

## **Anatomy of Environmental Racism and the Environmental Justice Movement**

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Communities are not all created equal. In the United States, for example, some communities are routinely poisoned while the government looks the other way. Environmental regulations have not uniformly benefited all segments of society. People of color (African Americans, Latinos, Asians, Pacific Islanders, and Native Americans) are disproportionately harmed by industrial toxins on their jobs and in their neighborhoods. These groups must contend with dirty air and drinking water—the byproducts of municipal landfills, incinerators, polluting industries, and hazardous waste treatment, storage, and disposal facilities.

Why do some communities get “dumped on” while others escape? Why are environmental regulations vigorously enforced in some communities and not in others? Why are some workers protected from environmental threats to their health while others (such as migrant farmworkers) are still being poisoned? How can environmental justice be incorporated into the campaign for environmental protection? What institutional changes would enable the United States to become a just and sustainable society? What community organizing strategies are effective against environmental racism? These are some of the many questions addressed in this book.

This chapter sketches out the basic environmental problems communities of color face, discusses how the mainstream environmental movement does not provide an adequate organizational base, analysis, vision, or strategy to address these problems, and, finally, provides a glimpse of several representative struggles within the grassroots environmental justice movement. For these purposes, the pervasive reality of racism is placed at the very center of the analysis.

## Internal Colonialism and White Racism

The history of the United States has long been grounded in white racism. The nation was founded on the principles of "free land" (stolen from Native Americans and Mexicans), "free labor" (cruelly extracted from African slaves), and "free men" (white men with property). From the outset, institutional racism shaped the economic, political, and ecological landscape, and buttressed the exploitation of both land and people. Indeed, it has allowed communities of color to exist as internal colonies characterized by dependent (and unequal) relationships with the dominant white society or "Mother Country." In their 1967 book, *Black Power*, Carmichael and Hamilton were among the first to explore the "internal" colonial model as a way to explain the racial inequality, political exploitation, and social isolation of African Americans. As Carmichael and Hamilton write:

The economic relationship of America's black communities [to white society]...reflects their colonial status. The political power exercised over those communities goes hand in glove with the economic deprivation experienced by the black citizens.

Historically, colonies have existed for the sole purpose of enriching, in one form or another, the "colonizer"; the consequence is to maintain the economic dependency of the "colonized" (pp. 16-17).

Generally, people of color in the United States—like their counterparts in formerly colonized lands of Africa, Asia, and Latin America—have not had the same opportunities as whites. The social forces that have organized oppressed colonies internationally still operate in the "heart of the colonizer's mother country" (Blauner 1972, p. 26). For Blauner, people of color are subjected to five principal colonizing processes: they enter the "host" society and economy involuntarily; their native culture is destroyed; white-dominated bureaucracies impose restrictions from which whites are exempt; the dominant group uses institutionalized racism to justify its actions; and a dual or "split labor market" emerges based on ethnicity and race. Such domination is also buttressed by state institutions. Social scientists Omi and Winant (1986, pp. 76-78) go so far as to insist that "every state institution is a racial institution." Clearly, whites receive benefits from racism, while people of color bear most of the cost.

## Environmental Racism

Racism plays a key factor in environmental planning and decisionmaking. Indeed, environmental racism is reinforced by government, legal, economic, political, and military institutions. It is a fact of life in the United States that the mainstream environmental movement is only beginning to wake up to. Yet, without a doubt, racism influences the likelihood of exposure to environmental and health risks and the accessibility to health care. Racism provides whites of all class levels with an "edge" in gaining access to a healthy physical environment. This has been documented again and again.

Whether by conscious design or institutional neglect, communities of color in urban ghettos, in rural "poverty pockets," or on economically impoverished Native-American reservations face some of the worst environmental devastation in the nation. Clearly, racial discrimination was not legislated out of existence in the 1960s. While some significant progress was made during this decade, people of color continue to struggle for equal treatment in many areas, including environmental justice. Agencies at all levels of government, including the federal EPA, have done a poor job protecting people of color from the ravages of pollution and industrial encroachment. It has thus been an up-hill battle convincing white judges, juries, government officials, and policymakers that racism exists in environmental protection, enforcement, and policy formulation.

The most polluted urban communities are those with crumbling infrastructure, ongoing economic disinvestment, deteriorating housing, inadequate schools, chronic unemployment, a high poverty rate, and an overloaded health-care system. Riot-torn South Central Los Angeles typifies this urban neglect. It is not surprising that the "dirtiest" zip code in California belongs to the mostly African-American and Latino neighborhood in that part of the city (Kay 1991a). In the Los Angeles basin, over 71 percent of the African Americans and 50 percent of the Latinos live in areas with the most polluted air, while only 34 percent of the white population does (Ong and Blumenberg 1990; Mann 1991). This pattern exists nationally as well. As researchers Wernette and Nieves note:

In 1990, 437 of the 3,109 counties and independent cities failed to meet at least one of the EPA ambient air quality standards...57 percent of whites, 65 percent of African Americans, and 80 percent of Hispanics live in 437 counties with substandard air quality. Out of the whole population, a total of 33 percent of whites, 50 percent of African Americans, and 60 percent of Hispanics live in the 136 counties in

which two or more air pollutants exceed standards. The percentage living in the 29 counties designated as nonattainment areas for three or more pollutants are 12 percent of whites, 20 percent of African Americans, and 31 percent of Hispanics (pp. 16-17).

Income alone does not account for these above-average percentages. Housing segregation and development patterns play a key role in determining where people live. Moreover, urban development and the "spatial configuration" of communities flow from the forces and relationships of industrial production which, in turn, are influenced and subsidized by government policy (Feagin 1988; Gottdiener 1988). There is widespread agreement that vestiges of race-based decisionmaking still influence housing, education, employment, and criminal justice. The same is true for municipal services such as garbage pickup and disposal, neighborhood sanitation, fire and police protection, and library services. Institutional racism influences decisions on local land use, enforcement of environmental regulations, industrial facility siting, management of economic vulnerability, and the paths of freeways and highways.

