The environmental justice movement was born from communities of color - and Black communities in particular - organizing in opposition to environmental policies that systematically expose them to disproportionate levels of toxins and pollution. This racist distribution of environmental burdens is accompanied by the unjust distribution of environmental benefits as well. In addition to fighting for distributional justice, the environmental justice movement has grown to encompass procedural justice as well by working to redistribute power over ownership and environmental decision-making processes.

1982 was a foundational year for the contemporary environmental justice movement in the United States. That year, residents in Warren County, North Carolina mobilized in opposition to a toxic landfill where the state proposed to dump large amounts of PCB-contaminated soil in the middle of a predominantly Black and long disinvested community. 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 environmental justice movement, legal decisions around environmental justice 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.

**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.
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 compared 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.

Some critics of environmental justice activism and scholarship argue that the movement has been watered down, drifting further from its radical 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 environmental justice 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 environmental justice as a race-neutral concept despite its distinctly race-aware origins. And even while environmental justice has been increasingly embraced by mainstream institutions rhetorically, the implementation of environmental justice principles has been inconsistent. In 2017, the EPA’s Office of Environmental Justice was completely dismantled, demonstrating how swiftly environmental justice can be sacrificed depending on the political moment.

Environmental justice-driven work to remove and remediate hazardous sites brings significant improvements in terms of health and aesthetic appeal. As environmental gentrification has become increasingly pressing, however, these improvements also carry risk of negative social outcomes. Indeed, there is evidence linking brownfield remediation and waste clean up to environmental gentrification processes. Some have suggested that the environmental justice movement is inadvertently causing environmental gentrification by improving polluted neighborhoods that draw in whiter and wealthier residents. These criticisms paint the environmental justice and anti-displacement movements in opposition to one another. But anti-displacement work is itself an environmental justice issue because it demands access to green amenities through staying in place. Thus, resisting green gentrification is itself an act of environmental justice.