

Introduction

Revisiting the Environmental Justice Challenge to Environmentalism

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The two environmental movements could not be more different as black and white is truer than it sounds.

—M. Dowie¹

People don't get all the connections. They say the environment is over here, the civil rights group is over there, the women's group is over there, and the other groups are here. Actually all of them are one group, and the issues we fight become null and void if we have no clean water to drink, no clean air to breathe and nothing to eat.

—C. Tucker²

The environmental and environmental justice movements would seem to be natural allies. Indeed, one might expect that a social movement dedicated to environmental integrity and preservation and a social movement dedicated to justice in the distribution of environmental goods and decision making would not be two distinct social movements, but rather two aspects of one encompassing movement. After all, both have chosen the core term of "environment" to name their passions, mobilize their constituents, and send their message to those they aim to persuade. Moreover, there are ample opportunities for joint efforts in the cause for environmental health, sustainability, and integrity. All of our environments—from urban to wilderness areas—are being stressed, polluted, and commodified, while corporations and governmental agencies increasingly are challenging the general public and local communities for control over them. So it would seem reasonable that the movements would be, at minimum, coalition partners in a broad array of social and political struggles. Therefore, it is somewhat unexpected that the relationship between the environmental

movement and the environmental justice movement in the United States often has been characterized as one of division and even hostility, rather than one of cooperation.

Since at least the early 1990s, activists from the environmental justice movement consistently have criticized what they consider the “mainstream” environmental movement’s racism, classism, and limited activist agenda, charges against which environmental organizations have responded in ways ranging from defiance to varying degrees of acceptance.³ For its part, the academic community’s reaction to these critiques, both initially and in subsequent years, primarily has been to investigate the validity of the various charges, as well as to try to better understand the sources—the social, cultural, racial, economic, conceptual, institutional, historical, and rhetorical factors—that generate the tensions between the two movements. This scholarship was and remains important work, and it provides the basis for the next step: exploring how the two movements might be able to overcome, move beyond, or dissolve what divides them, to foster productive cooperation toward accomplishing their goals. The aim of this volume is to provide a stimulus for moving academic dialog in that direction. It consists of ten original essays, each of which considers some aspect of the environmental justice challenge to environmentalism and the relationship between the two movements in terms of what divisions remain, how interactions between the movements have fared in the past, and what the limits and possibilities are for the future. Without neglecting significant conceptual and practical points of tension, and while recognizing that there are times when collaboration is not appropriate or desirable, the collection as a whole emphasizes productive responses to the challenges environmental justice poses to environmentalism and the ways both movements have the potential to accomplish a great deal when they work together.

That the goals of both the environmental justice movement and the environmental movement are urgent and worth advancing is something all the contributors to this volume embrace. What is ultimately at issue is *not* whether one movement has more worthwhile goals or moral authority over the other, but, rather, *how the goals of both movements might be achieved together effectively*. As such, the contributors to this collection do not approach their topics from the “side” of either

the environmental or environmental justice movement. Nor do they all approach the theme of this volume from one particular academic discipline. Among the fields represented are anthropology, environmental studies, natural resource sciences, philosophy, public policy, rhetoric, and sociology. The contributing authors thus provide a range of scholarly perspectives, methods, and frames. This diversity is appropriate to the multifaceted relationship between the two movements and the complexity of the social, political, conceptual, evaluative, historical, and rhetorical terrain in which they operate. A comprehensive assessment of the prospects for these two movements to work together requires that each of these perspectives be considered, without encumbrances from disciplinary boundaries.

The remainder of this introduction is intended to serve, first, as a primer for those who are not already familiar with two key events in the early 1990s—the letters to the “Group of Ten” and the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit—that have since then largely framed the relationship between the two movements and significantly oriented the scholarship regarding the challenges that environmental justice poses to environmentalism. It then provides a brief discussion of what both activists and scholars have identified as major sources of division between the two movements. Finally, it provides a brief overview of the chapters, locating them within the questions, issues, and themes that drive this volume.