People skeptical of the assertion that poor people and people of color are targeted for waste-disposal sites should consider the report the Cerrell Associates provided the California Waste Management Board. In their 1984 report, *Political Difficulties Facing Waste-to-Energy Conversion Plant Siting*, they offered a detailed profile of those neighborhoods most likely to organize effective resistance against incinerators. The policy conclusion based on this analysis is clear. As the report states:

All socioeconomic groupings tend to resent the nearby siting of major facilities, but middle and upper socioeconomic strata possess better resources to effectuate their opposition. Middle and higher socioeconomic strata neighborhoods should not fall within the one-mile and five-mile radius of the proposed site (p. 43).

Where then will incinerators or other polluting facilities be sited? For Cerrell Associates, the answer is low-income, disempowered neighborhoods with a high concentration of nonvoters. The ideal site, according to their report, has nothing to do with environmental soundness but everything to do with lack of social power. Communities of color in California are far more likely to fit this profile than are their white counterparts.

Those still skeptical of the existence of environmental racism should also consider the fact that zoning boards and planning commissions are typically stacked with white developers. Generally, the deci-



sions of these bodies reflect the special interests of the individuals who sit on these boards. People of color have been systematically excluded from these decisionmaking boards, commissions, and governmental agencies (or allowed only token representation). Grassroots leaders are now demanding a shared role in all the decisions that shape their communities. They are challenging the intended or unintended racist assumptions underlying environmental and industrial policies.

## Toxic Colonialism Abroad

To understand the global ecological crisis, it is important to understand that the poisoning of African Americans in South Central Los Angeles and of Mexicans in border *maquiladoras* have their roots in the same system of economic exploitation, racial oppression, and devaluation of human life. The quest for solutions to environmental problems and for ways to achieve sustainable development in the United States has considerable implications for the global environmental movement.

Today, more than 1,900 *maquiladoras*, assembly plants operated by American, Japanese, and other foreign countries, are located along the 2,000-mile U.S.-Mexico border (Center for Investigative Reporting 1990; Sanchez 1990; Zuniga 1992, p. 22A). These plants use cheap Mexican labor to assemble products from imported components and raw materials, and then ship them back to the United States (Witt 1991). Nearly half a million Mexicans work in the *maquiladoras*. They earn an average of \$3.75 a day. While these plants bring jobs, albeit low-paying ones, they exacerbate local pollution by overcrowding the border towns, straining sewage and water systems, and reducing air quality. All this compromises the health of workers and nearby community residents. The Mexican environmental regulatory agency is understaffed and ill-equipped to adequately enforce the country's laws (Working Group on Canada-Mexico Free Trade 1991).

The practice of targeting poor communities of color in the Third World for waste disposal and the introduction of risky technologies from industrialized countries are forms of "toxic colonialism," what some activists have dubbed the "subjugation of people to an ecologically-destructive economic order by entities over which the people have no control" (Greenpeace 1992, p. 3). The industrialized world's controversial Third World dumping policy was made public by the release of an internal, December 12, 1991, memorandum authored by Lawrence Summers, chief economist of the World Bank. It shocked the world and touched off a global scandal. Here are the highlights:

"Dirty" Industries: Just between you and me, shouldn't the World Bank be encouraging MORE migration of the dirty industries to the LDCs [Less Developed Countries]? I can think of three reasons:

1) The measurement of the costs of health impairing pollution depends on the foregone earnings from increased morbidity and mortality. From this point of view a given amount of health impairing pollution should be done in the country with the lowest cost, which will be the country with the lowest wages. I think the economic logic behind dumping a load of toxic waste in the lowest wage country is impeccable and we should face up to that.

2) The costs of pollution are likely to be non-linear as the initial increments of pollution probably have very low cost. I've always thought that under-polluted areas in Africa are vastly UNDER-polluted; their air quality is probably vastly inefficiently low compared to Los Angeles or Mexico City. Only the lamentable facts that so much pollution is generated by non-tradable industries (transport, electrical generation) and that the unit transport costs of solid waste are so high prevent world welfare-enhancing trade in air pollution and waste.

3) The demand for a clean environment for aesthetic and health reasons is likely to have very high income elasticity. The concern over an agent that causes a one in a million change in the odds of prostate cancer is obviously going to be much higher in a country where people survive to get prostate cancer than in a country where under 5 [year-old] mortality is 200 per thousand. Also, much of the concern over industrial atmosphere discharge is about visibility impairing particulates. These discharges may have very little direct health impact. Clearly trade in goods that embody aesthetic pollution concerns could be welfare enhancing. While production is mobile the consumption of pretty air is a non-tradable.

The problem with the arguments against all of these proposals for more pollution in LDCs (intrinsic rights to certain goods, moral reasons, social concerns, lack of adequate markets, etc.) could be turned around and used more or less effectively against every Bank proposal...

## Beyond the Race vs. Class Trap

Whether at home or abroad, the question of who *pays* and who *benefits* from current industrial and development policies is central to any analysis of environmental racism. In the United States, race interacts with class to create special environmental and health vulnerabilities. People of color, however, face elevated toxic exposure levels even when social class variables (income, education, and occupational status) are held constant (Bryant and Mohai 1992). Race has been found to be an independent factor, not reducible to class, in predicting the distribution of 1) air pollution in our society (Freeman 1972; Gianessi, Peskin, and Wolff 1979; Gelobter 1988; Wernette and Nieves 1992); 2) contaminated fish consumption (West, Fly, and Marans 1990); 3) the location of municipal landfills and incinerators (Bullard 1983, 1987, 1990, 1991a); 4) the location of abandoned toxic waste dumps (United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice 1987); and 5) lead poisoning in children (Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry 1988).

Lead poisoning is a classic case in which race, not just class, determines exposure. It affects between three and four million children in the United States—most of whom are African Americans and Latinos living in urban areas. Among children five years old and younger, the percentage of African Americans who have excessive levels of lead in their blood far exceeds the percentage of whites at all income levels (Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry 1988, p. I-12).

The federal Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry found that for families earning less than \$6,000 annually an estimated 68 percent of African-American children had lead poisoning, compared with 36 percent for white children. For families with incomes exceeding \$15,000, more than 38 percent of African-American children have been poisoned, compared with 12 percent of white children. African-American children are two to three times more likely than their white counterparts to suffer from lead poisoning independent of class factors.

