



# Environmental Justice

AUGUST 2024



## WHAT IS IT?

The concept of "Environmental Justice" has evolved through numerous events throughout our nation's history. A common thread in these events is the disproportionate impact on minoritized populations, who are more likely to face environmental health risks and hazards. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) defines environmental justice as "the just treatment and meaningful involvement of all people, regardless of income, race, color, national origin, Tribal affiliation, or disability, in agency decision-making and other Federal activities that affect human health and people." Although this definition may not fully capture the experiences of those who have faced environmental injustice, it is a goal that we, as public health professionals, environmentalists, activists, and common citizens, should strive towards.

## HOW DID WE GET HERE?

During the 1980s, the concept of environmental justice began to gain traction as more communities sought social justice and environmental protection. The initial catalyst for this movement occurred in Warren County, North Carolina, a small African-American town. Due to discriminatory practices, the state of North Carolina designated Warren County as a dumping site for a hazardous waste landfill. The soil in the landfill was contaminated with polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), man-made chemicals that can be extremely toxic to human health. As a result, Black and Hispanic communities faced higher risks of health issues such as cancer, infertility, and liver damage. Warren County citizens took to the streets in an attempt to prevent the establishment of the facility. While the protest did not achieve its original goals, it sparked international concern for the environmental health of minority and underserved communities.

This movement encouraged more researchers to focus on environmental inequities across the United States. Studies conducted at the time confirmed that race was a driving factor in the location of hazardous waste facilities. The increased awareness of environmental injustices led to a broader recognition of how discriminatory policies and practices disproportionately impacted communities of color. Researchers and activists highlighted the systemic nature of environmental racism, emphasizing the need for policy changes and increased accountability from both government and private sectors to protect vulnerable populations from harmful environmental exposures. In 1994, President Clinton issued Executive Order 12898: Federal Actions to Address Environmental Justice in Minority Populations and Low-Income Populations. The order required the federal government to consider environmental justice in decision-making processes, emphasizing the need to account for the overall health and welfare of surrounding communities. This executive order marked a significant step towards institutionalizing the principles of environmental justice within federal policy, ensuring that the voices and concerns of marginalized communities were included in environmental decision-making.

The legacy of the Warren County protests and subsequent activism continues to shape the environmental justice movement, advocating for the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people in environmental policies and practices. The foundation for environmental health and justice was built by those most at risk for health consequences. Despite significant strides, our country still has much work to do in addressing environmental health risks in communities of color and low-income communities.

Environmental racism occurs when communities of color face disproportionate exposure to harmful pollutants and related health conditions. The increased risk in underserved communities can be traced to redlining, a policy that allowed government mortgage officers to deny loans based on race and neighborhood. This policy forced minorities into the same communities, making them targets for higher levels of hazardous pollution.

Although redlining is now illegal, its remnants persist in our communities, evident in issues such as lack of access to clean air and water, limited local healthy food options, and frequent flooding. Addressing these ongoing disparities requires continued advocacy, research, and policy change to ensure environmental justice for all.



It is rather cathartic to recognize what the citizens of Warren County couldn't see at the time. Their protests, aimed at protecting their small town, sparked a national concern for environmental justice issues affecting minoritized groups. Today, the Office of Environmental Justice is implementing strategies for greater environmental health. In May 2024, this representation of bravery led to the birth of nonprofit and grassroots organizations dedicated to environmental justice and health equity, such as:

- The NAACP Center for Environmental & Climate Justice, which focuses on advocacy and education regarding the civil rights of individuals.
- Black Millennials for Flint (BM4F), a grassroots organization dedicated to ensuring that Black people in Flint, Michigan, have access to clean water.
- National Black Environmental Justice Network, which was developed after nearly 300 Black grassroots organizations met in New Orleans, Louisiana, to address systemic environmental inequities in Black communities.
- TIRED (The Initiative to Reduce and Eliminate Dumping), based in Atlanta, GA, with a mission to stop the dumping of landfill and hazardous waste in Southwest Atlanta communities.

Ensuring our collective environmental health, like all public health efforts, is a collaborative endeavor involving officials, health professionals, and people like you and me. Working with these organizations can increase your awareness of your environment and its needs. You can also contribute by contacting your local elected officials and advocating for meaningful environmental justice policy changes.

As you consider your role in environmental justice, remember that no matter how big or small, a rock still creates a ripple in water. The simple act of educating yourself can lead to change beyond your conception, much like the brave people of Warren County.



# ADVOCACY

Advocating for environmental justice in your community involves active engagement and strategic actions to address and rectify environmental inequalities. Here's how you can make a difference:

- **Educate Yourself and Others:** Start by understanding the issues your community faces. Research local environmental problems, their causes, and affected demographics. Share this knowledge through community meetings, social media, and local events to raise awareness.
- **Engage with Policymakers:** Contact local, state, and federal representatives to voice your concerns. Attend city council meetings, public hearings, and town halls to advocate for policies that promote environmental justice. Present data, share personal stories, and propose solutions.
- **Participate in Environmental Reviews:** Get involved in the review process for new projects in your community. This can include attending public hearings, submitting comments, and ensuring that environmental impact assessments consider the needs of vulnerable populations.
- **Promote Sustainable Practices:** Encourage and support community-led initiatives that promote sustainability, such as recycling programs, community gardens, and clean energy projects. These efforts can reduce environmental harm and build resilience.
- **Legal Action and Advocacy:** In some cases, legal action may be necessary. Partner with legal organizations that specialize in environmental justice to challenge harmful practices and policies in court.
- **Foster Inclusive Community Engagement:** Ensure that the voices of marginalized communities are heard and prioritized. Advocate for their inclusion in decision-making processes and provide platforms for them to share their experiences and solutions.

Advocating for environmental justice in Georgia may take on many different roles and responsibilities, but it starts right here with me and you. Want to get more involved or learn more? Explore some of the resources below!



# RESOURCES

- Georgia Conservancy: <https://www.georgiaconservancy.org>
- Environmental Protection Agency (EPA): <https://www.epa.gov>
- Environmental Community Action (ECO-Action): <https://eco-act.org>
- Watershed Atlanta Westside Alliance: <https://www.wawa-online.org>
- Office of Environmental Justice: <https://www.justice.gov/oej>

## Contact Information

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