

Promoting Environmental Justice

MIDDLE SCHOOL READINGS

In an environmentally just world all people and communities have the right to equal environmental protection under the law, and the right to live, work and play in communities that are safe, healthy and free of life-threatening conditions. However, environmental risks and impacts disproportionately affect low-income, Black, Indigenous, people of color, and ethnic minorities around the world.

In the U.S., and in other parts of the world, harmful practices, such as the forced removal of Native Americans from their ancestral lands, has led to long-lasting social and economic inequalities among this group. **Redlining**, another harmful practice with persistent consequences, is the intentional targeting of low-income Black and minority areas and neighborhoods where banks would avoid making loans and investments. Today, these areas still feel the effects of redlining and many have become food deserts, or areas where residents don't have access to fresh and healthy foods, and are literal hot spots for the effects of climate change.

In addition to harming human health and well-being, environmental injustice has negative consequences on the physical environment. Hazardous waste sites are more often placed near or in low-income communities of color, where they pollute the air, water and land. In other communities, **the costs of extracting fossil fuels are often hidden** and disproportionate to the benefits. As global population increases, the demand for resources is also increasing. The burning of fossil fuels releases greenhouse gases which contribute to climate change. The effects of climate change impact us all, but poor and rural communities bear an undue burden. Many in these communities are being **forced to migrate due to environmental stressors**. These harmful and often intentional practices amount to **environmental racism** and persist all over world.

Food Deserts

Food deserts are areas where people have limited access to a variety of healthy and affordable foods. This could be due to **lack of transportation, scarcity of grocery stores, and high costs of healthy foods.** Food deserts are most commonly **found in low-income communities of color and this is the result of harmful practices such as redlining (see more on redlining below) which has resulted in less business development in these communities.** Instead of grocery stores that offer a variety of foods, studies have found that there are more fast-food restaurants, convenience stores, and high-calorie food options in lower-income neighborhoods.¹ This puts people living in food deserts at greater risk for many health problems including diabetes and heart disease. **Urban populations have increased rapidly** in the past several decades, as more people move to cities. Creating inclusive and sustainable cities means addressing food deserts. How can addressing food deserts impact environmental justice? **How can solutions look at more than geography (distance and location to grocery stores)? What role does culture play in addressing this issue?**



ARCGIS

1. Hilmers, A., Hilmers, D. C., & Dave, J. (2012). Neighborhood disparities in access to healthy foods and their effects on environmental justice. *American journal of public health*, 102(9), 1644-1654.

Climate Migrants

Climate impacts such as drought, flooding, sea level rise, or extreme heat can make places inhospitable and **pressure people to move**. The effects of climate change impact us all, however, some people are more vulnerable than others.

In poorer, developing countries, **or countries whose economies rely on agriculture and selling raw materials**, many rural communities depend on farming or raising livestock for their livelihoods. Other communities depend on fishing as their main source of food and income. These practices are all threatened by climate change. Combined with other factors (wars, political instability, poverty and human rights abuses) changes in climate have **begun to displace many people. This population is known as climate migrants**.

Climate migration is usually internal, meaning that people migrate from one place to another within their countries' borders. However, as the effects of climate change increase, more people will begin to migrate to other countries. Many climate migrants are moving within and from countries where populations are expected to grow. **This ESRI Story Map highlights real world stories of people facing climate migration, from small communities on the Alaskan coast to larger populations living in the world's largest ports.** What can countries to do to mitigate the impacts of climate change on citizens and support people who are forced to flee? How will population growth in some of these countries contribute to the challenge?



Placement of Hazardous Waste Sites



EPA

low-income neighborhoods. In the U.S., 70 percent of **Superfund toxic sites** on the National Priorities List are located within one mile of federally-assisted housing.

In the US, race is the **biggest predictor** of an individual's likelihood of living near hazardous waste sites. Housing policies like exclusionary zoning and redlining have concentrated black and brown populations into communities with restricted access to wealth and resources. These communities have historically been targeted for dumping waste and for siting landfills and trash incinerators. The health impacts of living near hazardous waste sites vary and have long-lasting effects on communities.

The world's worst industrial accident happened in Bhopal, India in 1984, killing thousands. To this day, it continues to impact both survivors and their children. What actions can be taken to prevent hazardous materials from harming human health and disproportionately impacting low income people and communities of color? How can communities prevent hazardous waste sites from being built near them?