One reason for this is that African Americans and whites do not have the same opportunities to “vote with their feet” by leaving unhealthy physical environments. The ability of an individual to escape a health-threatening environment is usually correlated with income. However, racial barriers make it even harder for millions of African Americans, Latinos, Asians, Pacific Islanders, and Native Americans to relocate. Housing discrimination, redlining, and other market forces make it difficult for millions of households to buy their way out of polluted environments. For example, an affluent African-American family (with an income of \$50,000 or more) is as segregated as an African-American family with an annual income of \$5,000 (Denton and Massey

1988; Jaynes and Williams 1989). Thus, lead poisoning of African-American children is not just a "poverty thing."

White racism helped create our current separate and unequal communities. It defines the boundaries of the urban ghetto, *barrio*, and reservation, and influences the provision of environmental protection and other public services. Apartheid-type housing and development policies reduce neighborhood options, limit mobility, diminish job opportunities, and decrease environmental choices for millions of Americans. It is unlikely that this nation will ever achieve lasting solutions to its environmental problems unless it also addresses the system of racial injustice that helps sustain the existence of powerless communities forced to bear disproportionate environmental costs.

## The Limits of Mainstream Environmentalism

Historically, the mainstream environmental movement in the United States has developed agendas that focus on such goals as wilderness and wildlife preservation, wise resource management, pollution abatement, and population control. It has been primarily supported by middle- and upper-middle-class whites. Although concern for the environment cuts across class and racial lines, ecology activists have traditionally been individuals with above-average education, greater access to economic resources, and a greater sense of personal power (Buttel and Flinn 1978; Morrison 1980, 1986; Dunlap 1987; Bullard, 1990; Bullard and Wright 1987; Bachrach and Zautra 1985; Mohai, 1985, 1990).

Not surprisingly, mainstream groups were slow in broadening their base to include poor and working-class whites, let alone African Americans and other people of color. Moreover, they were ill-equipped to deal with the environmental, economic, and social concerns of these communities. During the 1960s and 1970s, while the "Big Ten" environmental groups focused on wilderness preservation and conservation through litigation, political lobbying, and technical evaluation, activists of color were engaged in mass direct action mobilizations for basic civil rights in the areas of employment, housing, education, and health care. Thus, two parallel and sometimes conflicting movements emerged, and it has taken nearly two decades for any significant convergence to occur between these two efforts. In fact, conflicts still remain over how the two groups should balance economic development, social justice, and environmental protection.

In their desperate attempt to improve the economic conditions of their constituents, many African-American civil rights and political leaders have directed their energies toward bringing jobs to their commu-



nities. In many instances, this has been achieved at great risk to the health of workers and the surrounding communities. The promise of jobs (even low-paying and hazardous ones) and of a broadened tax base has enticed several economically impoverished, politically powerless communities of color both in the United States and around the world (Center for Investigative Reporting and Bill Moyers 1990; Bullard 1990; Bryant and Mohai 1992). Environmental job blackmail is a fact of life. You can get a job, but only if you are willing to do work that will harm you, your families, and your neighbors.

Workers of color are especially vulnerable to job blackmail because of the greater threat of unemployment they face compared to whites and because of their concentration in low-paying, unskilled, nonunionized occupations. For example, they make up a large share of the nonunion contract workers in the oil, chemical, and nuclear industries. Similarly, over 95 percent of migrant farmworkers in the United States are Latino, African-American, Afro-Caribbean, or Asian, and African Americans are overrepresented in high-risk, blue-collar, and service occupations for which a large pool of replacement labor exists. Thus, they are twice as likely to be unemployed as their white counterparts. Fear of unemployment acts as a potent incentive for many African-American workers to accept and keep jobs they know are health threatening. Workers will tell you that "unemployment and poverty are also hazardous to one's health." An inherent conflict exists between the interests of capital and that of labor. Employers have the power to move jobs (and industrial hazards) from the Northeast and Midwest to the South and Sunbelt, or they may move the jobs offshore to Third World countries where labor is even cheaper and where there are even fewer health and safety regulations. Yet, unless an environmental movement emerges that is capable of addressing these economic concerns, people of color and poor white workers are likely to end up siding with corporate managers in key conflicts concerning the environment.

Indeed, many labor unions already moderate their demands for improved work-safety and pollution control whenever the economy is depressed. They are afraid of layoffs, plant closings, and the relocation of industries. These fears and anxieties of labor are usually built on the false but understandable assumption that environmental regulations inevitably lead to job loss (Brown 1980, 1987).

The crux of the problem is that the mainstream environmental movement has not sufficiently addressed the fact that social inequality and imbalances of social power are at the heart of environmental degradation, resource depletion, pollution, and even overpopulation. The environmental crisis can simply not be solved effectively without social justice. As one academic human ecologist notes, "Whenever [an] in-

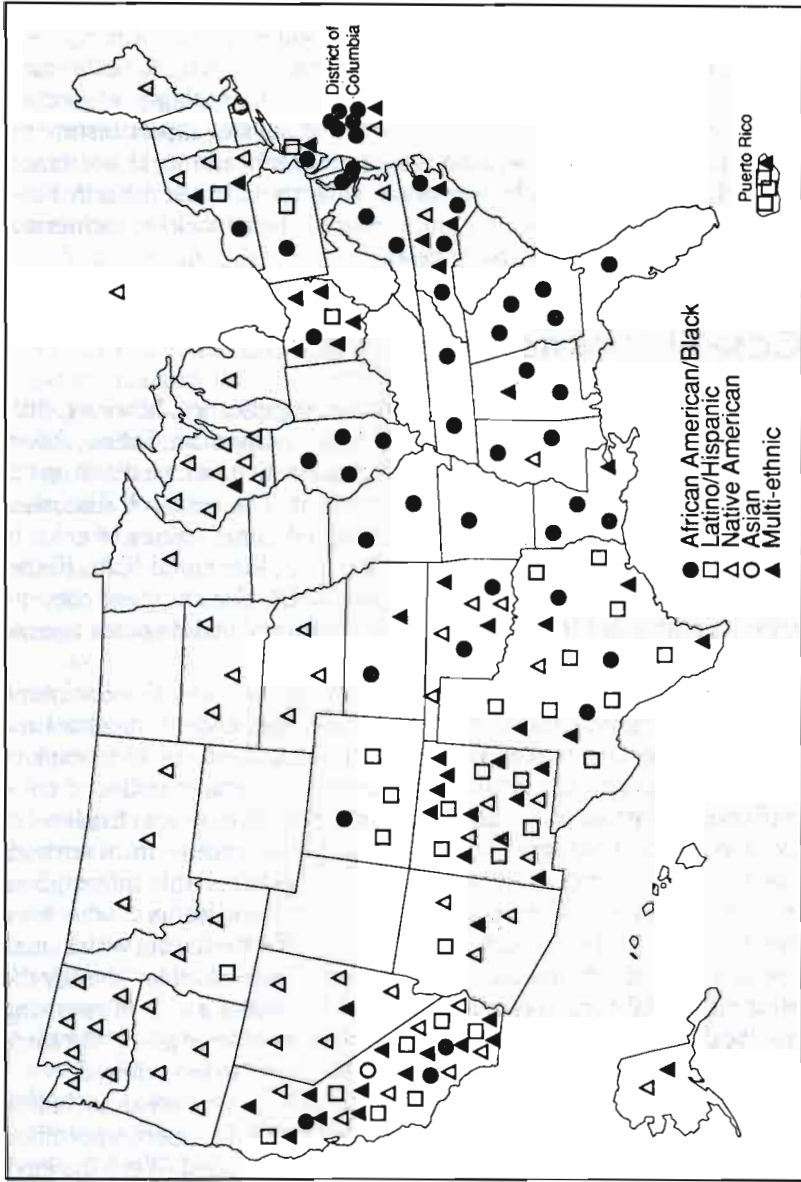
group directly and exclusively benefits from its own overuse of a shared resource but the costs of that overuse are 'shared' by out-groups, then in-group motivation toward a policy of resource conservation (or sustained yields of harvesting) is undermined" (Catton 1982).

