

Environmental Justice 101



What is Environmental Justice?

The concept behind the term “environmental justice” is that all people – regardless of their race, color, national origin or income – are able to enjoy equally high levels of environmental protection.

What is the history of EJ?

Environmental Justice (EJ), as a social movement has grown rapidly since the Warren County PCB Landfill Protest movement in the early 1980s. The EJ movement began in order to address concerns about disproportionate environmental burdens in poor, minority communities. In the case of the Warren County protests, controversy arose in 1982 when a landfill was sited in Warren County, a community that was black, poor, rural and politically powerless. This landfill was designated as a place to dump toxic, contaminated soil.

What is an example of EJ?

According to the EPA, “one of the most appalling environmental tragedies in American history” was the Love Canal disaster in Niagara Falls, New York. Hazardous materials, waste, and land mismanagement in the area impacted the health of more than 6,000 residents. For over 30 years, the canal was a dump site for a chemical company. Not long after the company was sold to the city, officials began to build schools, homes and low-income housing on the former landfill. In the following years, wet winters and springs caused the water table to rise and toxins to seep in residents’ backyards. As a result of the groundwater contamination, early surveys conducted by residents illustrated that 56 percent of the children born in the neighborhood had birth defects such as deformed teeth, anemia, ADHD and auto immune diseases, while mothers had a 300 percent jump in miscarriages.

Which communities are most vulnerable to EJ issues?

Low-income and minority communities are most vulnerable to EJ issues. Often these communities do not have an organized community group that can serve as a point of contact. Additionally, these communities may house a disproportionate amount of polluting facilities putting residents at a much higher risk for health problems from environmental exposures.

How can communities affected by EJ issues deal with environmental issues?

It is important that communities affected by EJ become aware of the environmental issues in their area, participate in the policy-making process and utilize resources available from government and private entities in order to ensure safe, healthy and sustainable communities for all.

Implementation of Environmental Justice in Maryland

The Maryland Department of Environment's mission in regards to Environmental Justice is to emphasize improvements in quality of life, economic development, and environmental protection for all communities. Implementation efforts of Environmental Justice at the Maryland Department of Environment include:

Identify agency responsibilities.

- Integrate and incorporate EJ activities into state operations

Proactive Engagement.

- Continue education of state regulators on environmental justice and sustainable communities, with specialized focus given to marginalized and disenfranchised communities
- Strengthen government infrastructure at local levels to support marginalized communities
- Promote and implement MDE's Environmental Benefit Districts program

Recognize Environmental Justice concerns with collaborative approaches.

- Undertake state-wide EJ forums to discuss concerns and solutions
- Efficiently build a network of people who are knowledgeable about the issues of concern to share expertise and advance the EJ agenda in Maryland. This includes reaching out to local businesses, legislators, planning and community organizations, and the academic community
- Collaboration with the Commission on Environmental Justice and Sustainable Communities (CEJSC), whom are responsible for advising state agencies on the adequacy of current laws, regulations, and statutes to achieve environmental justice, while ensuring all Maryland communities are healthy, safe, economically vibrant, and environmentally sound

Offer solutions.

- Optimize limited state resources. Solutions could appear in the form of increased public participation and education, public-private partnerships, innovative outreach advertising (social media, newspapers, press releases, outdoor signs), and strategic enforcement

Maryland Environmental Justice Resources

CEJSC: The Commission of Environmental Justice and Sustainable Communities is tasked with advising State government agencies on environmental justice and analyzing the effectiveness of State and local government laws and policies to address issues of environmental justice and sustainable communities.

MDE: The Maryland Department of Environment focuses on encouraging environmental protection and economic development in Maryland that takes into account public and ecological health, sustainability issues, and community participation.

EPA/Plan EJ 2014: The Environmental Protection Agency has launched an initiative called "Plan EJ 2014." This new initiative plans to integrate environmental justice into the Agency's programs, policies, and activities. More information on this initiative can be found here: <http://www.epa.gov/environmentaljustice/plan-ej/>.

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