

The Environmental Justice Movement ^[1]

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The exact start of the environmental justice movement in America is not clear. Local groups have complained about unwanted land uses for decades. Prior to the early eighties, these local protests were considered isolated and protesting communities were complaining by themselves and not associated with others similarly situated in other communities.

This isolated protesting all changed in the early 1980's and the environmental justice movement became a national social and racial protest that galvanized communities across the country seeking social justice and environmental protection. The initial environmental justice spark sprang from a Warren County, North Carolina protest. In 1982, a small, predominately African-American community was designated to host a hazardous waste landfill. This landfill would accept PCB-contaminated soil that resulted from illegal dumping of toxic waste along roadways. After removing the contaminated soil, the state of North Carolina considered a number of potential sites to host the landfill, but ultimately settled on this small African-American community.

In response to the state's decision, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and others staged a massive protest. More than 500 protesters were arrested, including Dr. Benjamin F. Chavis, Jr., from the United Church of Christ, and Delegate Walter Fauntroy, then a member of the United States House of Representatives from the District of Columbia. While the Warren County protest failed to prevent the siting of the disposal facility, it did provide a national start to the environmental justice movement.

Following the Warren County protest, people in poor minority communities created groups to fight environmental burdens they claimed:

1. resulted from being targeted by industry for activities that threaten the environment (e.g., use, storage, and disposal of toxic chemicals); and,
2. produced high rates of environmental illness.

While local protests decreased such threats to some communities, the groups realized another effective way to prevent harmful environmental impacts was to develop a loose, national, multicultural coalition of such community groups to collectively speak out for environmental justice and to challenge others with similar interests to also speak out.

The Warren county residents presented feelings similar to many other residents in small, low-income and minority communities across the country. The common feeling was that these communities were targeted based on their demographics. They all felt that but for their race and economic status, their communities would not have been designated to host a hazardous waste disposal facility. Furthermore, they felt a lack of power to defeat siting decisions and would be constant repositories for waste treatment, storage and disposal facilities.

The Warren County protest and the emerging environmental justice movement served as the impetus for a number of studies, designed to measure the connection between race and hazardous waste siting decisions. Delegate Fauntroy asked the General Accounting Office (GAO) to review hazardous waste siting decisions in EPA Region 4. This region includes the states of Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee, states with a high proportion of minority residents. The GAO conducted a study and found that there are four hazardous waste landfills in Region VI's eight states. Blacks make up the majority of the population in three of the communities where the landfills are located. At least 26 percent of the population in all four communities have incomes below the poverty level and most of the population is black.

Another study that sprang from the Warren County protest is Toxic Waste and Race, a 1987 United Church of Christ study that examined the relationship between waste siting decisions in the United States and race. That study concluded that race was the most significant factor in siting hazardous waste facilities, and that three out of every five African Americans and Hispanics live in a community housing toxic waste sites.

Critics to both studies have presented arguments supporting different conclusions for waste siting decisions. Some argue that the cost of land and favorable business climates are greater predictors of waste siting decisions. Others have argued that minority and low-income residents have moved into neighborhoods hosting a waste facility due to the cheap cost of land. Regardless to the reason, a clear feeling in many minority communities is that they have been targeted for unwanted land uses and have little, if any, power to remedy their dilemma. Correct or incorrect, this is the position from which many environmental justice activists make their environmental justice decisions.

User Tags:

[environmental history](#) ^[2]

[history](#) ^[3]

[NC](#) ^[4]

[North Carolina](#) ^[5]

[North Carolina History](#) ^[6]

[Page](#) ^[7]

[pollution](#) ^[8]

[protest](#) ^[9]

[protests](#) ^[10]

[State of North Carolina](#) ^[11]

[Students](#) ^[12]

[Teachers](#) ^[13]

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[3] <https://www.ncpedia.org/category/user-tags/history>

[4] <https://www.ncpedia.org/category/user-tags/nc>

[5] <https://www.ncpedia.org/category/user-tags/north-carolina-5>

[6] <https://www.ncpedia.org/category/user-tags/north-carolina-6>

[7] <https://www.ncpedia.org/category/user-tags/page>

[8] <https://www.ncpedia.org/category/user-tags/pollution>

[9] <https://www.ncpedia.org/category/user-tags/protest>

[10] <https://www.ncpedia.org/category/user-tags/protests>

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