Hazardous waste is anything dangerous or potentially harmful to human health. It can be solid, liquid, or gas. Hazardous waste sites include many places: manufacturing facilities, oil refineries, processing plants, and mines. They also include places that treat, store, or dispose of hazardous material, such as waste transfer stations, landfills, or incinerator sites. **Hazardous waste sites are most likely to be placed**

within or near communities of color and

Effects of the Fossil Fuel Industry

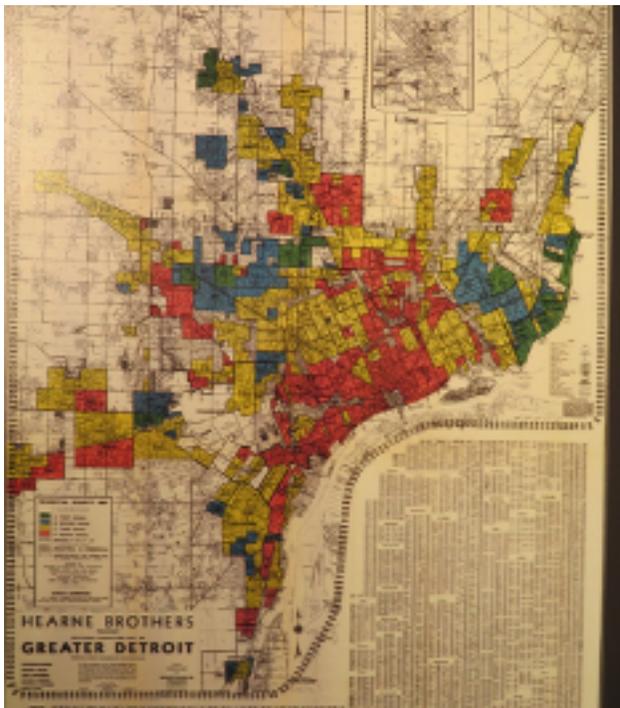
Fossil fuels are mined from the earth to produce energy. The modern world relies on massive amounts of energy to power our homes, cars, and manufacture the goods we use every day. As global population increases, the demand for energy increases. Extracting fossil fuels is a dirty job, producing toxic waste byproducts that pollute groundwater and can be harmful to communities living near extraction and processing sites, as well as detrimental to the health of industry workers.

The fossil fuel industry is closely connected to environmental justice concerns. According to a 2014 **report** from the NAACP, 68 percent of African Americans live within 30 miles of a coal-fired power plant, a reality that is tied to disproportionate rates of birth defects, heart disease, asthma, lung disease, learning difficulties, and lower property values in African American communities. Yet, African Americans hold only 1 percent of energy-related jobs and gain only .01 percent of the revenue from energy-related industries.²

Moving away from fossil fuels and creating equal employment opportunities across race and ethnicity, gender, socio-economic status, and age groups is a critical step toward improving human and environmental health and justice. How can we re-imagine our energy system to accomplish these goals, while considering economic, social, and environmental issues? What bold thinking, activism, and policy changes are needed to do this while advancing environmental justice?

Redlining

Redlining is the unfair practice of denying home loans or insurance to entire neighborhoods deemed “risky” on the basis of race. For many decades in the 1900s, the U.S. government used color-coded maps to guide decisions, with “risky” neighborhoods outlined in red. Neighborhoods with any non-white or immigrant residents were included in these redlined areas. While redlining was banned in the 1960s, the impacts of redlining are still felt today through segregation, economic inequality, lack of public services to redlined communities, and poor air quality from urban highways, industrial plants, and landfills.



Redlining map” by Sean_Marshall is licensed with CC BY-NC 2.0. [View a copy of this license](#)

The effects of climate change are also disproportionately felt in historically redlined districts. According to one study, these areas **“now contain the hottest areas”** in the U.S., which put residents at risk of heat-related death and health impacts associated with heat and carbon pollution.³ Today, the majority of the U.S. population lives in urban areas, and urbanization is expected to increase throughout the world. How can cities and communities address redlining’s impacts to create inclusive and sustainable cities that advance environmental justice?

