

## The environmental justice movement

Written by EarthTalk® E - The Environmental Magazine  
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**Dear EarthTalk: I understand that the "environmental justice" movement seeks to protect the poor and non-white communities from being unfairly targeted to host activities like sewage treatment plants, landfills and polluting factories. Have there been notable victories?**  
-- P. Silver, Peekskill, NY

The environmental justice movement was born in September 1982 when a group of poor residents of rural Warren County, North Carolina laid down in front of trucks transporting waste containing toxic PCBs to a nearby landfill. Those primarily African American activists eventually lost their battle to keep toxic waste out of the area, but their actions eventually led to an executive order by President Clinton in 1996 that institutionalized the U.S. government's duty to identify and address "disproportionately high adverse health or environmental effects of its policies or programs on low-income people and people of color." It also mandated that the federal government look for ways to prevent discrimination by race, color or national origin in any federally funded programs dealing with health or the environment.

In the time since, many other low income or minority groups—Latinos, Asians, Pacific Islanders, Native Americans and others—have learned to raise their voices and stand up against the discriminatory locating of hazardous waste landfills and transfer stations, polluting factories and utilities, and other triggers for bad air quality and compromised waterways and soils across the U.S. and beyond.

Some of the better known environmental justice groups came to be out of specific struggles in their own local neighborhoods. Concerned Citizens of South Central LA (Los Angeles) was created to fight the now infamous LANCER incinerator in the late 1980s, and today provides leadership on environmental and other social justice issues throughout southern California. Likewise, Mothers of East LA, originally formed to stop the siting of a prison in an East Los Angeles community, has become a strong voice against incinerators and other waste processing and landfill facilities interested in moving to the area.

Elsewhere, West Harlem Environmental Action formed in 1998 to fight (unsuccessfully) the building of the North River Sewage Treatment Plant in West Harlem in New York City. Despite that defeat, the group is now a leader on environmental justice issues around New York State. And the Deep South Center for Environmental Justice began with humble activist roots but is

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now in high demand helping rural communities in Louisiana's "Cancer Alley" protect themselves from further degradation and harm at the hands of oil refineries and other heavy industry located there.

Several national organizations now devote significant resources to these issues. The Center for Health, Environment and Justice (CHEJ), which emerged out of the 1970s Love Canal controversy when the U.S. government relocated 800 families from their polluted Niagara Falls, New York neighborhood, today functions as an activist clearinghouse for related issues. The Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) has devoted significant resources to environmental justice efforts, including helping to identify cancer clusters in poor communities near heavy industry. Many Sierra Club local chapters battle environmental discrimination in their neighborhoods. And the federal government today provides millions of dollars to environmental justice projects through the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and other agencies.

**CONTACTS:** Mothers of East LA, [www.mothersofeastla.com](http://www.mothersofeastla.com); West Harlem Environmental Action, [www.weact.org](http://www.weact.org); Deep South Center for Environmental Justice, [www.dscej.org](http://www.dscej.org); NRDC, [www.nrdc.org](http://www.nrdc.org); CHEJ, [www.chej.org](http://www.chej.org); Sierra Club, [www.sierraclub.org](http://www.sierraclub.org); EPA; [www.epa.gov](http://www.epa.gov).

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