The Letters

On January 16, 1990, the Gulf Coast Tenant Leadership Development Project sent a letter to the “Group of Ten”⁴ national environmental organizations, declaring, “Racism and the ‘whiteness’ of the environmental movement is our Achilles heel.”⁵ Two months later, on March 16, 1990, the Southwest Organizing Project sent a second letter to the Group of Ten. This letter, which included 103 signatories, invited “frank and open dialogue” regarding the following charges:

Although environmental organizations calling themselves the “Group of Ten” often claim to represent our interests, in observing your activities it has become clear to us that your organizations play an equal role in the disruption of our

communities. There is a clear lack of accountability by the Group of Ten environmental organizations towards Third World communities in the Southwest, in the United States as a whole, and internationally.

The letters accused the Group of Ten of ignorance, ambivalence, and complicity with the environmental exploitation of communities of color within the United States and abroad. Although they often emphasized that environmental tenets are universal, the Group of Ten's pursuit of their conception of environmentalism had failed, according to the letters, to take into account the ramifications of their agenda for "working people in general and people of color in particular." The letters also claimed that the voices and representatives of communities of color too often were marginalized from environmental decision making by the very organizations that claimed to be representing their interests on a variety of issues ranging from grazing of sheep on public lands to "debt-for-nature swaps," in which Third World countries are invited to trade some rights over parts of their land for reduction of their national debt. Overall, the letters called for the environmental movement to review comprehensively and address its own culpability in patterns of environmental racism and undemocratic processes, including its hiring practices, lobbying agenda, political platforms, financial backers, organizing practices, and representations of Third World communities within the United States and abroad.

This was not the first time such concerns were expressed, but in this case environmental justice activists succeeded in raising the social, political, ethical, and institutional challenges to environmentalism in a way that gained the attention of the national mainstream press.⁶ In light of the bluntness of these public allegations, it seemed impossible for the environmental movement to plead ignorance any longer about accusations of its own responsibility in patterns of racism and elitism. Meanwhile, the environmental justice movement only seemed to be gaining momentum.

The First Summit

One year later, on October 24–27, 1991, the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit (Summit I) was held in Washington, DC. The gathering brought together more than a thousand activists from across the United States, as well as Canada, Central America,

and the Marshall Islands. In the words of then Executive Director of the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice, Reverend Benjamin F. Chavis, Jr., Summit I was “not an independent ‘event’ but a significant and pivotal step in a crucial process whereby people of color are organizing themselves and their communities for self-determination and self-empowerment around the central issues of environmental justice” (1991, p. i).⁷

On the final day of the Summit, the delegates adopted the seventeen “Principles of Environmental Justice,” which has since served as the defining document for the environmental justice movement. (The Principles of Environmental Justice can be found in Appendix A of this collection.) The Principles embody an expansive conception of environmental issues, and locate them within an encompassing social, political, and ethical outlook. They call for a robust activist agenda and a wide range of spiritual, ecological, sustainable, educational, and social justice commitments. They articulate a desire for universal protection and self-determination domestically and internationally. Overall, the Principles emphasize that the environmental justice movement is not only an effort for racial justice; it is a movement for justice for “all peoples.”

At Summit I, a prominent corollary to articulating a vision for the environmental justice movement was addressing the relationship between environmental justice communities and environmental organizations. For example, Pat Bryant, executive director of the Gulf Coast Tenants Organization, outlined conditions for dialogue with environmental organizations.

I think there is fertile ground for coalition and cooperation. But it cannot happen unless we adhere to some very basic principles. . . . We cannot join hands with anybody who will not join with us and say that we have the right to live. And having the right to live means that we also have the right to housing, health care, jobs and education. . . . We need our friends who are environmentalists to look at a total program for human uplift. (1991, p. 85)

During Summit I, a session was dedicated to the relationship between the environmental justice movement and the environmental movement. Moderated by Chavis, it was entitled “Our Vision of the Future: A Redefinition of Environmentalism.” The speakers for that session included African American, Latino/a, Asian American, and tribal representatives

of the environmental justice movement from across the United States, as well as two environmental movement leaders, John H. Adams, executive director of the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC), and Michael Fischer, executive director of the Sierra Club.

