

BRIEF REPORT

Environmental justice for the future: How protecting nature can create a fairer world for all

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Environmental justice is a transformative framework that links ecological sustainability with social equity. As climate change and environmental degradation disproportionately affect marginalized communities, integrating environmental justice into policy and practice is crucial for building a fairer world. This article explores the concept of environmental justice, its historical context and its potential to foster a more equitable and sustainable future. Through case studies and policy analysis, it examines how protecting nature not only preserves ecosystems but also upholds human rights and promotes social justice.

Keywords: Environmental justice, Climate change, Social equity, Sustainable development, Human rights, Indigenous knowledge, Policy reform, Global south, Ecological sustainability, Legal frameworks.

Introduction

In the face of escalating environmental crises, the call for environmental justice has never been more urgent. Traditionally, environmental issues have been viewed through a purely ecological lens, focusing on biodiversity loss, pollution and resource depletion. However, these environmental challenges are inextricably linked to social issues such as poverty, inequality and human rights. Environmental justice seeks to address these interconnected concerns by advocating for the fair distribution of environmental benefits and burdens, ensuring that all communities, especially the most vulnerable, have access to a healthy environment. This approach recognizes that marginalized groups-particularly Indigenous peoples, low-income communities and people of color-often bear the brunt of environmental degradation despite contributing the least to its causes. By centering justice in environmental policies and practices, we can create a more equitable and sustainable world for all (Cornelissen G, 2014). The environmental justice movement emerged in the United States in the 1980s in response to the disproportionate siting of hazardous waste facilities in communities of color. One of the pivotal moments was the 1982 protest in Warren County, North Carolina, where a predominantly Black community opposed the establishment of a toxic landfill in their area. This event highlighted the intersection of environmental issues and social inequities, sparking a broader movement that emphasized the need for policies that protect both the environment and the rights of affected communities

Description

Environmental degradation often disproportionately affects marginalized communities. For instance, Indigenous peoples and Afro-descendant women play a pivotal role in protecting nature and combating environmental crises. However, they frequently face challenges such as lack of legal recognition and internal community discrimination, hindering their access to resources and support. Supporting these communities is crucial, not only for their well-being but also for preserving biodiversity and ancestral knowledge

essential for environmental conservation. Climate change exacerbates existing social inequalities (Liang J, et al., 2016). Communities in the Global South, who have contributed the least to greenhouse gas emissions, often experience the most severe impacts, including extreme weather events, sea-level rise and food insecurity. Addressing climate change through an environmental justice lens involves not only mitigating environmental harm but also rectifying historical injustices and ensuring that vulnerable populations are supported and protected. One innovative legal approach to environmental justice is the recognition of the "rights of nature." This concept grants legal personhood to natural entities, allowing ecosystems to be represented in court and protected by law. Ecuador was the first country to enshrine the rights of nature in its constitution, recognizing that nature has the right to exist, persist and regenerate its.

Following Ecuador's lead, other countries have adopted similar frameworks. In 2017, New Zealand granted legal personhood to the Whanganui River, acknowledging its status as an indivisible and living whole. These legal innovations challenge traditional property rights and offer new avenues for environmental protection and justice (Dornelas M, et al., 2018). International agreements such as the Paris Agreement on climate change and the Convention on Biological Diversity include provisions that recognize the importance of environmental justice. These agreements emphasize the need for inclusive decision-making and the protection of vulnerable communities. However, the implementation of these provisions often falls short and there is a need for stronger commitments and accountability mechanisms to ensure that environmental justice is upheld globally. In the United States, the removal of four hydroelectric dams on California's Klamath River marked the largest river restoration project in U.S. history. This \$550 million initiative aimed to rehabilitate the river's ecosystem and conserve its fish population. Central to this effort was the involvement of Indigenous nations, whose traditional ecological knowledge and stewardship practices were integral to the project's success

Indigenous communities have long practiced sustainable environmental stewardship based on spiritual and cultural ties to the land. However, these communities often face threats from resource extraction projects and lack legal protections. Recognizing Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) as a legitimate and valuable form of environmental management is not only respectful but essential for crafting truly sustainable solutions. TEK provides holistic, long-term views of ecological health that can complement scientific approaches (van Klink R, et al., 2021). Protecting Indigenous rights and lands is thus a dual imperative: safeguarding biodiversity and advancing social justice. The Global South, comprising developing countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America, faces the double burden of contributing least to climate change while suffering its worst effects. Historical exploitation through colonialism and present-day practices of climate colonialism-where wealthy nations outsource their environmental burdens-exacerbate inequalities. In cities across the world, environmental inequality manifests through disparities in air quality, access to green spaces and exposure to hazards like industrial pollution or heatwaves. In the U.S., studies have shown that communities of color are exposed to higher levels of fine particulate pollution (PM_{2.5}) than white communities, even when adjusting for income. Young people are at the forefront of the climate justice movement, bringing with them a deep awareness of intersectionality-the recognition that race, gender, class and environmental issues are deeply intertwined. Movements like Fridays for Future, Sunrise Movement and Polluters Out reflect this consciousness and demand transformative change, not incremental reforms. Educational institutions and policy platforms must embrace this intergenerational and intersectional lens to build an inclusive environmental future (EconoMO EP, et al., 2018).

Conclusion

Environmental justice is not just an add-on to environmental policy-it is the foundation of any truly sustainable and equitable society. The path forward involves reimagining our relationship with nature and with each other. By protecting ecosystems, uplifting marginalized voices and restructuring institutions, we can confront the twin crises of environmental degradation and social inequality together. This future is not only possible-it is necessary. A just transition to a green economy, community-led conservation, participatory democracy and inclusive technology development can all contribute to a world where environmental protection and human dignity go hand in hand.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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