

A [sample entry](#) from the

Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature

(London & New York: Continuum, 2005)

Edited by

[Bron Taylor](#)

© 2005
All Rights Reserved

Zimmerman, Michael E. *Contesting Earth's Future: Radical Ecology and Postmodernity*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994.

See also: Anarchism; Bioregionalism and the North American Bioregional Congress; Callicott, Baird; Carson, Rachel; Conservation Biology; Deep Ecology; Ecofascism; Ecofeminism; Ecosophy T; Leopold, Aldo; Mountaineering; Naess, Arne; Natural History as Natural Religion; Pinchot, Gifford; Radical Environmentalism; Religious Studies and Environmental Concern; Rolston III, Holmes; Shepard, Paul; Social Construction of Nature; Social Ecology; Spinoza, Baruch; Thoreau, Henry David; Traditional Ecological Knowledge; Virtues and Ecology in World Religions.

Environmental History – See Environmental Ethics.

Environmental Justice and Environmental Racism

Environmental justice refers to a broad range of issues that combine values of social justice with environmental values and practices. Environmental justice pertains when the cause of social injustices are mediated by environmental conditions, or the environmental burdens that threaten human health are bound by social injustices of marginalization, exploitation, discrimination, racism, sexism, and various forms of imperialism. Examples of environmental burdens include exposure to hazardous materials and toxic wastes, pollution, health hazards, workplace hazards, as well as the exploitation and loss of traditional environmental practices and depletion of local natural resources. Environmental benefits include a safe workplace, clean water and air, easy access to natural surroundings or parks, fair compensation for environmental burdens, and the preservation of traditional environmental practices connected to local natural resources. Concern for environmental justice grew as a grassroots movement of people of color and poor communities. Various populations including African-Americans, Hispanic Americans, Native Americans, and Americans of Asian and Pacific Island descent, as well as the urban, rural, and industrial poor populations – who make up their own local cultures – actively defended against the inequitable distribution of environmental burdens and the lack of participation in environmental decision making. The religious and spiritual importance can be addressed in four general arenas of environmental justice: distributing environmental burdens according to religious affiliation; organizing grassroots reactions to environmental threats from the religious community base; struggling to protect sacred spaces and places; and comprehending spirituality through values of environmental justice.

The first arena of religious environmental injustices pertains to the direct targeting of religious affiliation as a criterion for the location of environmental burdens. One of the most dramatic instances of religious targeting for environmental discrimination exists in the report authored by the Cerrell Associates, a public relations firm for the State of California. The now-infamous 1984 *Cerrell Report* argued that a community with reduced capacity for resistance, rather than geological and other scientific characteristics, would best determine the location of environmental burdens. In the report, characteristics such as high unemployment, high school or less education, and Catholic congregations would prove to be likely sites of least resistance. Identifying the faith of a community exposed a sanctioned religious discrimination in the distribution of environmental burdens.

The second arena of religious and spiritual significance for the environmental justice movement pertains to grassroots organizing around a religious community base. Communities in environmental justice cases often rely upon the moral center and congregational core of their religious organizations. A critical example is also one of the focal points in the movement's origins in the community of Afton in Warren County, North Carolina, where in 1981 it was chosen as the site for a toxic landfill. At the time, Afton had an 84 percent African-American population; Warren County had the highest percentage African-American population in North Carolina. In 1982, Dr. Charles E. Cobb, Director of the United Church of Christ's Commission for Racial Justice (UCC-CRJ), spoke out against this landfill, arguing it demonstrated how African-Americans and the poor are forced to assume heavier environmental burdens than white communities. Other important national organizations, such as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the Congressional Black Caucus also protested. This support inspired a campaign of nonviolent civil disobedience culminating in protest of activists and residents bodily blocking the trucks hauling toxin-laced soil, which led to over 500 arrests and drew national media attention. The Warren County protest represented one of the first public mobilizations against environmental racism. Although the protest was unsuccessful in stopping the toxic landfill site, the incident sparked the environmental justice movement, and two decades later the state closed the landfill and attempted to compensate the community for the long period of environmental injustices.