## The Movement for Environmental Justice

As this book testifies, activists of color have begun to challenge both the industrial polluters and the often indifferent mainstream environmental movement by actively fighting environmental threats in their communities and raising the call for environmental justice. This groundswell of environmental activism in African-American, Latino, Asian, Pacific Islander, and Native-American communities is emerging all across the country. While rarely listed in the standard environmental and conservation directories, grassroots environmental justice groups have sprung up from Maine to Louisiana and Alaska (see map below).

These grassroots groups have organized themselves around waste-facility siting, lead contamination, pesticides, water and air pollution, Native self-government, nuclear testing, and workplace safety (Alston 1990; Bullard 1990, 1992; Bryant and Mohai 1992). People of color have invented and, in other cases, adapted existing organizations to meet the disproportionate environmental challenges they face. A growing number of grassroots groups and their leaders have adopted confrontational direct action strategies similar to those used in earlier civil rights conflicts. Moreover, the increasing documentation of environmental racism has strengthened the demand for a safe and healthy environment as a basic right of all individuals and communities (Commission for Racial Justice 1991; Bullard and Wright 1987, 1990; Bryant and Mohai forthcoming).

Drawing together the insights of *both* the civil rights and the environmental movements, these grassroots groups are fighting hard to improve the quality of life for their residents. As a result of their efforts, the environmental justice movement is increasingly influencing and winning support from more conventional environmental and civil rights organizations. For example, the National Urban League's 1992 *State of Black America* included—for the first time in the seventeen years the report has been published—a chapter on the environmental threats to the African-American community (Bullard 1992b). In addition, the NAACP, ACLU, and NRDC led the fight to have poor children tested for lead poisoning under Medicaid provisions in California. The class-action lawsuit *Matthews v. Coye*, settled in 1991, called for the state of California to screen an estimated 500,000 poor children for lead



poisoning at a cost of \$15 to \$20 million (Lee 1992). The screening represents a big step forward in efforts to identify children suffering from what federal authorities admit is the number one environmental health problem of children in the United States. For their part, mainstream environmental organizations are also beginning to understand the need for environmental justice and are increasingly supporting grassroots groups in the form of technical advice, expert testimony, direct financial assistance, fundraising, research, and legal assistance. Even the Los Angeles chapter of the wilderness-focused Earth First! movement worked with community groups to help block the incinerator project in South Central Los Angeles.

## Case Studies from the Grassroots

For all of their current and potential significance, however, little research has yet been done on these African-American, Latino, Asian, Pacific Islander, and Native American organizations which make up the grassroots environmental justice movement. The research discussed here focuses on environmentally threatened communities of color in Houston (TX), Dallas (TX), Los Angeles (CA), Richmond (CA), Kettleman City (CA), Alsen (LA), and Rosebud (SD). Each of these communities is embroiled in a wide range of environmental disputes against both government and private industry.

We had three major objectives in looking at these nine communities: 1) to examine the organizations and the dispute mechanisms people of color use in resolving environmental conflicts, 2) to explore the conditions and circumstances under which communities of color mobilize against an environmental threat, and 3) to assess the level of external support that grassroots groups of color receive from environmental, social justice, and other groups. To gather this information, in-depth interviews were conducted with opinion leaders, who were identified through a "reputational" approach. We started out with a small number of local informants. The informants were asked to "identify the *most* influential person or persons who had played a role in resolving the local dispute." These influential leaders were later asked the same question, and this second group of leaders was also interviewed.

The interviews focused on a number of key issue areas, including the nature of the dispute, leadership and external support, opposition tactics, and dispute outcomes. The questions included: Were the environmental problems caused by the government and/or corporations? Did the dispute involve a proposed or existing facility? Was the community group started as an environmental group? Do its leaders and



members see themselves as environmentalists? Were equity and social justice concerns dominant organizing themes? Who led the local citizen opposition in the disputes? What kind of support did the local groups receive from environmental and other organizations? What tactics did the groups use? Which were most effective? How was the dispute resolved?

A summary of the various communities, grassroots groups, and types of environmental disputes included in this study are presented in Table 1. Here is a more detailed overview of each community's situation.

*Houston:* In the 1970s, Houston was dubbed the "golden buckle" of the Sunbelt (Bullard 1987, 1990). In 1982, it became the nation's fourth largest city with 1.7 million inhabitants. Its black community of some 450,000 is the largest in the South. For decades, Houston boasted that it was the only major city without zoning. During the "boom" years of the 1970s, this no-zoning policy contributed to haphazard and irrational land-use planning and infrastructure chaos (Bullard 1983). A mostly African-American suburban neighborhood was selected as the site for a municipal landfill. The Northeast Community Action Group (NECAG) formed to block the construction of the landfill.