Both environmental leaders noted that their organizations had done previous work on pollution and public health campaigns. “The Sierra Club works a lot on rocks and trees and mountains and scenic beauty,” Fischer acknowledged, but added, “[it] is not all we do. It is most important to know that, particularly in the last 10 to 15 years, much more of our energy has gone into a very broad mission” including toxics and urban sprawl (1991, p. 99). He also pointed out that the Sierra Club had recently given its highest award to Wangari Maathai, a Kenyan grassroots activist who established a women-led organization to reforest their lands. On a similar note, Adams reminded those attending the Summit that NRDC was an organizer of Summit I itself. A dedication to environmental justice, he argued, was not unusual for his organization: “For 20 years, NRDC has relentlessly confronted the massive problems associated with air, water, food and toxics. These issues form the core of NRDC’s agenda, a public-health agenda” (1991, p. 101).

Nevertheless, both speakers could go only so far in situating their agenda within the emerging discourse of Summit I. Although both Fischer and Adams described the work of their organizations on what might be called “environmental justice issues” (for example, air quality and toxics), they stopped short of claiming that their groups’ interests were equivalent to those voiced at the Summit. Instead, they claimed a desire to forge alliances. As NRDC’s Adams put it, “I did not come here just to talk or just to listen, but I came here to engage in a new partnership” (1991, p. 101). Each insisted that this required efforts from not only environmentalists, but also from those delegates who attended Summit I. Adams observed, “What we need now is a common effort” (1991, p. 102). Fischer concurred:

We know we have been conspicuously missing from the battles for environmental justice all too often, and we regret that fact sincerely. . . . I believe that this historic conference is a turning point, however, and while we can still say the *mea culpas* from time to time, this is a charge to all of us to work and look into the future, rather than to beat our breasts about the past. . . . We national environmental organizations are not the enemy. The divide-and-conquer approach is one that the Reagan and Bush administrations have used all too successfully for all too long. (1991, p. 99)

Thus, representatives of both movements hoped that the Summit might mark a starting point toward better communication, understanding, responsiveness, and alliances.

Cautious about any “quick fixes,” however, Dana Alston, senior program officer of the Panos Institute of Washington, DC, responded with hesitation to the prospects of collaboration. First, she emphasized the importance of an expanded appreciation of “environmentalism,” which involved a broader agenda than traditional conservation or preservation discourses included:

For us, the issues of the environment do not stand alone by themselves. They are not narrowly defined. Our vision of the environment is woven into an overall framework of social, racial and economic justice. The environment, for us, is where we live, where we work, and where we play. (1991, p. 103)

Second, she described what a basis for a “just partnership” between the two movements would require:

What we seek is a relationship based on equity, mutual respect, mutual interest, and justice. We refuse narrow definitions. It is not just ancient forests; it is not just saving the whales or saving other endangered species. These are all very important. We understand the life cycle and the inter-connectedness of life. But our communities and our people are endangered species, too. We refuse a paternalistic relationship. We are not interested in a parent-child relationship. Your organizations may be or may not be older than ours. Your organizations definitely have more money than ours. But if you are to form a partnership with us, it will be as equals and nothing else but equals. (1991, pp. 105–106)

Understanding the Challenge

In the aftermath of the letters and Summit I, scholars began investigating further why these charges arose and analyzing the challenges they posed to the environmental movement. Several prominent themes emerged, including racism, classism, and sexism, as well as conceptual, rhetorical, historical, evaluative, and cultural differences.

