Environmental Racism Essay, Research Paper

Communities are not all created equal. Have you ever heard of or considered the concept of Environmental Racism and what role it plays in the lives of Afro-Americans? I presume your answer is ?no.? Well then, have you ever wondered why so many housing projects, which are majority Black occupied, are located near industrial parks? I presume you haven?t even noticed. Well, I have. Growing up in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, New York, I often visited my older cousin who resided in the Red Hook Housing Projects in Brooklyn. The aroma…garbage. It was like walking through a sanitation dump from the second you got off the G-train at Smith Street to the second you got back on. And how did you know you were almost there? From the sight of smoke floating from pipes on top of large square buildings. My only concern then was seeing my cousin and having fun for the weekend…not the effects of inhaling the fumes or why it smelled so awful. I figured that if my cousin lived there it must have been a good place or atleast affordable for the time.

However, now that I have come of age and traveled throughout the U.S. I have realized that Red Hook is not the only housing project located smack-dab in the middle of an industrial park. Red Hook is not the only housing project occupied by majority Blacks and Hispanics. Housing projects are not the only minority communities located near industrial parks. Industrial parks are strategically positioned. What does all this mean? What does it all boil down to?…The concept of Environmental Racism and the birth of the Environmetal Justice Movement.

Environmental Racism has been defined as the intentional siting of hazardous waste sites, landfills, incinerators, and polluting industries in communities inhabited mainly by Arican-Americans, Hispanics, Native Americans, Asians, migrant farm workers, and the working poor. Minorities are particularly vulenrables because they are perceived as weak and pasisve

Environmentalism is defined by the Webster’s dictionary as “(1) a theory that views environment rather than heredity as the important factor in the development and especially the cultural and intellectual development of an individual or group (2) the advocacy of the preservation or improvement of the natural environment; especially: the movement to control pollution.” Most people consider environmentalists as “tree-huggers” that fight for the rainforests and the ozone. More recently, however, there has been a new group of “environmentalists” that have come forward. They are minorities and their supporters that are fighting the environmental racism that has been occurring in their neighborhoods.

“Environmental racism can be defined as the intentional siting of hazardous waste sites, landfills, incinerators, and polluting industries in communities inhabited by mainly African-Americans, Hispanics, Native Americans and Asians” (Weintraub 1). As a practice, whether on purpose or unintended, environmental racism is often reinforced by government, legal, economic, political and military institutions (Buntin 4). Minorities are particularly vulnerable because they are perceived as feeble and passive citizens. They fear that if they fight against the poisoning of their neighborhoods it may jeopardize jobs and economic survival. Higher income areas are usually more successful in preventing or controlling the entry of polluting industries to their communities. Many at-risk communities are victims of land-use decision making that reflects the power arrangements of the dominant society. Polluting industries are attracted to poor neighborhoods because land values, incomes, and other costs of doing business are lower. Studies suggest clear relationships between high concentrations of minority populations with an unhealthy environment (Weintraub 3). Three out of every five Black and Hispanic Americans live have lived in communities with one or more toxic waste sites. Over 15 million African-Americans, over eight million Hispanics and about 50% of Native Americans are living in communities with one or more abandoned or uncontrolled toxic waste sites (Weintraub 2). On the other hand, only 34% of the White population live or have lived in a polluted area (Buntin 4).

Environmental racism is now well documented in America’s communities. There was a landmark study proposed by the Commissions of Racial Justice, United Church of Christ in 1987 that described the extent of environmental racism and the consequences for those who are victims of polluted environments.

The study revealed that:

- “Race was the most significant variable associated with the location of hazardous waste sites.

- The greatest numbers of commercial hazardous facilities were located in communities with the highest composition of racial and ethnic minorities” (Weintraub 1).

Some real-life examples of economical racism are as follows:

- “Three out of the five largest commercial hazardous waste landfills in the United States are located in predominantly African-American or Latino communities” (Buntin 5).

- “The largest hazardous waste landfill in the United States is located in Emelle, Alabama, a poor, predominantly African-American community. It receives toxic materials from 45 states and several foreign countries.

- An industrial toxic waste site is located in a predominantly Hispanic neighborhood on the South Side of Tucson, Arizona. The air and water are polluted with toxic chemicals, which have caused a high rate of cancer, birth defects, genetic mutations and other illnesses. The community is tainted with 20 times the acceptable levels of trichloroethylene.

- Waste disposal companies have been attempting to convince Native Americans to permit dumping on the reservations under the guise of improving the economic conditions. High rates of lung cancer and poisoned land have occurred on Navajo reservations as a result of uranium mining.

- The South Side of Chicago, which is predominantly African-American and Hispanic, had the greatest concentration of hazardous waste sites in the nation” (Weintraub 2).

The Environmental Protection Agency admits that certain communities suffer a disproportionate share of the burden, but there appears to be a general lack of data on the health effects of pollution in those communities. One reason for this is that environmental and health data are not routinely collected and analyzed by categories of income and race. The information is available but the EPA considers environmental racism a public relations issue, not a civil rights issue (Weintraub 2). Therefore, they do not take claims seriously enough to gather the necessary data by income and race.

One of the first steps toward addressing the problem of environmental racism was the establishment of the Conference on Race and the Incident of Environmental Hazards held at the University of Michigan in January of 1990. This conference gave national visibility to the public debate n environmental racism and served as a catalyst for residents of polluted communities to organize (Weintraub 4). Citizens who were tired of being subjected to the dangers of pollution in their communities started confronting the power structures through organized protest, legal actions and other activities.

After attention was brought to the problem of environmental racism, the EPA got involved. The Environmental Equity Workgroup of the EPA offered several recommendations that would enable the Agency to deal more impartially with minorities in environmental decision making. Some recommendations were:

- “Increase the priority given to issues of environmental equity.

- Establish and maintain an effective database for assessing risks on the basis of income and race.

- Create measures to reduce high concentrations of risk among specific population groups.

- Increase efforts to communicate with racial minority and low-income communities and involve them in environmental policy-making” (Weintraub 5-6).

Some people disagree with the ideas of environmentalism. Ayn Rand introduced the philosophy of Objectivism. Objectivists believe that environmentalism is a danger to humankind. They feel that the basic goal of environmentalists is not clean air and water, but the extermination of the technological/industrial civilization. They think that environmentalism advocates a “subhuman world where nature is worshipped like the totem of some primitive religion” (Berliner 1). Objectivists believe that an individual has “a moral right to live his own life for his own sake. He has no duty to sacrifice it to the needs of others and certainly not to the needs of the non-human” (Berliner 4). They feel that the rejection of environmentalism as “hatred of science, technology, progress and human life” is required to save humankind (Berliner 4).

What the objectivists did not take into consideration is that the industrial civilization, especially polluting industries, is “picking on” minorities. The goal for the environmentalists fighting against environmental racism is clean air and water. Every person, whether minority or not, deserves to live in a healthy environment. They are not trying to exterminate the industries; they are trying to have them distributed in a non-discriminating manner.

Environmentalism goes far beyond rainforests and the ozone. In the first definition of environmentalism, it states that the environment is “the important factor in the development and especially the cultural and intellectual development of an individual or group”. Are the minorities affected by environmental racism given a fair chance to develop culturally and intellectually if their environment is polluted? Probably not.

Environmental racism is not a topic heard in everyday conversation. Maybe it should be. Ignorance is not bliss. People need to become aware of these heinous acts that are condoned by our lawmakers and legislative bodies. Until people take a stand, this racial discrimination will continue into the next millenium.