As its legacy, the Warren County incident introduced a new set of environmental obligations in the United States: the first of which was to decipher the extent of the disparate distribution of environmental burdens on communities of color and poor communities. For instance, the 1983 General Accounting Office study, *Siting of*

Hazardous Waste Landfills and Their Correlation with Racial and Economic Status Surrounding Communities, focused on the Southern states that make up Region IV of the United States Environmental Protection Agency (US-EPA). This study noted a strong correlation between the location of poor and African-American communities and hazardous waste sites. The study still left many questions about the extent of the problem beyond this region, which prompted the United Church of Christ's own nationwide study, *Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States*. It confirmed the disparate distribution of hazardous waste facilities suffered by minorities and lower socio-economic groups, concluding "Race proved to be the most significant among variables tested in association with the location of commercial hazardous waste facilities" (UCC-CRJ 1987: xiii). Upon the 1987 presentation of this study to the National Press Club, in Washington, D.C., Reverend Ben Chavis, Director of the UCC-CRJ coined the first official definition of *environmental racism*:

racial discrimination in environmental policy making, and the unequal enforcement of environmental laws and regulations . . . the deliberate targeting of people of color communities for toxic waste facilities . . . the official sanctioning of the life-threatening presence of poisons and pollutants in people-of-color communities for toxic waste facilities . . . the history of excluding people of color from the leadership of the environmental movement (*Hearings Before the Subcommittee* 1993: 4).

At the same time that studies were confirming the extent of the problem, religious organizations created their own networks as an obligation to protect these communities. The National Council of Churches created the Eco-Justice Working Group in 1983 and later The Environmental Justice Covenant Congregation Program, as way to promote environmental justice. The Black Church Environmental Justice Program established community support among seven historically black denominations. Spiritual and religious support in environmental justice struggles also occurred in many diverse, localized forms, including expressions of cultural heritage. An example of the former is the Mothers of East Los Angeles (MELA), which began as a group of Latina grandmothers who, with their local priest, organized a neighborhood watch group. During one of their meetings, they organized MELA to block the building of a prison in their neighborhood. MELA continued in strength, by blocking an oil pipeline planned to traverse a local schoolyard, successfully derailing plans for a hazardous waste incinerator, and building a women's grassroots organization capable of leading voting drives for representatives and introducing community improvements on multiple environmental justice fronts. Another front of religious

community support in cultural heritage can be found in the struggles against pesticides and labor injustices fought by César Chávez and the United Farm Workers. These struggles were often based on principles found in Catholic papal encyclicals, the Mexicano religious heritage of suffering and penance, and an iconic following of the Virgin of Guadalupe.

The environmental justice frame expands into territories beyond the waste and pollution issues; since, vital cultural, spiritual, and natural resources concern social justice and ecological sustainability around values of place. The third arena of environmental justice, therefore, pertains to the protection of sacred spaces and places of ritual. Many examples of indigenous land struggles occur at the intersection of place and spiritual values. Such struggles often are articulated around issues of resource use. In the United States, indigenous peoples struggle for water use that connects them to their spiritual heritage. Acoma poet Simon Ortiz, for example, reflects,

water defines our culture, water from the skies, and groundwaters, which are really part of each other. In terms of religion, the gods and the kachinas bring the water, of course they bring it in terms of the weather forces, the climatic conditions that provide that water (Adamson, Stein, and Evans 2002: 21).

In the same conversation, Chicano anthropologist Devon Peña has observed, "for the Pueblo Indian and the Hispano Mexicano alike, water was not a commodity. It was not the exchange value that was important, it was the communal and spiritual value that was important" (Adamson, Stein, and Evans 2002: 22). The overall struggle is spiritual: for sacred values, practices, and resources are unfairly distributed to large population centers.

Other kinds of examples include the preponderance of high-level nuclear waste facilities slated and proposed for Indian lands. Sites typically offer attractive economic compensation; however, debates about land rights and respect for sacred lands still ensue. The Shoshone Indians have long debated the Yucca Mountain nuclear waste facility and the extent to which it impacts sacred land. The appeal to ritual spaces and sacred land is a vital sticking point in environmental justice cases for indigenous peoples. Given such values cost-benefit analysis cannot easily be used for such decision making, for resource economics and the values of sacred spaces are construed very differently. Hence, Rep. Lindsey Graham (R-SC) commented to the Shoshone: "God made Yucca Mountain for the express purpose of storing high level nuclear waste. There's nothing within a 100 miles of the place" (LaDuke 2002: 26).