*Dallas:* Dallas is the seventh largest city in the nation with a population of just under one million. The 265,594 African Americans who live in Dallas represent 29.4 percent of the city's population. West Dallas is one of many segregated black enclaves in the city. It has a population of 13,161, of which 85 percent is black. The neighborhood has lived with a polluting lead smelter for five decades (Nauss 1983; Bullard 1990). Early on, West Dallas residents formed the Neighborhood Coalition on Lead Pollution to get the smelter closed and the area cleaned up. Another group, West Dallas Coalition for Environmental Justice, continued the fight after the Neighborhood Coalition for Lead Pollution was disbanded.

*Alsen (LA):* Alsen is an unincorporated community on the Mississippi River several miles north of Baton Rouge, Louisiana's state capital. It had a population of 1,104 individuals in 1980, of which 98.9 percent were African Americans. Alsen lies at the beginning of "Cancer Alley," the 85-mile stretch of land from Baton Rouge to New Orleans, an area that accounts for one-fourth of the nation's petrochemical production (See Maraniss and Weisskopf 1987; Anderson, Dunn, and Alabarado 1985; Bullard 1990; Bullard and Wright 1990). Much of Louisiana's hazardous waste is disposed of in the Rollins Environmental Services incinerators located near Alsen. The resi-

**Table 1**  
**Summary of Community Disputes**

<b>Group (Year Founded), Location</b>	<b>Type of Dispute</b>	<b>Facility</b>
Northeast Community Action Group (1979), Houston, TX	Solid waste landfill	Existing
Neighborhood Committee on Lead Pollution (1981), Dallas, TX	Lead smelter	Existing
West Dallas Coalition for Environmental and Economic Justice (1989), Dallas, TX	Lead smelter	Existing
Coalition for Community Action (1979), Alsen, LA	Hazardous waste incinerator	Existing
Concerned Citizens of South Central Los Angeles (1985), Los Angeles, CA	Solid waste incinerator	Proposed
Mothers of East Los Angeles (1985), Los Angeles, CA	Hazardous waste incinerator	Proposed
People for Clean Air and Water (1990), Kettleman City, CA	Hazardous waste incinerator	Proposed
West County Toxics Coalition (1989), Richmond, CA	Petrochemical refinery	Existing
Good Road Coalition (1991), Rosebud, SD	Solid waste landfill	Proposed

dents formed Coalition for Community Action to challenge the Rollins hazardous waste incinerator operation.

*Los Angeles:* Los Angeles is the nation's second largest city with a population of 3.5 million. It is one of the nation's most culturally and ethnically diverse big cities. People of color (Latinos, Asians, Pacific Islanders, African Americans, and Native Americans) now constitute 63 percent of the city's population. Residents of South Central Los Angeles, a neighborhood that is over 52 percent African-American and about 44 percent Latino, was slated to host the city's first state-of-the-art municipal solid waste incinerator. Local residents organized Concerned Citizens of South Central Los Angeles to fight the incinerator (Sanchez 1988; Russell 1989; Blumberg and Gottlieb 1989; Hamilton 1990).

Just as Los Angeles's largest African-American community was selected as a site for a city-sponsored municipal incinerator, East Los Angeles, the city's largest Latino community, was chosen as a site for a hazardous waste incinerator (Russell 1989). Officially, the incinerator was planned for Vernon, an industrial suburb that has only 96 people. But, several East Los Angeles neighborhoods (made up of mostly Latino residents) are located only a mile away and downwind from the proposed site. The group Mothers of East Los Angeles (MELA) took the lead in fighting the proposed hazardous waste site (Pardo 1991).

*Richmond (CA):* Richmond has a population of 80,000. Over half are African Americans and about 10 percent are Latinos. Most of the African-American population live next to the city's petrochemical corridor—a cluster of 350 facilities that handle hazardous waste (Citizens for a Better Environment 1989). The five largest industrial polluters in the city are the Chevron oil refinery, Chevron Ortho pesticide plant, Witco Chemical, Airco Industrial Gases, and an ICI pesticide plant (formerly Stauffer Chemical). Chevron Ortho generates over 40 percent of the hazardous waste in Richmond. The bulk of it is incinerated on the plant's grounds. Local citizens founded the West County Toxics Coalition to address the problem of toxic emissions.

*Kettleman City (CA):* Kettleman City is a small farmworker community of approximately 1,200. Over 95 percent of the residents are Latino. It is home to a hazardous waste landfill operated by the world's largest waste-disposal company, Chemical Waste Management (see Corwin 1991; Siler 1991). The company proposed that a new incinerator be built in Kettleman City. Residents organized an opposition group called El Pueblo para el Aire y Agua Limpio (People for Clean Air and Water).

*Rosebud Reservation (SD):* As state environmental regulations have become more stringent in recent years, Native-American reservations have become prime targets of waste disposal firms (Beasley 1990b; Tomsho 1990; Kay 1991b). Many waste-disposal companies have attempted to skirt state regulations (which are often tougher than the federal regulations) by targeting Native lands (Angel 1992). Because of their quasi-independent status, Native-American reservations are not covered by state environmental regulations. The threat to Native lands exists for the Mohawk Indians in New York to the Mission Indians (i.e., Campo, La Posta, Los Coyotes, Morongo, Pala, and Soboda) in southern California to the Gwichin people in Alaska (Kay 1991b). The problem is typified in the case of the Rosebud Reservation in South Dakota. RSW, a Connecticut-based company, proposed in 1991 to build a 6,000-acre municipal landfill on Sioux lands (Daschle 1991). Local residents founded the Good Road Coalition to block the landfill.

## What We Learned

Eight of the nine community opposition groups were started as environmental groups. Mothers of East Los Angeles was the only exception. It grew out of a six-year dispute involving a proposed 1,450-bed state prison in East Los Angeles (Pardo 1991). MELA also fought a proposed underground pipeline through their neighborhood. Its fight against the incinerator is an extension of this earlier battle.

All of the groups have multi-issue agendas and incorporate social justice and equity as their major organizing themes. The leaders see their communities as "victims" and are quick to make the connection between other forms of discrimination, the quality of their physical environment, and the current dispute. Some of the leaders have worked in other organizations that fought discrimination in housing, employment, and education.

It is clear that the local grassroots activists in the impacted communities provided the essential leadership in dealing with the disputes. The typical grassroots leader was a woman. For example, women led the fight in seven of the nine cases examined. Only the West Dallas Coalition for Environmental Justice and Richmond's West County Toxics Coalition were headed by men.