As the letters and Summit I indicated, the primary impetus for the environmental justice movement’s criticisms was the failure of the environmental movement to make racism a priority, internally or externally. Leading environmental justice scholars and activists Beverly A. Wright, Pat Bryant, and Robert D. Bullard echoed the letters by reiterating that a

major barrier between the two movements is the whiteness of the environmental movement: “That seems to be the strategy of leaders of major environmental organizations. These groups cannot reach out to African Americans and people of color as long as they are nearly all white” (1994, p. 121).⁸ In 1980, when the Group of Ten was established, the leaders of each organization were white.⁹ One implication of this racial divide was the way it shaped agenda setting, particularly insofar as certain places became the focus of protection and other places—usually more populated and with more people of color inhabiting them—drew less attention from the environmental movement (Figueroa 2001; Lawson 2001). Moreover, by marginalizing the people, places, and issues important to those in the environmental justice movement, the environmental movement was limiting possibilities of alliance building, even when people of color approached them. “We knew we needed allies,” Bryant explained, “but when we reached out to the Sierra Club, we found that only one Sierra Club member could understand us. . . . Somehow, racism has made itself palatable to the intellectuals and to the environmentalists” (1991, p. 84).¹⁰

Although race has been established as a separate, and often more significant, predicting factor of environmental discrimination and exclusion than economic status, elitism and economic disparity are also significant factors in the unequal siting of environmentally undesirable land uses, routine marginalization from environmental decision-making processes, and denial of just compensation and informed consent in environmental matters.¹¹ As environmental justice activist Lois Gibbs and others have noted, poor, white working-class communities also felt ignored by the Group of Ten. Despite occasional efforts to use the resources and clout of the more established movement—particularly in lobbying Capitol Hill—they found such attempts at collaboration often forced them to lose their own voices in setting the agenda (Schwab 1994, pp. 389, 391). As a result, the issues working-class communities wanted to focus on were often marginalized. And, although labor activists and environmentalists had worked together on some occupational health and safety legislation in the past, the often false choice of “jobs versus the environment” remained a dominant frame and influenced many local struggles (Obach 2004; Levenstein and Wooding 1998). In addition, “debt-for-nature” swaps were

perceived as signals that, when the environmental movement engaged global issues of deforestation and global warming, it failed to take into account the needs of indigenous peoples and the Third World poor in those negotiations.¹²

Exacerbating the environmental justice movement's racial and economic critiques of the environmental movement was a sex and gender divide between the two movements. Although they have played various roles throughout the history of the U.S. environmental movement, women's contributions largely have been undervalued. Moreover, their roles have been more at the grassroots level, rather than in national or international leadership positions (Merchant 1996). Conversely, housewives and mothers, often mobilized by environmental health crises in their homes and communities, quickly emerged as leaders in the environmental justice movement and challenged traditional notions of gender roles. The attitudes and practices of the predominantly male leadership of the environmental movement further exacerbated tensions between the two movements when empowered, often self-taught grassroots leaders of the predominantly female-led or, at minimum, co-led environmental justice movement found themselves less respected and less represented by the environmental movement.¹³

In addition to challenges of race, class, and sex, there were also conceptual, cultural, and rhetorical differences. Both before and after the letters to the Group of Ten, environmental justice activists openly complained of the difficulties of articulating their views and concerns within the prevalent terms and conceptual frames of environmental organizations.¹⁴ Although there was widespread awareness and concern about toxic pollution and public health within the environmental movement since at least the publication of Rachel Carson's (1962) best-seller *Silent Spring*, the Group of Ten remained most commonly identified by those both inside and outside the movement with the preservation of scenic wilderness areas and the protection of endangered species (Bullard and Wright 1992, p. 42). In her account of efforts to stop the location of a 1,600-ton-per-day solid waste incinerator in a South Central Los Angeles neighborhood in the mid-1980s, Giovanna Di Chiro reports, "These issues were not deemed adequately 'environmental' by local environmental groups such as the Sierra Club or the Environmental Defense Fund" (1996, p. 299ff.). Thus, when

residents of the predominantly African American, low-income community approached these groups, “they were informed that the poisoning of an urban community by an incineration facility was a ‘community health issue,’ not an environmental one” (1996, p. 299).¹⁵ On the other coast, in meetings in New York City, critics observed that it was clear “that the mainstream environmental community is reluctant to address issues of equity and social justice, within the context of the environment” (Alston 1990, p. 23). Episodes of this sort not only indicated to many in the environmental justice movement that the environmental movement was indifferent to their issues, they also suggested that the environmental movement was not interested in significantly challenging the established social and political power structure. Environmentalism failed, on this view, to provide a much-needed radical cultural critique (Bullard 1993; Hofrichter 1993).

