

This is Part 1 of a 4 part miniseries on environmental racism

Environmental Racism and Sustainability

By Richard W. Franke

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

In his famous “I Have a Dream” speech in 1963 Martin Luther King did not mention the environment. This is hardly surprising. King and the civil rights movement were struggling against southern violence and northern ambivalence.

Rachel Carson’s “Silent Spring” had been published just one year earlier. Her now famous book had resulted in part from a court case Carson learned about from white Long Island residents concerned about the effects of DDT spraying in their communities. After King’s speech and Carson’s book, the civil rights and environmental movements continued on their separate but parallel ways. King’s speech and the mass movement it reinvigorated led to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights

Act of 1965. Carson’s book generated a President’s Science Advisory Committee Report, and played a role in the 1967 creation of the Environmental Defense Fund and the 1972 banning of DDT in the U.S.

As the African-American led civil rights and the largely white environmental movements pushed through changes in American life, they nonetheless remained effectively segregated from each other, reflecting the segregation pervasive in this country. Some people of color saw the environmental movement as more focused on the rights of animals in our national parks than those of their fellow Americans. In his last (1967) book before his assassination in 1968, “Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?” King lamented how white solidarity had dissipated as the struggle against legal segregation moved to the greater struggle for full and genuine equality.

As it turned out, blacks themselves created the conditions for greater unity with white environmentalists. In 1962 black Americans chal-

lenged what came to be called environmental racism. Activists in Warren County—the poorest in North Carolina with 65percent black residents—organized mass resistance to the dumping of industrial wastes in their neighborhoods. Up to 500 were arrested in what was a combination of civil rights and environmental activism. The concepts of environmental racism and environmental justice were born and brought to prominence in academic and policy circles by the African-American sociologist Robert Bullard.

In 1987 the United Church of Christ published a report titled “Toxic Waste and Race in the United States,” which argued that race was the single most important factor in determining the location of commercial hazardous waste sites, outweighing even income, property values and rate of home ownership.

The environmental movement’s pattern of racial indifference slowly began to give way. In 1994 Robert Bullard came out with a 39-page

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Note: Robert Bullard’s 1994 book is 392 pages, not 39 pages.

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edited collection titled "Unequal Protection: Environmental Justice and Communities of Color." It was published by Sierra Club Books in what could be seen as an attempt by the white environmentalist establishment to open a path for greater white awareness of environmental racism. Bullard's essay and those of his collaborators established in 14 detailed case studies the reality of environmental racism and its impact on communities of African-Americans, Latinos and Native Americans. The title of one of the essays neatly summed up the book: "Black, Brown, Red and Poisoned."

More recently Van Jones' 2008 book "The Green Collar Economy: How One Solution Can Fix Our Two Biggest Problems" electrified many white activists with its call for a racially unified movement and an understanding of "ecology" and "social justice" as equally important and interconnected goals. "The Green Collar Economy" combines an overview of racial and class inequality with an analysis of the environmental crisis and examples of communities that found ways to work together to make some progress. "Green for all" became a slogan associated with his efforts.

With Barack Obama's election, Jones found himself in a presiden-

tial advisory role but was quickly removed when conservative critics uncovered disparaging remarks he had made about the Republican Party and that he had supposedly been involved with a Marxist group in the 1990s.

Have the separate paths of Martin Luther King and Rachel Carson converged over these past 60-plus years? White climate and sustainability activists now routinely acknowledge the need to incorporate the concerns of people of color and of overcoming poverty as essential to succeeding in sustainability struggles.

Organizers of the September 2014 People's Climate March sent out an email of solidarity with protesters in Ferguson, Mo., including a call for donations to the legal costs of the family of unarmed black teenager Michael Brown, who was killed by a white police officer. Building Bridges, a major coalition of social justice and environmental activists in Ithaca, lists "Creating a socially just, ecologically sound local economy" as a major goal. But have communities suffering from environmental racism found any significant environmental justice?

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