History, Privilege, and Disproportional Environmental Burdens

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My course, Environmental Justice, is cross-listed among the departments of Environmental Studies, History, and American Studies, and focuses on a few key themes and take-home lessons.

First, we think about the ways that *the term “environmental justice” itself* *is socially constructed*. Is it synonymous with environmental racism? Can it affect poor white people, or does it only apply to racial minorities? Who has been instrumental in defining the term, and for what social and political ends? Next, we discuss the advantages—especially for thinking about the period before modern environmental justice advocacy emerged—of thinking about environmental justice in terms of times and places where marginalized populations (and especially racial minorities) have had to shoulder disproportional environmental burdens compared to more powerful members of society. We also discuss the observations of C. S. Lewis, who argued that “what we call Man’s power over Nature turns out to be a power exercised by some men over other men with Nature as its instrument.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Second, the course takes a *historical approach* to identifying and understanding the ways that structural inequalities have emerged as a product of changing social, political, environmental, and economic conditions. We also spend a good deal of time discussing the ways that those structural inequalities reflect (and feed) evolving power relations in American society.

Third, we think about the ways that *environmental decision-making intersects with race and class privilege*. A number of our case studies highlight the role of traditional environmental decision-making structures tend to privilege the opinions of outsiders over residents, expert interpretation over “lived experience,” and broad social good over parochial, self-interested (“NIMBY”) objections. During the early “Conservation Era,” for example, new laws designed to protect natural resources from overexploitation imposed harsh new restrictions on (poor, sometimes white, sometimes Native American) local residents that broke markedly with past practices. Traditional “frontier” activities like harvesting timber from public lands to build a log cabin, hunting wild game to feed one’s family, or burning trees and underbrush to clear land for agriculture suddenly became, as a result of new conservation laws, criminal activities: timber theft, poaching, arson. Similarly, establishing national parks and opening their scenic wonders for public enjoyment often meant evicting Native American residents or blocking their rights of access for traditional hunting and gathering activities.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Finally, we discuss the power (and limits) of *narrative* as a tool for understanding how and why environmental justice activism has tended to take the forms that it has. How should legislators respond when epidemiologists insist that no causal links can be made between, say, oil refineries and poor health among nearby residents, yet residents continue to tell stories of unusual maladies, frequent health problems, and what seem like unusually high local cancer raters? What happens when those without power demand new approaches to defining which problems are legitimate and worthy of remediation?

1. As quoted in Andrew Hurley, *Environmental Inequalities: Class, Race, and Industrial Pollution in Gary, Indiana, 1945-1980* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 182. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Karl Jacoby, *Crimes Against Nature: Squatters, Poachers, Thieves, and the Hidden History of American Conservation* (University of California Press, 2003); and Mark David Spence, *Dispossessing the Wilderness: Indian Removal and the Making of the National Parks* (Oxford University Press, 2000). For a more extended summary of these points, see Wells, “The Early Conservation Movement,” <http://bit.ly/XOaIK0>. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)