

Environmental Racism Prompts Activism

By Richard W. Franke

This is the latest installment in our Signs of Sustainability series, organized by Sustainable Tompkins. Visit them online at www.sustainabletompskins.org.

In the introductory column on environmental racism and sustainability published here on Dec. 8, it was noted that a key moment in the movement for environmental justice came in 1987 with the publication of the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice's "Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States." This report put the issue of environmental racism before the public in a new way.

There was another significant environmental report that year—the UN World Commission on Environment and Development, published by Oxford University Press under the title "Our Common Future." This is more informally known as the Brundtland Report, after its chairperson, Gro Harlem Brundtland of Norway. Because of this report the word "sustainability" entered mainstream scientific and academic circles.

After 1987 both environmental racism and sustainability grew rapidly as topics of conferences, reports, scientific journal articles

and books. In the U.S. the environmental justice movement discovered that Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act contained language forbidding discrimination in projects using federal funds that they could use as the basis for lawsuits, but legal challenges were not the only devices used to oppose environmental threats.

Thousands of mostly anonymous activists set up local meetings, wrote letters and press releases, got petitions signed, made phone calls and led marches and sit ins—working in nonviolent ways to pressure local governments and/or companies to clean up dangerous toxic waste facilities and sites and/or to stop implementing harmful practices. In 1992 there were about 300 people-of-color environmental justice organizations active around the country. By 2011 the number had risen to more than 3,000.

In 2007 the United Church of Christ Justice and Witness Ministries updated their 1987 exposé by issuing a 160-page document titled "Toxic Wastes and Race at Twenty: 1987-2007." It listed several victories by local environmental justice activists and organizations. In 1988 "Mothers of East L. A." defeated construction of a huge toxic waste incinerator in their community. In Dikon, Ariz.,

Navajo activists achieved a similar victory that same year.

In 1996 local grassroots organizers in Pensacola, Fla., convinced the EPA to relocate an entire community of 358 African-American and low-income households living next to a toxic wood treatment plant. In 2006 activists welcomed the opening of the 32-acre Los Angeles State Historic Park, a proposed site for warehouses.

Also in 2006, after 13 years of litigation, the black residents of Warren County, N.C., whose struggle had brought the concepts of environmental racism and environmental justice into mainstream circles, finally won their case for compensation and assistance in relocating from their poisoned neighborhood. The poison came from an adjacent 142-acre landfill where PCBs that had been illegally dumped along North Carolina roads were being deposited.

Most of the news, however, was not so positive. The overall "findings" section of the 2007 report concluded that 9.2 million Americans "are estimated to live within 3 kilometers (1.8 miles) of the nation's 413 commercial hazardous waste facilities." Of those, 5.1 million (56 percent) were people of color, whereas in areas not so close to the facilities, people of color were only 30 percent.

The data and analysis in the report indicate that the overrepresentation of people of color in the more polluted zones was either equal to or possibly even greater than 20 years earlier when the 1987 report had been issued. Several of

the findings of overrepresentation, including those in urban areas, were statistically significant.

Furthermore, a detailed statistical study using 2000 census data and the (then) newer GIS location software made it possible to statistically validate a key finding of the 1987 report: "race continues to be a significant and robust predictor of commercial hazardous waste facility locations [even - RWF] when socioeconomic and other non-racial factors are taken into account." An established statistical technique called "logistic regression" further showed that all the race indicators were statistically significant.

The 2007 20-year update report includes a chapter with a scathing and detailed attack on the lax and incompetent government response to Hurricane Katrina's devastation in southern Louisiana in 2005. As C. J. Correa Bernier of the UCC Environmental Justice Office reminded readers in the preface, "... the environmental justice movement is a dynamic one, a continuous struggle ..." At the national level that struggle came of age during the 1990s, leading to several important political developments. Watch for another installment in this story in a future Signs of Sustainability report.

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