

Energy and Environmental Justice

While some would argue that environmental issues are of paramount importance to the human race, the problems of global warming, pollution, deforestation and the like have frequently taken a back seat to education, health care, social security, and other matters that are more salient to average American voters in their daily lives. For example, neither “environment” nor any derivative of the word appeared anywhere in George W. Bush’s January 21 State of the Union address (“President”). As the environment is rarely a key issue in an election, environmental activists have made little progress getting the attention of politicians. This lack of success has led them to be innovative and devise alternate strategies, imitating the rhetoric of more successful progressive movements and marrying themselves to more prominent causes, such as those relating to health, safety, poverty, and racism. Environmental justice represents one such innovative strategy, and energy is a central issue to lobbyists for this cause. Environmental justice advocates see the current United States energy policy as harmful, unsustainable, and discriminatory.

Comment 1 - Nice introductory paragraph.

Comment 2 - There seems to be a disconnect between students and politicians.

When I was teaching large classes on energy and environmental issues, I usually started off by asking the students to list what was going on in the world that they were most concerned about. Environmental issues were always at or near the top of the list. Do peoples' priorities change as they get older?

While it has become a major part of the environmental movement in the past several years, many remain unaware of the concepts of environmental justice and environmental racism. On its web site the Environmental Justice Group at the University of Michigan says that

Environmental justice differs from traditional environmental philosophies in that it seeks to combine a concern for the natural world with a consciousness of ethnic and class discrimination. Throughout the world, poor and minority communities bear a disproportionately large burden of toxic contamination, and suffer the health problems and stigmatization that result from it. The concerns of the environmental justice movement are global, stretching from American inner cities to the third world.
(Environmental Justice Group)

Comment 3 - Even I, after two decades of teaching about environmental issues, did not know about the Environmental Justice Group. It's good that you have brought this to our attention..

Massachusetts Senator John Kerry has acknowledged the importance of environmental justice, saying in a speech on Earth Day 2003 that

Environmental justice means action to repair the environment in all communities wherever they may be. It means an end to playing favorites when it comes to Americans' health and their very lives.... All Americans, regardless of their color or income, deserve clean air, pure water, land that is safe to live on, food that is safe to eat. (Johnson)

Senator Kerry's words reflect a paradigm shift among politicians, who now place greater emphasis on the importance of environmental issues, because they have been linked to a large, once unrepresented segment of the population that is now a strong lobbying force.

The low-wage workers employed by waste-producing facilities such as factories and power plants typically live in the immediate vicinity of their workplace and are thus

at a greater risk of harm from pollutants (Piselli). These low-wage workers are predominantly minorities. Higher incidences of cancer, respiratory problems and other pollution-related illnesses are common in such communities, but neighborhoods are frequently hesitant to blow the whistle on their primary employer. The concept of environmental racism existed as far back as the 1970's, but did not become a topic of public debate until a 1982 protest by African Americans in North Carolina over hazardous waste. It was then that the term environmental justice was first coined.

The movement saw its greatest political victory in 1994 when Carol Browner, former administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency, confirmed that the burden of contamination problems is borne disproportionately by some communities (Russo). That same year Executive Order 12898, issued by President Bill Clinton, called upon all agencies of the federal government, not just EPA, to consider the environmental justice consequences of their actions (Mohai). Since that victory, campaigners in this area have expanded their efforts to include a broad range of environmental issues and no longer focus solely on polluters' impact on minorities. The operative word in environmental justice as it exists today is equity, and activists seek equity both in bearing the burden of pollution and in utilizing resources. Many criticize "the rich, white consumer who uses a disproportionate amount of energy" (Russo). Advocates of environmental justice point out that

The average person in an industrial market economy uses more than 80 times as much energy as someone in Sub-Saharan Africa.... We need to recognize how our moves affect others and try to understand our common concerns. We live in a country that represents 6% of the world's population and consumes 45% of its resources, including 60% of its energy resources. (Russo)

This iniquity in energy consumption is an example of environmental injustice on a global scale that is simultaneously harming the earth and hindering the progress of the developing world.

Pollution caused by production and iniquity in consumption are not the only two energy issues that environmental justice advocates have tackled. Energy extraction has also become a major issue of late, and activists have harshly criticized various methods of producing energy for being unsafe, harming cultures and destroying wildlife. The Peabody Western Coal Company, for example, recently came under fire in Arizona for transporting its coal by slurry to the Mohave Generating Station (Russo). Doing this caused the coal to pollute springs that are used daily by Hopi Indians and are considered a sacred, crucial part of their religious practices. In spite of every effort made by the Hopi and outcry from environmental justice organizations, the legal mechanisms available to them failed (Russo).

While coal and other fossil fuels unarguably have negative environmental effects, the negative impact of wind and hydroelectric power are easier to overlook, but environmental justice advocates argue that these also carry a burden, the brunt of which is borne by the poor. Communities have opposed the building of wind farms because of the danger of blades coming off and injuring people (Beecher).