Exasperated with the perceived narrowness of the environmental movement’s social agenda and the marginalization of their issues and experiences, environmental justice activists began to emphasize self-definition (Di Chiro 1998). As is apparent from Alston’s statement at Summit I, environmental justice activists were reinventing the concept of “environment” to reflect their diverse range of voices and cultures.¹⁶ In *We Speak for Ourselves*, Alston (1990) insists that environmental justice “calls for a total redefinition of terms and language to describe the conditions that people are facing” (quoted in Di Chiro 1998, p. 105). And according to the National Environmental Justice Advisory Council, the movement “represents a new vision borne out of a community-driven process whose essential core is a *transformative public discourse* over what are truly healthy, sustainable and vital communities” (1996, p. 17). Indeed, one of the primary goals of the movement was, in the words of environmental justice activist Deehon Ferris, literally “shifting the terms of the debate” (1993). For example, the language of environmental justice activists drew on the legacy of the civil rights movement, but terms like “racism,” “economic blackmail,” “justice,” and “rights” were not the predominant environmental discourse at the time. As Dorceta Taylor (2000) has argued, from the beginning the environmental justice movement effectively reframed environmental discourse by communicating its grievances and goals in a frame that inextricably linked social justice with

the environment. This broadened dialogue about the “environment” worried some environmentalists, who wondered whether the already marginalized concerns for animals and wilderness would be placed even further on the back burner by this seemingly more anthropocentric set of values and terms.

In addition to redefining terms, the environmental justice movement also sought to redefine knowledge, by emphasizing how grassroots communities express their experiences and the knowledge they have to share. The environmental justice movement, for example, recognizes the importance of storytelling as an epistemology, in addition to more traditional scientific and economic discourses (Krauss 1994, p. 259). This way of knowing and critically interpreting the world contrasts with environmental reports that rely heavily on scientific and economic data and challenges particular conceptions of what an educated presentation entails.

As even this concise and selective discussion shows, in the 1990s the environmental justice movement was challenging the environmental movement in many ways and promised to do nothing short of transform the political and cultural landscape of environmental practice, theory, and discourse. Initial attempts by the environmental movement to respond to these charges were perceived with suspicion. For instance, when several large environmental organizations began environmental justice efforts, some environmental justice activists immediately expressed concern that such gestures were merely attempts to raise more money from foundations—money that environmental justice groups then would be unable to receive (Di Chiro, 1998, p. 112). Some environmental justice activists also questioned whether there was even a role for environmentalists in the environmental justice movement (Ferris and Hahn-Baker 1995). But all the criticisms, disappointments, and suspicions of the environmental movement notwithstanding, this was a time of substantial optimism within the environmental justice movement. As Fred Setterberg and Lonny Shavelson have put it, “The 1990s, they hoped, would be their decade” (1993, p. xiii). Indeed, most scholars and activists seemed to agree. According to Jim Schwab, “The new movement had won a place at the table. The Deep South, the nation, would never discuss environmental issues in the same way again” (1994, p. 393).

Time to Reassess

It now is well over a decade since the environmental justice critique of environmentalism was laid out in the 1990 letters to the Group of Ten and Summit I was convened. Much has changed within, transpired between, and happened around the two movements over that time. For example, in 1994 President Clinton signed Executive Order 12898, Federal Actions to Address Environmental Justice in Minority Populations and Low-Income Populations. Among the executive order's outcomes was the formation of the National Environmental Justice Advisory Council (NEJAC) to the EPA.¹⁷ In this way, among others, the environmental justice movement has become increasingly institutionalized over the last ten years. Also, on October 23–27, 2002, a second National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit (Summit II) was convened in Washington, DC, to mark a decade of accomplishments and to discuss directions for the future of the movement.