Women activists were quick to express their concern about the threat to their family, home, and community. The typical organizer found leadership thrust upon her by immediate circumstances with little warning or prior training for the job. Lack of experience, however, did not prove an insurmountable barrier to successful organizing.

The manner in which the local issue was framed appears to have influenced the type of leadership that emerged. Local activists immediately turned their energies to what they defined as environmental discrimination, for discrimination is a fact of life in all of these communities. Most people of color face it daily.

The quest for environmental justice thus extends the quest for basic civil rights. Actions taken by grassroots activists to reduce environmental inequities are consistent with the struggle to end the other forms of social injustice found throughout our society—in housing, education, employment, health care, criminal justice, and politics.

The mainstream environmental groups do not have a long history of working with African-American, Latino, Asian, Pacific Islander, and Native-American groups. For the most part, they have failed to adequately address environmental problems that disproportionately impact people of color. Despite some exceptions, the national groups have failed to sufficiently make the connection between key environmental and social justice issues.



The experience of the organizations discussed here suggests that the situation is beginning to change for the better. While still too little, the mainstream environmental movement's support of environmental justice struggles has visibly increased between the first Earth Day in 1970 and Earth Day 1990. Certainly, the early environmental struggles by communities of color were less likely than more recent ones to attract significant support from the mainstream groups.

Because of the redefinition of "environmentalism" spurred on by grassroots challenges to the elitism and environmental racism of the mainstream groups, more mainstream groups now acknowledge and try to address the widespread inequities throughout our society. Many of these groups are beginning to understand and embrace the cause of social justice activists mobilizing to protect their neighborhoods from garbage dumps or lead smelters. These first steps have been a long time in coming, however. For many conservationists, the struggle for social justice is still seen as separate from environmental activism. Because of this, environmental activists of color have usually had better luck winning support for their cause by appealing to more justice-oriented groups. For example, Houston's Northeast Community Action Group (NECAG) was able to enlist support from a number of local social justice activists in their dispute with Browning-Ferris Industries. The anti-discrimination theme was a major tool in enlisting the Houston Black United Front (an African-American self-help group), the Harris County Council of Organizations (an African-American voter education and political group), and a Houston chapter of ACORN (Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now).

The situation in Dallas somewhat resembled that found in Houston. Leaders of West Dallas's Neighborhood Committee on Lead Pollution received no assistance from any outside environmental group in resolving their dispute. Instead, they relied exclusively on a grassroots self-help group, the Common Ground Community Economic Development Corporation, to get their grievances publicly aired. Common Ground not surprisingly has a long history of working on equity issues in the city's African-American community.

The Neighborhood Committee on Lead Pollution disbanded after the lead-smelter dispute was resolved. In 1989, the West Dallas Coalition for Environmental Justice, a multiracial group, formed to fill the leadership vacuum. It pressed for cleanup of the RSR site in West Dallas, closure of the Dixie Metals lead smelter in Dallas's East Oak Cliff neighborhood, and pollution prevention measures for the remaining industries in the neighborhood. The multiracial coalition has about 700 members and 20 volunteers. It has worked closely with Common Ground and Texas United, a grassroots environmental group affiliated

with the Boston-based National Toxics Campaign. The local Sierra Club also wrote several letters endorsing the actions taken by the West Dallas group to get their neighborhood cleaned up.

Leaders in Alsen, on the other hand, did receive support (although late in their struggle) from several environmental groups. Rollins' proposal to burn PCBs in the Alsen incinerator had gotten the attention of several national environmental groups, including Greenpeace, Citizens' Clearinghouse for Hazardous Waste, and the National Toxics Campaign.

Alsen residents also enlisted the support of the Louisiana Environmental Action Network (a mostly white group) and Gulf Coast Tenants Organization (a mostly African-American group). Gulf Coast has, for example, led Earth Day "toxics marches" from New Orleans to Baton Rouge.

The four California community groups examined in this study all had great success in getting support from and forming alliances with both grassroots and national environmental groups. Again, the level of outside support was greatest for the groups fighting new facilities proposals.

The African-American leaders of Concerned Citizens of South Central Los Angeles found allies and built strong working relationships with a diverse set of international, national, and grassroots environmental groups. Greenpeace was the first national group to join Concerned Citizens in their fight to kill LANCER 1 (Russell 1989; Blumberg and Gottlieb 1989). Others joined later, including Citizens for a Better Environment (CBE), National Health Law Program, and the Center for Law in the Public Interest. Concerned Citizens also forged alliances with two white Westside "slow-growth" groups: Not Yet New York (a coalition of environmental and homeowner groups) and the anti-incineration group California Alliance in Defense of Residential Environments (CADRE).

Mothers of East Los Angeles lined up the support of groups such as Greenpeace, the Natural Resources Defense Council, the Environmental Policy Institute, the Citizens' Clearinghouse on Hazardous Waste, the National Toxics Campaign, and the Western Center on Law and Poverty. These allies provided valuable technical advice, expert testimony, lobbying, research, and legal assistance.

The Kettleman City dispute attracted widespread attention and became a topic on prime-time newscasts. The local group, El Pueblo para el Aire y Agua Limpio (People for Clean Air and Water), got a lot of support from both national and grassroots environmental and social justice groups. The dispute brought together environmental leaders of color from inside and outside California. The decision to site a hazardous waste incinerator in Kettleman City also acted as a rallying point for many environmental justice groups ranging from Greenpeace to the Albuquerque-based Southwest Network for Environmental and Eco-

nomic Justice (a coalition of environmental activists of color from eight states in the Southwest).

The Richmond-based West County Toxics Coalition was founded with assistance from the National Toxics Campaign. It then got the Sierra Club (headquartered just across the Bay in San Francisco) involved in their struggle. The San Francisco-based Citizens for a Better Environment (CBE) furnished the group with technical assistance and documentation of the local environmental problem (see the 1989 report *Richmond at Risk*). The report offers graphic evidence of the threat posed by polluting industries in the city's African-American and Latino communities.

Disputes involving Native lands present special problems to conventional environmental movements. Given the long history of exploitation and genocide directed at Native Americans by whites, environmental disputes take on larger historical and cultural meanings. However, the Good Road Coalition was able to enlist the support of Greenpeace activists and two Native-American groups (the Indigenous Environmental Network and the Natural Resource Coalition).

