Chapter 4
Cultivating Environmental Justice

ABSTRACT

The environmental justice movement grew out of the civil rights movement, and its aim was to provide all people with equal environmental protection. In the 1970s it became clear that African American and Hispanic children had much greater exposure to lead paint than did other children, and that hazardous waste dumps were disproportionately placed in communities of color. In 1991, the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in Washington, D.C., laid out the 17 principles of environmental justice. One of the Summit leaders was Hazel Johnson, an African American mother from Chicago who formed a nonprofit organization to clean up toxins in her neighborhood, which had the highest concentration of hazardous waste dumps in the nation. Mrs. Johnston's long battle with big industrial polluters is the focus of one of this chapter's case examples of how communities can empower their residents to fight for and achieve environmental justice.

INTRODUCTION

Climate change does not impact populations uniformly. As was discussed in Chapter 3, some populations are more at risk for adverse impacts than others, due to their age, gender, health status, race, income, origins, or occupation. Typically, when extreme weather events strike, people living in poverty, especially the very young and the very old, are hardest hit and are more likely

to be displaced and relocated than are other populations. They experience higher rates of injury, illness, and death than do other populations.

WHAT IS ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE?

The concept of environmental justice is based on the belief that all people–regardless of their race, color, national origin or income–should enjoy equally high levels of environmental protection. Low-income and minority communities are most vulnerable to environmental justice issues. These communities often have a disproportionate share of polluting facilities, which exposes their residents to greater health problems from environmental pollution (Maryland Department of the Environment, 2017). These communities may not have an organized group that can serve as a point of contact. It is important to make these communities aware of the environmental issues in their area, to empower them to participate in the policy-making process, and to enable them to access available resources in order to make their communities safe, healthy and sustainable (Maryland Department of the Environment, 2017).

History and Principles of Environmental Justice

The environmental justice (EJ) movement emerged in the 1980s in the United States. It grew out of the Civil Rights Movement, beginning with the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibited discrimination based on race, color, or national origin (Maryland Department of the Environment, 2017). In 1970, the National Public Health Service acknowledged that African American and Hispanic children were disproportionately impacted by lead poisoning and in 1982, residents of a predominantly African American community in North Carolina protested the construction of a hazardous waste facility in their neighborhood (Maryland Department of the Environment, 2017). In 1987, a national study was published correlating waste facility siting and race. In 1990, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency founded the Environmental Equity Work Group. In 1991, 17 principles of EJ were set forth at the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in Washington, D.C (Reprinted by Environmental Working Group, 2007).

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