forced to choose between an unsafe livelihood and unemployment. It also affirms the right of those who work at home to be free from environmental hazards.
TRANSFORMATION OF THE MOVEMENT OVER TIME

Early environmental justice efforts were focused on the siting of toxic land uses such as hazardous waste landfills and incinerators in communities of color. Studies mapped contamination sites and comparing the racial and ethnic demographics of the areas around toxic facilities to those of the larger population.

Over the past 35 years, environmental justice activism and scholarship began to tackle a wider range of environmental issues such as vulnerability to flooding, climate change and access to parks and other green spaces. The language and principles of environmental justice have also grown to address issues of pollution, environmental degradation and climate change in the Global South.

Environmental Justice and Environmental Gentrification

EJ-driven work to remediate hazardous sites brings significant health improvements. As environmental gentrification has become more pressing, however, improvements also carry risk. Some have suggested that the EJ movement is inadvertently causing gentrification by improving polluted neighborhoods. These criticisms paint the EJ and anti-displacement movements in opposition to one another. But anti-displacement work is itself an EJ issue because it demands access to green amenities through staying in place. Instead of dividing these movements, we can identify how systems like structural racism drive both issues.

CRITICISMS

Current critics of environmental justice activism and scholarship argue that the movement has drifted from its critical roots. Early articulations of environmental justice agendas were grounded in understandings of systematic racism that required the eradication of militarization, multinational conglomerates and other oppressive institutions that subjugate communities of color globally. These critics argue that the movement has been co-opted by government and corporate interests that are, at best, not well-positioned to provide leadership on environmental justice and, at worst, intentionally subverting the radical principles that the early movement was committed to.

One example of this de-radicalizing shift is the replacement of anti-racist language with language around inclusion. The Environmental Protection Agency, for example, defines EJ as “the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income, with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies.” In doing so, the EPA effectively paints EJ as a race-neutral concept despite its distinctly race-aware origins. And though EJ has been increasingly embraced by such institutions, the implementation of EJ principles has been inconsistent. In 2017, the EPA’s Office of Environmental Justice was completely dismantled, demonstrating how swiftly EJ can be sacrificed depending on the political moment.

LEARN MORE

Want to explore some of the tools and case studies that can help us imagine what our more equitable and just systems of greening can look like? Check out the Resources page at create.umn.edu for more.