## Organizing Tactics

The grassroots environmental groups and their allies have used a wide range of tactics to fend off what they see as a threat to family, home, and community. The leaders have borrowed many of their tactics from the earlier civil rights movement. All of the groups have used public protest, demonstrations, petitions, lobbying, reports and fact-finding, and hearings to educate the community and intensify public debate on the dispute. In addition, leaders organized community workshops and neighborhood forums to keep local residents informed on the disputes and new developments.

All of the grassroots groups targeted local, state, and federal governments for their direct or indirect influence in siting and enforcement decisions. For example, the leaders of Houston's Northeast Community Action Group directed their actions toward both the local and state government bodies responsible for permitting the facility.

A number of tangible results emerged from the Houston dispute. First, the Houston City Council, acting under intense political pressure from local residents, passed a resolution in 1980 that prohibited city-owned garbage trucks from dumping at the controversial landfill in the Northwood Manor subdivision. Second, the council also passed an ordinance restricting the construction of solid-waste sites near public facilities such as school and parks. (This action was nothing less than a



form of protective zoning.) And, third, the Texas Department of Health updated its requirements for landfill permit applicants. Applications now must include detailed land-use, economic impact, and sociodemographic data on areas where proposed municipal solid waste landfills are to be sited.

The Neighborhood Committee on Lead Pollution challenged the Dallas Health Department for its lax enforcement of the city's lead ordinance and the repeated violations by the nearby smelter. Grassroots leaders in West Dallas extended their influence beyond the neighborhood by pressuring the Dallas mayor to appoint a government-sanctioned city-wide task force (the Dallas Alliance Environmental Task Force) to address lead contamination. The impetus for the task force came from the local West Dallas group.

The two Los Angeles neighborhood groups also sought to have the city intervene in their dispute. The LANCER dispute was injected into local city politics and became a contributing factor in both the defeat of the pro-LANCER City Council President Pat Russell and the election of environmental advocate Ruth Galanter. Concerned Citizens of South Central Los Angeles and its allies proved that local citizens can fight city hall and win. Opponents of the city-initiated incinerator project applied pressure on key elected officials, including Mayor Tom Bradley. Bradley reversed his position and asked the city council to kill the project, which had been in the planning stage since 1969 and included a commitment to contribute \$12 million (Russell 1989).

Mothers of East Los Angeles, in its struggle, targeted the South Coast Air Quality Management District (AQMD), the California Department of Health Services (DHS), and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)—the agencies responsible for awarding a permit for the Vernon hazardous waste incinerator project. The facility was to be California's first "state-of-the-art" toxic-waste incinerator.

To block the project, Mothers of East Los Angeles and its allies arranged for more than 500 residents to attend a 1987 DHS hearing on it. They pressed their demands in other public forums as well. The alliance questioned DHS's 1988 decision that allowed California Thermal Treatment Services (CTTS) to move the project forward without preparing an environmental impact report (EIR). The City of Los Angeles, MELA, and others joined in a lawsuit to review the decision. The federal EPA, however, approved the permit without an EIR.

This prompted California Assemblywoman Lucille Roybal-Allard to lead a successful fight to change the California law and require EIRs for all toxic waste incinerators. In December 1988, as CTTS was about to start construction, the AQMD decided that the company should do the environmental studies and redesign its original standards to meet



the new, more stringent clean air regulations. CTTS legally challenged the AQMD's decision all the way up to the State Supreme Court and lost.

The Coalition for Community Action (Alsen, LA) focused its attack on the Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality and its less-than-enthusiastic enforcement of air quality standards in North Baton Rouge and the African-American communities affected by emissions from the nearby polluting industries. The group also worked on getting the federal EPA more actively involved in pollution prevention efforts in "Cancer Alley."

Richmond's West County Toxics Coalition worked to get both state and federal government agencies involved in reducing emissions from the nearby polluting industries. On the other hand, Kettleman City's People for Clean Air and Water focused its attention on the Kings County Board of Supervisors, the California Department of Health Services, and the federal EPA.

The Native Americans who founded the Good Road Coalition appealed to their Tribal Council (the government of the sovereign Sioux Nation on the Rosebud Reservation) to rescind the contract signed with RSW to build the 6,000-acre landfill on the reservation. Tribal Chairman Ralph Moran had supported the construction. It is interesting that six of the nine grassroots groups used litigation as a tactic. The three groups that did not were the West Dallas Coalition for Environmental Justice (its predecessor had already filed a lawsuit), Richmond's West County Toxics Coalition, and Rosebud's Good Road Coalition. All of the groups that filed lawsuits used their own lawyers. Three of them (Concerned Citizens of South Central Los Angeles, Mothers of East Los Angeles, and People for Clean Air and Water) applied to public interest law centers to file their lawsuits.

The West Dallas and East Los Angeles groups were joined in their lawsuits by the local government: both the city of Dallas and the Texas Attorney General joined the West Dallas plaintiffs, while the city of Los Angeles joined MELA.

Three of the neighborhood groups (the two in West Dallas and the one in Richmond) used negotiations as a dispute resolution tactic. The West Dallas groups were able to negotiate two different cleanup plans—the first in 1984, the second in 1992.

Richmond's West County Toxics Campaign brought in the Reverend Jesse Jackson of the National Rainbow Coalition to negotiate with Chevron, the major polluter in the community. Richmond's Mayor George Livingston helped arrange the May 7, 1990 meeting with Chevron that included representatives from the West County Toxics Coalition, the National Rainbow Coalition, and the Sierra Club. Jackson described the negotiations as a "test case, a test example, both with

dangers and possibilities." He and the West County Toxics Coalition presented Chevron with a six-point plan (Reed 1990, p. A1):

- Annually set aside 1 percent of the cost of Chevron's proposed \$1 billion modernization for a cleanup fund. The fund should employ Richmond's unemployed to help clean up the environment, and should also be used to finance health care and new pollution-reduction technology;
- Establish a 24-hour, fully funded clinic to provide medical attention to those harmed by the dozens of polluting industries in Richmond;
- Reduce the tons of toxic waste destroyed in Chevron's Ortho Chemical plant incinerator. (Chevron, which currently burns about 75,000 tons annually in the furnace, is seeking state permits to double the incinerator's capacity);
- Bring together representatives of other polluting industries and pressure them to reduce their companies' toxic emissions;
- Divest from South Africa; and
- Negotiate a timetable for accomplishing the above goals.

