

Activist Communities Advance by Focusing on the Specifics

Robert D. Bullard, ed., *The Quest for Environmental Justice: Human Rights and the Politics of Pollution*, Sierra Club Books, 2005.

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Robert D. Bullard's *The Quest for Environmental Justice: Human Rights and the Politics of Pollution* is a progress report from one of the more recent branches of environmental activism. Bullard's edited collection documents the recent history and the ongoing legal developments that have occurred since this movement's founding. This collection of essays, representing the work of many communities, shows the wide variety of issues that become visible only with thick descriptions of the variety of political contexts from which they emerge. Readers will learn about contexts as varied as waterfront radioactive contamination in Camden, NJ, the politics of greenspace in Los Angeles, racist zoning laws in Houston, gold mining by cyanide vat leaching on tribal lands, and the politics of water in the southwest U.S.

This collection of field reports from grassroots activists shows the many successes of community activism and the wisdom of citizens in poor and marginalized communities becoming "squeaky wheels." The essays repeatedly highlight the role of women of color as activist leaders. The many examples show how activist communities have not only made legal inroads on problems, but also accomplished successes in the court of public opinion. These reports make clear just how costly legal counsel can be for poor communities, how necessary effective legal counsel is, and how effective even an unsuccessful legal confrontation can be toward giving political power to a marginalized community. These reports from the field demonstrate the need to use environmental laws in concert with civil rights laws and the highly technical nature of such lawsuits. The Camden Bucket brigade in which neighbors collected air samples for testing is a heartening example of how one community ingeniously lowered the costs of what is usually a nearly prohibitively costly legal proposition that stretches the resources of poor communities to the limit.

Almost every essay in this book demonstrates the importance of the concept of human habitat as part of an ecosystem. Human habitats can be as endangered as those of plants and animals, and humans have a right to claim their place in the ecosystem. All too often the concept of "environment" has not included the places where people, particularly poor people, live, work and play. A study of the U.S. military takeover on the Puerto Rican island of Vieques tells the story of the "separation of a community from the environment that sustains them." An essay on environmental politics in post-apartheid South Africa discusses the practice of moving blacks out to make way for game parks—hence, preserving wildlife and wildflowers at the expense of people without adequate food and shelter. Human habitat includes resources for subsistence communities and space for recreation. As the essay on park space in Los Angeles points out, having too few parks hits marginalized people first. The racialization of LA public recreation spaces gives a whole new meaning to the phrase "pay to play."

Bullard's book is, to a large extent, a chronicle of political growth within a community. Repeatedly, the stories about seeking environmental justice portrayed in this book demonstrate the need for coalitions and alliances for political efficacy. As one writer explained, "different stakeholders...[have] different but overlapping motivations" which might motivate unlikely allies to overcome their traditional divisions. One striking story tells how mining conflicts on native lands were successfully resolved by teaming up with non-native sportsmen—an unlikely but useful alliance in this case. Just as growing pains illuminate the value of alliances across differences, the significance of internal divisions among environmentalists proves telling. The traditional environmentalist emphasis upon wilderness gives way to a negotiated new emphasis upon inhabited wilderness, as traditional land-based local cultures vie for grazing rights with more wilderness-oriented environmentalists. Also highlighted is the importance of considering urban habitat—not just "wilderness." More privileged environmentalists participate in "exotic racism" by turning inhabited communities into commodities for the amusement of tourists and their second home markets, raising property taxes and displacing cash-poor, land-rich local communities already in residence there.

Bullard's collection also discloses emerging issues and frontiers, while raising new political agendas. Arguably the most important of these involves economic globalization, particularly the global politics of extracting resources. An article on the political violence in the Niger Delta shows how oil production politics there coincide with ethnic strife. The authors of this discussion show how the violence in the Niger Delta is a predictable result of poverty bumping up against unimaginable oil wealth, which is then "refracted through the lens of ethnic difference," a diagnosis which should sound familiar by now. Globalization has brought the politics of oil colonization of Third World countries by the U.S. onto center stage. Globalization has also unjustly turned some Third World counties into international dump zones. Another emerging issue is the internal debate over the primacy of race or class in determining environmental injustices. A discussion of post-apartheid South Africa examines new divisions between haves and have-nots; the emergence of the new black elite would suggest that environmental injustice is increasingly a class-based conflict.

The parts of this book that most shine (and persuade) are not its statistical analyses, but rather its pithy bits of political theorizing about environmental injustice. One author argues that people need not be intentionally racist to cause damage, but only unaware of the privilege their white skin allows them to take for granted. Another explains how racism allows people to feel "unconnected to specific others" in ways that allow for social irresponsibility. Proponents of environmental justice are finding eloquent ways to pose the political question that, of all subgroups of environmentalists, they ask the most trenchantly: who bears the costs and who gets the benefits? They've done the tedious fieldwork necessary to prove what most people intuitively know—that environmental benefits go to whites, and the costs go to people of color. Communities cannot sacrifice some of their members "for the greater good" and still honestly call themselves all part of a common community. Those continually sacrificed know this the best. Fieldwork and statistics will never persuade those not already intuitively convinced. Only a wider and more spiritual social change will force a community to acknowledge all of its members and its responsibilities to them without scapegoating the few. This collection of essays which analytically treats multiple and differing contexts of environmental injustice makes one now

yearn for the pendulum to swing back from the specific to the more synthesizing generalization.