Environmental Justice as a Pre-(Environmental)Professional Prerequisite

Introduction: I teach in the Geology department at Appalachian State University in Boone, North Carolina. I am also a practicing attorney in the field of Environmental Law, with my current focus on citizen enforcement of Clean Water Act violations by coal mining companies in Kentucky and Virginia. While my law work deals with environmental justice issues, I have not formally tackled the subject as part of my teaching. However, this fall I will be teaching a new course, Environmental Regulation and Enforcement (“E-Regs”). I cannot claim to have developed an approach to teaching environmental justice but will share my thoughts regarding integrating environmental justice as a course theme for E-Regs and what I think are the core EJ concepts my students should take from the class.

Summary of New E-Regs Course: The course will be offered to Geology and Environmental Science majors who are interested in pursuing careers in industry, environmental consulting, regulatory agencies, or environmental and community advocacy—in short, almost all Geology and Environmental Science majors. The purpose of the course is to prepare students to navigate the rocky landscape of environmental regulation within their chosen profession. It will provide students with an overview of the history and development of environmental regulation in the U.S., the substance and reach of environmental regulation, with particular focus on the surface mining industry, and will conclude with an overview of the various mechanisms of enforcement when regulations are not met. I am optimistic that this will become a regular course offering for Environmental Science majors within a new (in planning stages) pre-professional/policy degree track.

Thoughts on Incorporating Environmental Justice Into E-Regs Course: Environmental Justice issues permeate every aspect of environmental regulation. However, while Congress has acted to protect the nation’s waters and other resources through legislation such as the Clean Water Act, there exists no such statute or enforcement scheme specific to addressing environmental discrimination. Rather, Environmental Justice has been addressed in piecemeal-fashion through a smattering of legislation, executive orders and judicial decisions. As a result, Environmental Justice as a topic of study does not fit neatly into my E-Regs syllabus. Therefore, instead of trying to shoehorn it in as a discrete course topic, I plan to incorporate Environmental Justice as a running theme throughout the course.

Core Concepts: Through reading assignments, class discussions, and active learning activities, and beyond the basic facts of Environmental Justice, I would like my students to take from the course (and retain indefinitely), these concepts:

1. Discrimination is insidious, hard to prove and even more difficult to enforce against.
2. Environmental regulation, especially when taking into account issues of discrimination, is complex, riddled with uncertainty and fraught with competing interests.
3. People who are or may be affected by government or private action must be vigilant. The complexity and general messiness of environmental regulation can overwhelm even well intentioned people, creating an opportunity for others to use it to their own advantage, good or ill.
4. Environmental Justice is not only about addressing discrimination against minority communities, it is also a about promoting an equitable use of shared resources for us all.
5. You (the student and future environmental professional) have skills and knowledge that can be used, in ways big and small, to achieve an economically prosperous, environmentally sound, and socially equitable future.