A fourth example of a religious arena in the environmental justice movement pertains to the emergence and expression of spirituality through values of the movement

itself. In 1991, the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit convened in Washington, D.C., and adopted *The Principles of Environmental Justice*, heralded as the truest example of the movement's self recognition. Within it are multiple references to spirituality emerging from the movement. For instance the Preamble stated,

We, the people of color, gathered together at this multinational People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit, to begin to build a national and international movement of all peoples of color to fight the destruction and taking of our lands and communities, do hereby re-establish our spiritual interdependence to the sacredness of our Mother Earth (Hofrichter 1993: 237).

Additional examples of spirituality growing from concerns of environmental justice are identifiable in many works of ecological theologians, which span a number of themes. Among some examples of this scholarship, we can include Rosemary Radford Ruether's observation of the interrelation between the dominance of human activity upon the Earth with the social dominance around gender, racial, and economic inequities. She has called for a language of eco-justice that spiritually connects and addresses these forms of domination. Sallie McFague has measured the religious concept of the "good life" in contrast to the damaging effects of distributive inequities of environmental burdens and the Western over-consumption of resources that have causal status to these inequities. One of the critical features of the environmental justice movement is that 70–80 percent of the grassroots leadership has come from women who are mostly blue-collar women and predominantly women of color. Karen and Garth Baker-Fletcher expand upon this backdrop and utilize environmental justice concepts in their interpretation of Black womanist theology:

The entire cosmos, then, is engaged in God's activity of providing resources for survival and wholeness. Not only do we see Jesus in the faces of Black women; we see Jesus in the face of the earth, in the face of the waters, in the faces of wind and sun and moon. One of the forms of captivity that keeps human beings enslaved, womanists must add, is environmental racism and the global problem of environmental justice (Baker-Fletcher and Baker-Fletcher 1997: 84).

The history and scope of the environmental justice movement is often mistaken as a recent, merely anthropocentric cause. However, the purpose for conceptualizing environmental problems in terms of environmental justice

is fundamentally to resist the separation of environmental degradation from social justice. The environmental justice movement, now recognized by its veteran voices as the largest and fastest growing social movement in the world, refuses the final distinction of anthropocentric and non-anthropocentric concerns. Many global environmental crises, such as global warming, ozone depletion, climate impacts, acid rain, desertification, and downstream pollution are transnational problems that leave the poorest peoples, often previous colonies and indigenous peoples of the world, as the sufferers of environmental burdens produced by the wealthiest, previous colonial powers, of the world. For many communities and peoples worldwide, environmental justice is a matter of protecting ways of living that view religious, environmental, economic, and social values as inseparable. Thus, in Chiapas, Mexico, indigenous struggles are about land rights, sustainable agriculture, cultural self-determination, and spiritual heritage. In India, sacred groves must be protected against new land-use pressures from industry and growing populations. And, in San Jose, Phillipines, farmers struggle against invasive chemical farming and genetically modified seeds from American biotechnology corporations, in order to sustain their heritage of organic land management. Such diversity in global environmental justice movements involves comparably broad connections between religion, ecology, and social justice.

Robert Melchior Figueroa

Further Reading

- Adamson, Joni, Rachel Stein and Mei Mei Evans, eds. *The Environmental Justice Reader: Politics, Poetics, and Pedagogy*. Tuscon: University of Arizona Press, 2002.
- Baker-Fletcher, Karen and Garth Baker-Fletcher. *KASIMU: My Sister, My Brother: Womanist and Xodus God-Talk*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1997.
- Cole, Luke W. and Sheila R. Foster. *From the Ground Up: Environmental Racism and the Rise of the Environmental Justice Movement*. New York: New York University Press, 2001.
- Gottlieb, Robert. *Forcing the Spring: The Transformation of the American Environmental Movement*. Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1993.
- Hofrichter, Richard, ed. *Toxic Struggles: The Theory and Practice of Environmental Justice*. Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1993.
- LaDuke, Winona. *The Winona LaDuke Reader: A Collection of Essential Essays*. Stillwater: Voyageur Press, 2002.
- McFague, Sallie. *Life Abundant: Rethinking Theology and Economy for a Planet in Peril*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001.