Comment 4 - I hadn't heard that flying blades was a serious problem. The blades of the big (1-2 megawatt) turbines turn rather slowly (only a few revolutions per second) and the blades are big (50 yards, or so, across) and heavy, so they wouldn't be thrown very far. Bigger problems are the danger to

migrating birds, the noise, and visual pollution of what otherwise might be an attractive landscape.

Areas chosen for the building of dams to produce hydropower can also be reflective of environmental racism, as can be seen in Turkey. Several years ago the Turkish government approved a hydroelectric project that would destroy the homes of 78,000 people, mostly Kurdish refugees (Russo). Kurds have a history of being discriminated against in Turkey, but fear speaking out against the government. Many say that dams such as the Three Gorges Dam currently being built in China “will spell massive environmental and social devastation for millions,” and many environmental justice organizations are campaigning to keep such dams from being built (Environmental Justice Group).

Comment 5 - This was a problem when Monroe Reservoir was built in the 1960s (shortly after I came to Bloomington). The lake is now Bloomington's main water source and a playground and tourist attraction, but a lot of farms and homes were flooded when the dam was built.

One of the most controversial energy issues within environmental justice is nuclear power. In 1991 at the People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit, 17 Principles of Environmental Justice were articulated, the fourth of which was, “Environmental justice calls for universal protection from nuclear testing, extraction, production and disposal of toxic/hazardous wastes and poisons and nuclear testing that threaten the fundamental right to clean air, land, water, and food” (Environmental Justice Group). This principle reflects a general apprehensiveness about nuclear power among African Americans, who are the driving force of the American environmental justice

movement. By a margin of 67 percent to 41 percent, “blacks were much more likely than whites to view nuclear power...as dangerous to the environment” (Mohai). Only ten percent of African Americans surveyed said that nuclear power stations were “not very” or “not dangerous at all” for the environment, as compared to nineteen percent of whites. While African Americans showed a greater concern for most of those issues surveyed, the greatest difference could be seen between black and white respondents on nuclear power. Whether or not is it justifiable given the scientific evaluation of the danger of nuclear power, this perception strongly affects environmental justice activists’ stance on energy issues.

No form of electricity generation is above criticism from environmentalists, but the focus of environmental justice is not so much the negative effects of power generation, but the unfair distribution of those effects among different socioeconomic groups. As Richard Sklar, the former head of California’s energy task force, said, “Everyone wants their lights to go on . . . but no one wants their facility nearby” (Borenstein). This mentality is a symptom of NIMBYism, as in “Not In My Back Yard.” Proximity to gas lines, transmission lines, and power plants tends to raise health and environmental concerns as well as depress property values, making it an issue that both the rich and poor are concerned about. Frustrated power companies and policy makers have developed their own acronyms to describe the NIMBY phenomenon, BANANA (Build Absolutely Nothing Anywhere Near Anyone) and NOPE (Not On Planet Earth).

Environmental racism becomes an issue when minorities’ cries of “not in my back yard” are the last to be heard. New power plants and distribution lines are necessary to meet America’s still-growing power needs, and when neighborhood organizations and

zoning boards may often be guilty of environmental racism when deciding where to place them (Matejczyk). One proposal made to the Bush administration to circumvent NIMBYism is giving the federal government the power to condemn and buy private property for power lines (Borenstein). This also raises environmental justice questions, as the property likely to be condemned in the plan would be in underprivileged areas. Environmental justice is not only an issue with new infrastructure; because power plants and distribution lines depress property values, nearby homes are frequently bought by poor people.

The ultimate reason poor people and minorities' cries of NIMBY have fallen on deaf ears might simply be that they lack the resources or time to cry out as loudly as middle- and upper-class communities. "The luxury of environmental activism is it's going to be easier when you're better off" (Beecher). Through organization and activist campaigns at various levels, the environmental justice movement has helped amplify the voices of those who are frequently disenfranchised. Surveys have shown African Americans to have a greater concern for the environment than whites, and "blacks are as likely as are whites to make lifestyle choices and take actions on behalf of the environment, including joining environmental groups" (Mohai). Members of the Congressional Black Caucus have the most consistent voting record in favor of environmental legislation of any group in the House of Representatives. Hundreds of people of color environmental groups now exist in the United States, with a diverse range of concerns. Water pollution and toxics are the most prominent on these groups' list of problems, but energy also ranks high among them; over 135 groups, 40.9 percent of those in existence, are working on this issue.

Environmental justice seeks to remedy the long-ignored problem of environmental racism in part by making sure that the generation, distribution, and transmission of energy does not disproportionately affect the health, safety, development, culture, and living conditions of minority groups and poor people. It represents a marriage of environmentalist goals, the conservation and preservation of natural resources, to civil rights goals, equal consideration regardless of race or class, in the hope that equal consideration with regard to environmental matters will force those who would otherwise pass the burden off onto the poor to become more invested in the earth. Bringing more groups into the environmentalist movement, as environmental justice does, is one means by which people may work towards a cleaner, more sustainable energy policy.

Comment 6 - The nice thing about the marriage of environmental goals and civil rights goals is that it helps both movements.

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