

Environmental Justice May 2003



The socially just distribution of environmental costs, assets and resources and the means to achieve this.

Environmental damage doesn't occur evenly. There are patterns in the way environmental problems are distributed. And the people who live in the worst environments tend to be the people who are poor, unemployed, geographically isolated, discriminated against or socially excluded in some way or another. Nearly a third of Scottish households live with fuel poverty, the poorest children are four times more likely to be killed on busy roads, and many socially excluded communities are fighting against the pollution caused by landfill sites, fish farms, opencast mines and chemical factories.

Origins

Environmental justice is a term which comes from the civil rights movement in the USA. Research commissioned by the United Church of Christ identified that, in America, toxic facilities were significantly more likely to be sited in African-American, Hispanic and Native American communities. The environmental justice movement united thousands of local community campaigns and, under Bill Clinton, succeeded in making environmental racism illegal.

Friends of the Earth Scotland adopted environmental justice as a campaign priority in 1998. For years we have supported community campaigns against local polluters, and at the same time researched how our over-use of resources caused environmental damage elsewhere in the world, and left a legacy to future generations. Environmental justice unites these objectives. Environmental justice is: **no less than a decent environment for all, with no more than our fair share of the Earth's resources.**

Evidence

We know that environmentally damaging activities go somewhere. There are certainly physical, geological and ecological constraints to where some environmentally damaging activities are situated, but they also tend to be distributed along the same lines as other social costs. Those who have least access to the resources of wealth, security, education, language, legal advice, influence, cultural capital and power are the ones who end up with the worst environments.

We know that child pedestrians in the lowest socio-economic group are over four times more likely to be killed on the roads than their counterparts in the highest socio-economic group, even though the fifth of the population with the highest income travels three times further by road than the fifth with the lowest income and women have significantly less access to cars than men.

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We know that pensioners, single parents and low income families are disproportionately affected by fuel poverty.

We know that there are more landfill sites beside more deprived communities, and that house prices in these areas are depressed.

We know that in England and Wales, low income households are twice as likely to have a polluting factory in their neighbourhood than high income households, but in Scotland the data is not available.

A fair share of the Earth's resources

Environmental injustice in Scotland does not occur in isolation. An increasingly globalising economy both connects us to others' environments throughout the world. Scotland's position in the western periphery of a Europe expanding eastwards puts additional strains on the environment. An over dependence on primary resources can lead to insecurities and damage being concentrated in vulnerable communities, as has been demonstrated through fish-stock depletion, fish-farming expansion and the Harris superquarry debacle.

Further afield, the ecological shadow cast by our imports of foodstuffs, extracted materials and manufactured goods cause damage, from the banana plantations of Ecuador to the oil fields of Nigeria and the sweat shops of Indonesia. The pollution to which Scotland disproportionately contributes inflicts problems on countries far from Scotland. Carbon dioxide emissions from our ever-expanding transport leads to climate change and recent floods experienced in Bangladesh and Southern Africa. Scotland needs to take responsibility for the environmental injustices it inflicts on the rest of the world.

Delivering environmental justice

Friends of the Earth Scotland, with Queen Margaret University College in Edinburgh, have created the first community based Higher Education Certificate in Environmental Justice, which is validating the great skills of active citizens throughout the country, and empowering them for future environmental justice work. We continue to train and support communities to use the planning system and help groups working to improve their local communities through sustainable development.

The role of the Scottish Executive

In order to right the wrongs of the past, resources need to be directed to communities blighted by environmental injustices, the ecological debt needs to be addressed, and the results of policy on the ground must be assessed according to the demands of environmental justice.

Pollution prosecution - the Scottish Executive must tackle weaknesses in the pollution prosecution system so that the polluter pays. In Scotland prosecutions for water and waste offences are roughly four times less common and fines are far lower than in England and Wales.

Improvements in planning for third parties - a Third Party Right of Appeal should be introduced to the planning system for developments which require an environmental impact assessment; where the local authority has an interest; where it is contrary to the local development plan or where an approved development was subject to planning officers recommendation for refusal.

Corporate accountability - mechanisms should be introduced which increase environmental protection while giving communities access to information and an opportunity to raise concerns.