2. The Fossil Fuel Industry and Racial Injustice. (n.d.). Retrieved August 26, 2020

Mistreatment of Indigenous Peoples and Land

There are 476 million Indigenous People around the globe. They're among the most vulnerable and disadvantaged populations in the world and face increasing pressure to exploit their ancestral lands.⁴ Indigenous Peoples, **or people who originate from a region or place,** all over the world maintain a spiritual and cultural connection to the land. In many indigenous communities' cultural activities are closely tied to the land, placing them at high risk for **environmental contaminants resulting from industrial processing.**

A close look at historical practices and anti-indigenous policies helps us understand the status of indigenous communities today. From **forced removal** to broken agreements, the historical mistreatment of Indigenous Peoples and their land continues to be an environmental justice issue. Current federal and state laws regarding tribal lands are often inconsistent and inequitable, making it easier for industries, such as the fossil fuel industry, to operate on or near tribal lands.⁵

In 2014, [The Standing Rock Sioux Tribe learned of plans to build the Dakota Access Pipeline](#) and immediately opposed the project. The proposed pipeline would travel underneath the Missouri River, threatening the tribes drinking water and cultural sites. After years of activism, advocacy and legal battles, in 2020 a court ruled the pipeline must be shut down.

As the world population grows, more natural resources taken from the earth will be needed to support the current demand for food, energy, and goods. Such challenges require attention and progress in order to protect the rights and well-being of the world's Indigenous communities. How can governments support Indigenous communities? What can industries do to ensure that Indigenous lands are protected?

3. Cusick, D. (2020, January 21). Past Racist "Redlining" Practices Increased Climate Burden on Minority Neighborhoods. Retrieved August 26, 2020.

4. Indigenous Peoples. (n.d.). Retrieved August 26, 2020.

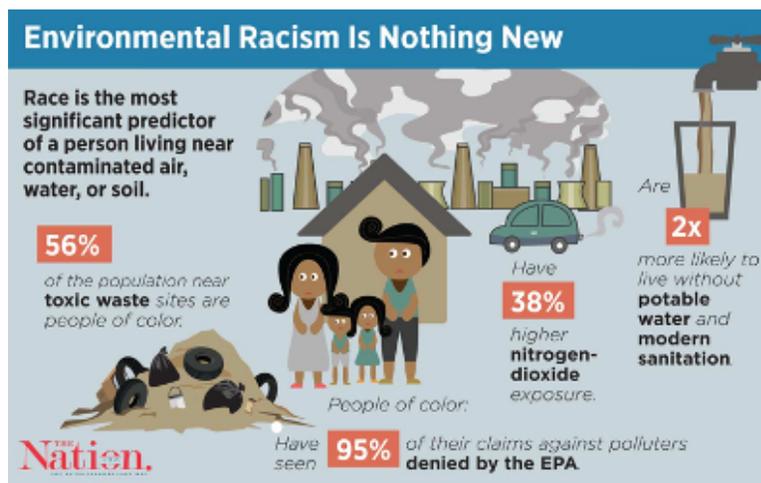
5. Elizabeth Hoover, Katsi Cook, Ron Plain, Kathy Sanchez, Vi Waghiyi, Pamela Miller, Renee Dufault, Caitlin Sislin, and David O. Carpenter 2012 Indigenous Peoples of North America: Environmental Exposures and Reproductive Justice Environmental Health Perspectives 120:12 CID

Environmental Racism

Environmental racism comes in many different forms. It is defined as a **form of systemic racism** in which communities of color are disproportionately burdened with health hazards through policies and practices that force them to live close to sources of pollution such as sewage plants, mines, landfills, power stations, highways and factories.

Race is the strongest predictor of environmental injustice among groups of people. In 2014, the predominantly African American residents of **Flint, Michigan** **began to notice foul smelling tap water** which would later be found to be the result of poisonous lead. Their concerns and complaints went unanswered by government officials. An investigation, prompted by years of community organizing and activism, eventually **found that the poor response to this public and environmental health emergency was a result of systemic racism.** This challenge involves many different stakeholders, or people who have an interest or concern, involved in continuing environmental racism such as businesses, industries

and governments. In a world where population is growing and people are migrating due to environmental pressures, how can society ensure that current and future generations are safe from discriminatory environmental practices?



(Tracy Loeffelholz Dunn / The Nation. Shutterstock images from Lorelyn Medina, Augusto Cabral)