Nobody knows what these negotiations will yield or how long it will take to get tangible results. Nevertheless, both sides appear willing to talk. Of course, talking about emission reduction is different from actual emission reduction. But the Coalition and its allies did get Chevron to agree not to bring in outside waste to burn at the Richmond site.

The other concrete result of the negotiations was an agreement to meet again to negotiate specifics. Nevertheless, the meeting itself represented a major community victory in that the West County Toxics Coalition finally won the right to bargain with Chevron, something local leaders had unsuccessfully attempted to do since 1987.

## Resolutions and Outcomes

These case studies demonstrate that African Americans, Latino Americans, and Native Americans are actively pursuing strategies to improve the overall quality of life in their neighborhoods. The grass-roots leaders have not waited for "outsiders" or "elites" to rush to their rescue; they have taken the initiative themselves.

As expected, the groups had more success in blocking proposed facilities than closing those already operating. The West Dallas residents were successful in shutting down the lead smelter and in winning an out-of-court settlement worth over \$45 million—one of the largest awards ever in a lead pollution case in the country. It was made on behalf

of 370 children—almost all of whom were poor, black residents of the West Dallas public housing project—and 40 property owners.

The lawsuit was finally settled in June 1983 when RSR agreed to a soil cleanup program in West Dallas, a blood-testing program for the children and pregnant women, and the installation of new antipollution equipment. The equipment, however, was never installed. In May 1984 the Dallas Board of Adjustments, a city agency responsible for monitoring land-use violations, requested that the city attorney order the smelter permanently closed for violating the zoning code. It had operated in the neighborhood for some 50 years without the necessary use permits.

The 1984 lead cleanup proved inadequate. A more comprehensive cleanup of West Dallas was begun in December 1991—20 years after the first government study of lead smelters. Some 30,000 to 40,000 cubic yards (roughly 1,800 truckloads) of lead-tainted soil are to be removed from several West Dallas sites, including schoolyards and about 140 private homes (Loftis 1992). The project will cost between \$3 to \$4 million. The contaminated soil was originally planned to be shipped to a landfill in Monroe, Louisiana—a city that is 60 percent African-American.

The municipal landfill in Houston, the hazardous waste incinerator in Alsen, and the petrochemical plant (and on-site hazardous waste incinerator) in Richmond are still operating. Although the three groups and their allies fell short of completely eliminating the threat by bringing about actual plant closures, they were able to extract concessions from the polluting industries in the form of capacity reduction and emission controls. In Alsen, after more than six years, a 1987 out-of-court settlement was reached between Rollins and the residents. It was reported to be worth an average of \$3,000 per resident. The company was also required to reduce emissions from its facilities.

Construction of four proposed facilities were prevented: the two waste facilities in Los Angeles (South Central and East Los Angeles), the one on Rosebud Reservation in South Dakota, and the one in Kettleman City. The two lawsuits filed on behalf of South Central and East Los Angeles residents never reached the trial or settlement stage, for the two construction proposals were withdrawn. The city-sponsored LANCER project was killed by the mayor and city council. In May 1991, CTTS decided to “throw in the towel” because the lawsuits threatened to drive up costs beyond the \$4 million the company had already spent on the project (Dolan 1991). The Vernon hazardous waste incinerator became a dead issue.

On the other hand, the Good Road Coalition blocked plans to build the 6,000-acre landfill on the Rosebud Reservation through the electoral process. A majority of the residents voted the proposal down. In 1991, former tribal chairman Ralph Moran, who had favored the landfill



proposal, was defeated in the tribal primary election and residents convinced the tribal council to cancel the agreement to build the facility. The proposal was resurrected in 1992 in yet another offer to the tribal council by RSW. Again, the plan was rejected by the council.

Although part of the lawsuit involving the Kettleman City incinerator dispute is still pending, People for Clean Air and Water won a major victory in delaying construction. A superior court judge in January 1992 overturned the Kings County Board of Supervisors' approval of the Kettleman City incinerator, citing its detrimental impact on air quality in the agriculture-rich Central Valley of California.

The judge ruled that Kings County's environmental impact report was inadequate and that county leaders had failed to involve the local residents in the decision by not providing Spanish translations of material about the project. This court ruling represents a victory since the waste-disposal company must now begin the permit process all over again if it is still interested in siting the facility.

## Conclusion

The mainstream environmental movement has proven that it can help enhance the quality of life in this country. The national membership organizations that make up the mainstream movement have clearly played an important role in shaping the nation's environmental policy. Yet, few of these groups have actively involved themselves in environmental conflicts involving communities of color. Because of this, it's unlikely that we will see a mass influx of people of color into the national environmental groups any time soon. A continuing growth in their own grassroots organizations is more likely. Indeed, the fastest growing segment of the environmental movement is made up by the grassroots groups in communities of color which are increasingly linking up with one another and with other community-based groups. As long as U.S. society remains divided into separate and unequal communities, such groups will continue to serve a positive function.

It is not surprising that indigenous leaders are organizing the most effective resistance within communities of color. They have the advantage of being close to the population immediately affected by the disputes they are attempting to resolve. They are also completely wedded to social and economic justice agendas and familiar with the tactics of the civil rights movement. This makes effective community organizing possible. People of color have a long track record in challenging government and corporations that discriminate. Groups that emphasize



civil rights and social justice can be found in almost every major city in the country.

Cooperation between the two major wings of the environmental movement is both possible and beneficial, however. Many environmental activists of color are now getting support from mainstream organizations in the form of technical advice, expert testimony, direct financial assistance, fundraising, research, and legal assistance. In return, increasing numbers of people of color are assisting mainstream organizations to redefine their limited environmental agendas and expand their outreach by serving on boards, staffs, and advisory councils. Grassroots activists have thus been the most influential activists in placing equity and social justice issues onto the larger environmental agenda and democratizing and diversifying the movement as a whole. Such changes are necessary if the environmental movement is to successfully help spearhead a truly global movement for a just, sustainable, and healthy society and effectively resolve pressing environmental disputes. Environmentalists and civil rights activists of all stripes should welcome the growing movement of African Americans, Latinos, Asians, Pacific Islanders, and Native Americans who are taking up the struggle for environmental justice.