

## **From Scarcity to Solidarity**

Andy Blom (Peace Flag Raising; April 22, 2021)

The idea of environmental justice points to our interconnectedness and common stake in creating a world that achieves justice across races, genders, social classes, cultures, countries, and other divides.

I've been reflecting on this interconnectedness this week as communities in the U.S. have been hit with the trauma of new police killings of unarmed Black and brown people.

Racial oppression attempts to get buy-in by creating a large enough group of people who are brought to see themselves as benefitting from it. As a person constructed as white, I am fed a series of lies and bribes that are meant to get me to, at minimum look the other way when BIPOC are racially abused and exploited, and even to accept enticement to become co-operator in that injustice.

Environmental harms are no exception to this dynamic; in fact they give us maybe the clearest illustration. The term "environmental racism" was first used in 1982 when Black residents in Warren County, North Carolina were protesting the dumping of toxic chemical wastes in their community. The dumping site was chosen out of all the possible farmland in the state. Predominantly white areas were passed over by officials who saw themselves as accountable to those populations. White constituents said "not in my back yard," and the dumping site was placed where Black people lived and farmed. White residents invested in the lie and delusion: it hurts them instead of us.

Environmental racism is parasitic on the systemic racism that plays out in [inequalities in housing, wealth, and health care](#). The history of housing discrimination in the United States has created communities segregated by race, and heavily polluted industry has been allowed to develop in those areas adjacent to predominantly Black and brown communities. Infrastructure in these communities has been neglected and deprioritized. Communities where more Black and brown people live are more often exposed to water toxins than whiter communities. Nationwide, Black residents absorb 1.5 times the air pollution burden of the general population. People exposed to long-term air pollution are more vulnerable to pulmonary distress from diseases like COVID-19.

Even in recognizing these inequalities, those of us who are white are enticed to think: environmental racism is a problem for Black people, for Latinx and indigenous communities, for those in the global south and so-called "Third World." We come to think of injustice as an "us vs. them" problem, as if human dignity is a scarce resource; if some are afforded less, then others get more; and if we're in a position of dominance and privilege, then we're safer.

But environmental harms illustrate clearly how injustice anywhere is a threat to people everywhere. The fight against environmental racism, like the fight against systemic racism writ large, is a fight for all of us. When people leverage whiteness to put the problem in someone

else's back yard, it relieves people in power of the burden of addressing the problem-- at the same time that it shifts the burden of resistance onto communities of color. Residents of Warren County, North Carolina fought back against the dumping of toxic wastes in their community, drawing on strategies and networks of resistance from the Civil Rights Struggle, laying down in front of heavy machinery, and filling jails through civil disobedience. In the end, their fight did not prevent the dump site, but it did spark a movement that made toxic wastes a much larger focus of environmental activism, saving communities across the country from further contamination.

Joining together around our common stake in environmental justice shows us the lie in the ideology of scarcity. What harms some, harms all. When we fight together against the abuse and exploitation of communities of color, we are all safer, healthier, better off. These win-win gains are what author and policy analyst, Heather McGhee, has recently called "solidarity dividends." Building bonds of solidarity with those most impacted by environmental harms uplifts those communities and benefits everyone: problems are not pushed down the road, insulating those in advantaged positions for only a short time longer; the power of people to resist unsustainable industrial interests is strengthened in unity rather than defeated through division.

These bonds of solidarity are the only promise of dismantling other forms of systemic violence and building a sustainable future together. Only by realizing our interconnectedness and working together in solidarity can we build sustainable forms of wealth for all communities, foster a planetary culture that upholds human dignity, and reimagine a system of public safety that does not brutalize and degrade but creates real protection for human life.