Moreover, there have been significant shifts in receptivity to environmental justice and environmental concerns within the national political landscape, particularly at the federal executive level. Whereas President Clinton was an outspoken advocate for environmental justice efforts targeted toward minority and low-income communities, President George W. Bush has reduced environmental justice efforts at the EPA and has proposed redefining environmental justice in a way that does not reference the historical environmental inequities and disproportionate environmental burdens of those communities.¹⁸ Although neither President Clinton nor Vice President Gore became the leaders for which the environmental movement had hoped (there was widespread disappointment, for example, with their failure to support the Kyoto Protocol to curb global warming and with the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement), both political leaders were preferable over the subsequent Bush administration, which has attempted to defund, roll back, revise or otherwise undermine many significant existing federal environmental policies and regulations and has stymied almost all new initiatives to expand environmental protections.¹⁹ As a result of the current political climate, there are ongoing conversations within both movements regarding the viability and direction of their futures.

Other relevant changes to the environmental justice and environmentalism landscape since the early 1990s include: the emerging prominence of new issues, such as globalization, global warming, and human genetic research; the development by several environmental organizations, including the Sierra Club and Greenpeace, of active environmental justice campaigns and programs; the hiring of some people of color into prominent positions in environmental organizations²⁰; and an increased circulation of the environmental justice framework globally, where it has begun to have an impact on transnational conversations, summits, and meetings.

Thus, it is time to reconsider the environmental justice challenge to environmentalism, as well as the relationship between the environmental and environmental justice movements more broadly to reassess the prospects for working together in the future. How and to what extent has the environmental movement responded to the challenges posed to it by the environmental movement? What are the points of division between the movements now, given the changes in the movements and the shifting social contexts in which they operate? Have new challenges, points of tension, or opportunities for cooperation emerged as a result of issues that have become increasingly urgent in recent years? Has the dialogue invited in the letters to the Group of Ten and in the speeches by Fischer and Adams at Summit I been realized to any significant degree, in at least some locales and on at least some issues? If so, what do these efforts teach us? How should the environmental movement respond to the challenges that remain? Are overcoming the divide, finding common ground, and promoting alliances or unity between the two movements appropriate aims? Do the two movements tend to work more productively when independent of one another, or have collaborations been effective in advancing both environmental and environmental justice goals? Do the events of the past decade signal future directions for the two movements? Do they adumbrate a collective or unified movement in which there is widespread appreciation of the importance of social justice to environmentalism and of environmentalism to social justice?

The essays in this collection address these and related questions. As noted, they do so from diverse academic perspectives and employ diverse

research methodologies, including ethnographic participant observation, interviews, critical analysis of case studies, quantitative economic and ecological research, and philosophical analysis. Again, we believe this variety in perspectives and methods is appropriate to the multifarious dimensions of the dynamics between the movements. Only by expanding the dialogue within and beyond any one academic approach and bringing together various scholarly frames, techniques, and conceptual paradigms can an appropriately multifaceted understanding of the environmental justice challenge to environmentalism and the relationship between the two movements be achieved.

This is not to suggest that the selections in this collection represent all relevant perspectives. Rather than exhausting and closing down discussion, it is hoped that this polyvocal, but selective, gathering of academic voices will provide stimulus for a progressive and ongoing discussion of where the relationship between the two movements stands right now and how it might be developed to the benefit of both movements in the future.

The Chapters

This collection consists of ten original works—written specifically for this volume—which are divided into three parts: “Conceptual Issues,” “U.S. Environments,” and “International Environments.” The rationale behind this division is that, although some aspects of the environmental justice challenge to the environmental movement and the possibilities for the relationship between the two movements can be discussed in abstraction from specific domestic or international circumstances, other aspects vary substantially between contexts. Both movements originated in the United States, and, as the chapters illustrate, the issues associated with the domestic relationship between them often differ substantially from the issues that arise in international contexts to which they have been exported.

In part I, “Conceptual Issues,” the authors consider the environmental justice challenge and the relationship between the two movements in terms of their conceptual or value orientations, as well as the implications of that relationship for the coordination (or lack thereof) of their practical agendas. In “A Wilderness Environmentalism Manifesto: