

# **Environmental Justice and Social Action**

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## **Problem Statement:**

In my experience, I have found that many students in lower income, inner city areas find it difficult to perceive life outside of their own realm of their family, friends, and neighborhood. Moreover, most teenagers, no matter where they are from, tend to lack the foresight necessary to focus on matters that have long-term future effects, such as environmental issues. Rather, they focus on more day-to-day issues and motives. Additionally, even those who are interested in environmental issues don't necessarily understand the political and historical context surrounding such issues. For urban students in particular, they may not realize that they are facing more pertinent environmental issues than their suburban counterparts. Urban students may not understand that some housing projects are built near dumping sites because residence in the projects attracts a less profitable audience. They may not realize that, even though they live in the city, they can have a profound impact on nature, starting today and for years to come.

As an American History teacher, I find that it's important to hear from a variety of perspectives on a topic, to have a holistic understanding of events that have shaped what we see today. I oftentimes like to start my American History class with a discussion of Friere's "Pedagogy of the Oppressed," because I feel as though it's an important philosophy that aids in an understanding of why certain cultures, races, or groups of people are put down by other, seemingly more "powerful" groups. This philosophy and theory can be then revisited throughout the rest of the discussion throughout the unit.

## **Rationale:**

The Pennsylvania state standard 8.1.12 states that students are to learn how to evaluate cause and effect by analyzing continuity and change in a variety of facets of history, one of which is the environment. However, there are rarely units that cover ways in which students can become real-world advocates for environmental social justice, to the point of having their own effects on history. My unit will address the issues of defining environmental justice, understanding the historical and political context of environmental justice, analyzing its effects so far on urban populations, and teaching students to learn how to become advocates for social change.

Students will first begin by understanding the concept of what environmental justice is, and what historical events have illustrated the struggles faced as they relate to environmental justice issues. Students will also analyze what it means to have a relationship with the environment. In order to have students understand why this is important, they must first understand the way that humans of all different cultures and backgrounds relate to nature and their environmental surroundings. Additionally, to give students a personal attachment to this topic, they will be asked to reflect upon their own beliefs and their own concept of what the environmental issues are and how they see them play out in their daily lives. My expectation is that some students will be more aware of their environmental surroundings and the need for change, whereas others may either simply be oblivious to the issues, or feel that they have more pressing issues in their day-to-day life (i.e. poverty, family issues, safety concerns), so that they have not spent time thinking about environmental problems as they relate to their part of society.

Students will analyze case studies so they can understand real-world applications of what has happened in the past. However, students will not merely understand the problems of the past. They will rather be charged with the task of creating a plan to promote change. The goal is to get students to think about their relationship with the environment, overcome the racial injustice that is present, and ultimately be active members of society working to change the status quo as it relates to environmental issues and race.

At the end of the unit, students will reflect on what environmental racism means in terms of its role in a progressive civil rights movement. Students will discuss whether or not the whole concept of “environmental racism,” is an issue to be focused on at all, or if it’s actually counterproductive in society. For example, in Kimberly K. Smith’s book, “African American Environmental Thought,” the author cited the perspective that some civil rights leaders such as Whitney Young of the Urban League and George Wiley of the National Welfare Rights Organization proposed (Smith, 190). These activists stated that it’s more important for people to focus on racism and poverty rather than pollution. However, the opposing thought is that racism, poverty, and environmental issues are not merely mutually exclusive, but, rather, are greatly intertwined. Students will analyze both perspectives on the issue and try to determine what they think is the most relevant to them—should society focus only on poverty and race, or should the environment also play a key role in promoting justice?

### **Objectives:**

This unit will most likely take place during the end of the school year, unit 8, which asks students to analyze the social, political and economic challenges that a global economy brings to different populations. At my current school, School of the Future, we use laptops within and outside the classroom in addition to textbooks and handouts, so those resources will be indicated within the completed unit.

Over the course of this curriculum unit, students will:

- Read the “Principles of Environmental Justice” and compare/contrast to portions of the US Constitution.
- Analyze the effects of policy issues on toxic waste and landfills in urban areas
- Research the Student Environmental Action committee

- Defend or Deny the EPA's rulings as they regard to communities involving those in urban areas, minority groups, and poverty
- Compare the differences amongst environmental equity, and environmental justice, and environmental racism
- Determine the economic effects of environmental issues, and illustrate the rationalization for environmental differences amongst different economic areas
- Explore the terms environmental racism and environmental justice

### **Background:**

To prepare for creating this unit, I plan to research current public policies and United States governing bodies, including the EPA and its current guidelines. Students need to know what's considered "acceptable," and then determine whether or not the current way that our environmental protection agencies operate is working in favor of all demographics, despite race, culture, or wealth differences. One important case study that students will need to focus on is the 1979 lawsuit *Bean vs. Southwestern Waste Management*, which was the first real lawsuit to focus on environmental discrimination. This came as a result of a 1974 report that the EPA was providing funds to the town of Marshall, Texas for a sewage treatment plant that would disproportionately serve a white population, with the black population being required to pay an assessment to receive the same services. This particular case can be a catalyst for further discussion into what the environmental justice movement is and when it began. I also feel it is necessary to understand some of the key court cases that have led to the creation or modification of public policies that are related to environmental justice. Some case studies could include Emelle, Alabama, which is often considered one of the largest hazardous waste cases, the Dearborn Michigan Arab American community and air pollution, and the Yucca Mountain High Level Nuclear Waste Depository.

Additionally, I feel that it may be interesting to make this a more interdisciplinary unit, and tie in science as well. Many of the students I teach currently are in their junior year, so they are taking chemistry along with my class, and I hope also to include some of the chemistry involved in environmental issues after doing additional research regarding chemical compounds to understand the types of compounds that have the most detrimental effect on our society. Specifically, students could model certain chemical compounds after the ones seen in the cases studied above, so that they could have a visual understanding of what is happening to the earth, water, and air when certain pollutants seep into the environment.

Another area of background that needs to be addressed is the rise of political action groups and individuals that focus on environmental issues. One of the groups that would be particularly interesting for our young students is the Student Environment Action Coalition, because students can easily relate to other young people who are focusing on political action. The Student Environmental Action Coalition (SEAC) is a diverse organization of high school and college aged individuals who promote not only environmental conservation but also a number of social justice policies. Their list of core principles is surprisingly vast, but they tend to focus greatly on environmental conservation, racial injustice, social welfare, animal rights, and equality for all individuals despite race, wealth, gender, or sexual orientation. At first glance, I find that the SEAC, albeit a very well-intentioned organization, may be a bit too widespread.

There are four current projects taking place through the SEAC that students could research for greater in-depth analysis of social action. The “National Black Law Student’s Association’s Environmental Justice Campaign” is one in which African Americans in the legal field are lobbying against the dumping of hazardous waste material in low income and racially segregated communities, and highlighting the need for better clean air and water policies in similar locations. The second project is known as “Build it Up, West Virginia,” where students help to build student-run sustainable environmental projects that change communities that are heavily economically dependent on and impacted by fossil fuels into locally run, sustainable, healthy communities. This can be in the way of something as simple as building a locally run organic community garden, with which people can get their produce for a fair price. Another project that the SEAC is working on is the “Engineers for a Sustainable World Recycling Project,” run by individuals at the University of Austin working to streamline recycling and enhance its usage. The final project currently in the works is the Keeper of Mountain Foundation, which seeks to promote a sustainable mountain community and end mountaintop removal. While some of these projects are clearly less likely to draw the attention of an urban student in Philadelphia, they may be used as models for my students to come up with their own organizations or political action committees.

When presenting this organization to my students, I will have them focus more on the issues regarding environmental conservation, race, and class issues, so that they don’t divert their attention from the theme of the unit. Nevertheless, I do feel as though this organization is a good role model for the students, and it would also be a way in which they could have a real-world application and an outlet for action to provide meaningful change. The website itself asks that, prior to joining the SEAC, students take the time to understand both the history of the SEAC and read the principles of the organization. Again, I feel as though not all of my students will necessarily choose to take the next step to be actively involved in such an organization, nor do I feel that it is necessary that they do so to be mindful of these issues, but I do want it to be an option for them if this is a topic that is of great interest to them.

In doing additional research, I also came across the 1991 People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit. This event was created in order to bring people of color together to focus on environmental and economic justice and health issues as basic civil and human rights. A second, follow up summit was held in Washington DC in 2002, and expanded on the first summit to focus also on the issues regarding economic justice, globalization and international issues. Students will research the discussions held at these summits, and create their own mock “Environmental Justice Summit,” with the goal of coming up with a tangible, real-world based plan that could actually be implemented in order to enact social change.

I find that it’s important not to pigeonhole this topic into one area of environmental impact- such as air pollution or land waste. Instead, I think that it’s important that students understand all of these actions can be used as forms of environmental injustice, and it’s important to focus on the broader question of how to address environmental injustice in all forms. Additionally, it’s not just African Americans that are affected by environmental racism, but other racial groups and social classes as well. Students will need to know that this is not something that affects one group of people, but rather it has strong, far-reaching implications. I

think the myriad of issues and social groups can be addressed by way of the aforementioned case studies, so that students will get a bigger picture of how widespread the issue is.

**Standards:** The following state of Pennsylvania Social Studies standards will be addressed in this curriculum unit:

Historical Analysis and Skills Development: Grade 12

8.1.12 A Evaluate chronological thinking through the following: Sequential order of historical narrative, continuity and change, context for events

8.1.12B Synthesize and evaluate historical sources through the following: literal meaning of historical passages, data in historical and contemporary maps, graphs and tables, different historical perspectives, data presented in maps, graphs and tables, visual data presented in historical evidence

8.1.12 C Evaluate historical interpretation of events through the following: impact of opinions on the perception of facts, issues and problems in the past, multiple points of view, illustrations in historical stories and sources, connections between causes and results, author or source of historical narratives' points of view

United States History Standards: Grade 12 8.3.12 D. Identify and evaluate conflict and cooperation among social groups and organizations in United States history from 1890 to the Present through the following: domestic instability, ethnic and racial relations

**Strategies and Activities:** Strategies that will be used are as follows:

**Do Now:** This will be used to engage students at the beginning of class. Most of the times, the Do Now will ask students to either reflect upon a discussion from the previous day's class, thereby activating prior knowledge, or it will ask that students explain their opinion on a certain topic or question. Since this unit will focus on issues that they may see in society today, the Do Now's will activate prior knowledge in their daily life. This will be done on laptops through Edmodo.com, which is the school's online platform for assignments, reading posts, and work submissions.

**Exit Slip:** This is the bookend strategy that complements the Do Now. This will be done at the end of class, and asks that students reflect upon what's been discussed or to review a key concept. This is a good way to close out class. This will be done on laptops through Edmodo.com.

**Compare and Contrast:** Students will use this strategy to compare and contrast historical texts to current concepts related to environmental justice. For example, when students are asked to compare the preamble to the Principles of Environmental Justice, they will also be asked to compare and contrast it to the United States Constitution's preamble, and the Bill of Rights. This can be done by way of a Venn diagram organizer, which is helpful for students of multiple learning modalities.

**Case Study Analysis:** This will be the bulk of the student's independent practice, where they will be asked to review environmental cases and their outcomes. We would review the EPA case of 1979 together as a sample, and then student will be asked to review individual case studies that they will present to one another, as they relate to a variety of environmental issues and social classes or racial groups. In order to make this relevant to Philadelphia students, they will study the case of the Schuylkill River, and analyze efforts made to clean up the river, and why it became polluted in the first place.

**Field Trip:** Waterworks museum to study the historical implications of Philadelphia's environmental issues. Students will learn that the environment and nature is very important even in urban environments of Philadelphia.

**Role Play:** Students will be given profiles of different stakeholders in the environmental justice dilemma (business owners, environmentalists, residents of low-income communities, government officials), and will have to identify how they would react to situations by making decisions in the eyes of the different stakeholders. (NIMBY- Not In My Backyard- Role Play activity.)

**Reading Comprehension and analyzing Key Terms:** Students will analyze the key terms of LULU (Locally undesirable land uses) through analysis of Peter S. Wenz's paper "Just Garbage." Students will analyze the business drivers that perpetuate stratified class systems and the creation of environmental injustice in low-income communities.

**Jigsaw:** After students have spent time analyzing the various cases, students will then be asked to share out their findings with one another. This can be done in the form of a jigsaw activity, where one group of individuals focuses on one key case or concept, and then shares out with the rest of the group. I like to do Jigsaw activities by way of graphic organizers- so that when students are listening to their classmates present on another issue, they are actively participating by writing down notes on what their classmates are saying. This would be a graded assignment that would be submitted through Edmodo.com, so all students would be required to be engaged participants.

**Mock Summit:** This would most likely be the final activity of the unit, where students would use all the information that they learned both in class and on their own to hold a mock "Environmental Justice Summit," modeled after the People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit of 1991 and 2002. The result from the mock summit would be to have the students come up with their own plan to end environmental racism. During this summit, students would have to have an honest conversation about EPA rulings, and defend or deny the effect that the EPA has on racial injustice.

**Scientific Labs:** When learning about the impact of racial issues, it's important that students learn why the environment is important to them, no matter where they live. Oftentimes, people misconstrue environmentalists as "tree huggers," in suburban or rural areas where they are typically more connected to nature. It's important to break that stereotype through actual exposure to the concept of what happens in the environment due to

environmental policies. For example, students would work with the chemistry instructor to create simulations of chemicals permeating through land, or perhaps the chemical reactions that take place in water pollution. Therefore, by having students get a visual on what is actually happening, they will most likely be more inclined to make changes and be more aware of environmental issues.

Multimedia (Videos): While I try to use videos sparingly in my class, and only snippets at a time, I find that this particular unit lends itself very well to quite a few movies that have focused on these concepts. The first movie I thought of initially was “Erin Brockovitch,” not only because it’s emphasis on environmental issues, but how it also is the story of how a woman with no legal experience and lower on the socio-economic ladder could still have a voice and make an impact. Additionally, other movies that could be included in this unit are “A Civil Action,” which is a movie based upon a true story about environmental pollution that took place in Woburn, Massachusetts in the 1980s. “Silkwood” is another film that illustrates the journey of Karen Silkwood, a plutonium factory worker who tried to expose the safety violations at her workplace, which ultimately led to her demise. The final movie might be a bit too dark and dramatic for the classroom. However, a segment of the film could always be used to spark discussion about the environmental issues prevalent and all the different ways our environment is being harmed by pollution and the actions of the government and corporations.

Strategies for Differentiation for students with special needs:

This unit will encompass a variety of strategies in order to ensure that both special education students and those who are mentally gifted are taught at levels that are appropriate for academic success.

Highlighted Text: Students with special needs will benefit from highlighted text that is on the board and in their notes so that they can more easily understand the key concepts without getting caught up and frustrated by reading difficulties.

Simplified Text: Students with special needs will also be given text readings that are either simplified by replacing words with easier to understand words, or defining words/concepts in the margins of text, or by eliminating frivolous sentences completely in order to assist with comprehension.

Multimedia Differentiation: Because I have access to audio and video capabilities, I can speak instructions, or record my voice reading text, which students can then download onto their computers and reference when needed. I can also use video clips that record me on my laptop, to explain instructions or to highlight key concepts, which, students can again access at a later time if need be.

Higher Level Text: Mentally gifted and advanced students will be asked to find information from higher level texts that are on more of an upper high school to college level of reading. They will be assigned different text readings to challenge themselves so they are fully engaged in the class.

Higher Level Questioning: Mentally gifted and advanced students will also be given higher level questions so that they are challenged to think above basic questions of identifying key concepts. Rather those who are more advanced will be asked to make connections, or analyze concepts in greater detail (for example, the issues regarding how lobbyists can have a direct impact on decisions made for lower class citizens or for those of other races), without much guidance. Therefore, students will be questioned on a higher level of Bloom's Taxonomy without going through scaffolding of lower levels of questions.

### **Unit Activities Outline:**

Lesson 1: To introduce this unit I will have students create their own definitions of environmental justice and environmental racism and make predictions about the issues at hand. I find that it's necessary for students to get involved in a concept if they first take a moment to reflect upon their own personal thoughts. As aforementioned, I believe that I'd find that some students will be less in tune with environmental issues, but it's important to make them aware on which end of the spectrum they lie. This would be done in the form of a surveymonkey.com survey, with Likert scale responses. We would then analyze the responses as a class to gauge the level of student awareness and involvement in environmental issues. Students will then talk about the historical relationship that people of color, or any ethnic or social group, have with the environment. Students will read excerpts from Kimberly White's Book "African American Environmental Thought," to analyze how history has shaped the relationship of different groups and the environment. Students will read excerpts from the book "Faces of Environmental Racism" (Westra and Lawson), including article experts by Laura Westra "The Faces of Environmental Racism," and Peter Wenz "Just Garbage." By reading excerpts, students will learn the concepts of "Locally Undesirable Land Usage" (LULUs,) and the business drivers behind environmentally racist policies.

Lesson 2: At this point, I want to reaffirm for those who are environmentally inclined, the reason why environmental issues are so important. Likewise, I will also want to use this time to highlight to students who don't seem to be that in tune with environmental issues, why they actually should care. This is when I'd like to introduce the scientific labs with the chemistry teacher, to analyze the impact of pollution on the environment.

Lesson 3: To introduce this unit, I'd like to take a copy of the "Principles of Environmental Justice," as created at The First People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit, 1991, and have students compare and contrast it to our US Constitution. This way they not only understand the key ideas that individuals are addressing as it relates to environmental justice and environmental racism, but I also believe that it will allow students to make connections to prior knowledge, because they already have an in-depth background of the US Constitution as it relates to our previous US history curriculum. Students would therefore read the preamble of the Principles of Environmental Justice, and compare and contrast it to the preamble to the US Constitution and the Bill of Rights. At the end of the class, students will come up with their own environmental bill of rights together as a class, which will be posted around the room. It is important that learners



understand that the Principles are unlike the other documents as they are not official U.S. documents, but rather political activist documents *modeled after* our founding documents.

Lesson 4-5: As it relates to politics and economics, students will understand policy issues and why certain policies are made. Students will read and discuss certain cases regarding rulings and EPA findings, and discuss both sides of the issue and whether or not they agreed with final rulings. Students will participate in mock debates that will justify both sides of the issue so they can understand varying perspectives. Students will also be asked to understand the underlying economic issues of environmental justice, by identifying the political and economic incentives individuals or companies have to participate in less than acceptable environmental practices. This lesson will include the jigsaw activity, to allow students to understand the key issues, while also asking that they work in small groups and independently, to be able to draw conclusions and reflect on how the issues pertain to their personal opinion.

Lesson 6: Students will have time both to work on independent research about their own environmental justice issue, while also seeing it play out in the movies. Students will watch excerpts from the aforementioned films and discuss the implications of such films, and the impact that both the characters had on the environment, and the importance of having such films be made to highlight the issues presented in society.

Lesson 7-8: As it relates to understanding the social implications of this issue, I will have students analyze the various committees and individuals who are prominent in defending environmental justice and environmental racism. Students will partake in a final, culminating project that will be in the form of an Environmental Justice Mock Summit. At this time, each individual student will bring to the “summit,” the individual case study that they researched. They will present a 1-minute response about what the case was and the implications of it to the rest of the panel (rest of the class). After everyone’s presented the key cases, the students will have a discussion about what can be done. They will reference groups such as the SEAC and try to come up with similar plans of action in order to create their own committee, or social action group, to change the issues that they’ve studied throughout the unit.

### **Annotated Bibliography:**

#### ***Reading List:***

Checker, M. 2002. “It’s in the Air”: Redefining the Environment as a New Metaphor for Old Social Justice Struggles. *Human Organization*, 61(1): 94-105.

This journal article, published in the journal *Human Organization*, focused on comparing two different environmental social justice organizations, and analyzed how the organizations worked to provide workable strategies for promoting an environmental justice agenda.

“Environmental Justice.” Web. 2/20/2012  
<[http://www.mapcruzin.com/environmental\\_justice.htm](http://www.mapcruzin.com/environmental_justice.htm)>

This is a website that lists various links to both social and environmental justice websites, as well as timely articles about new developments in the environmental justice arena. This should be used for pre-research purposes only, as some of the articles or websites may be inactive.

“Environmental Justice Summit.” Web. 4/1/2012

<<http://www.ejrc.cau.edu/EJSUMMITwelcome.html>>

This is the website for members of the Environmental Justice Summit, and for those interested in the outcome of the summit that took place in 1991 and 2002. These events discussed racial inequalities, case studies, and steps to take to decrease the amount of racial intolerance that is seen as it relates to racial injustice.

“Reporting on Environmental Racism.” *Teaching Tolerance*. Web. 2/20/2012

<<http://www.tolerance.org/activity/reporting-environmental-racism>>

This is a website that gives teachers lesson plan ideas to complete projects related to environmental racism. Particularly, this lesson plan discusses the ways that a mock news broadcast can highlight instances of environmental justice, and how students can use project based learning to analyze such issues.

Smith, Kimberly K. 2007. African American Environmental Thought. Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas. Pp. 187-191

This book took into account the more social and psychological relationship that African Americans have with the environment, which could have a sociological basis as to why there are certain patterns seen in African American communities. For purposes of this unit, it's important to use this as a stepping stone to engage in a discussion on whether or not the relationship between African American communities and the environment is due to a psychological background, or rather, due to the pressures put on these communities due to environmental standards and norms.

“Student Environmental Action Committee.” Web. 3/29/2012

<[www.SEAC.org](http://www.SEAC.org)>

The Student Environmental Action Committee is an organization geared towards high school and college students who try to identify issues of environmental injustice, and are advocates against social discrimination in the environment. A variety of projects have been established across the country.

### ***Teacher Resources:***

Cole, Luke W. and Foster, Sheila R. 2001. From the Ground Up: Environmental Racism and the Rise of the Environmental Justice Movement. New York: New York University Press. Pp. 1-40.

This book analyzed specific case studies of issues of environmental racism and the environmental justice movement. One particular area of interest that should be used for in-class discussion would be the case study about Chester, Pennsylvania, which has similar demographics and social issues.

Westra, Laura and Lawson, Bill E. 2001. Faces of Environmental Racism: Confronting Issues of Global Justice (Studies in Social, Political, and Legal Philosophy) 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

For purposes of this research, there were specific case studies mentioned, such as Titusville Alabama, which could be used to illustrate the effects of environmental racism. This book should also be used to discuss the chapters focused on how various different points of views have stake in environmental issues (ie, community members, business owners, members of the government, etc.)

### ***Student Resources***

*Students will be required to do independent research on organizations currently working towards environmental justice. Readings/sources for students are listed below:*

“The Alliance for a Clean Environment” Web. 6/11/2012

<<http://www.acereport.org>>

The Alliance For A Clean Environment (ACE) is a non-partisan, non-profit grass-roots organization founded by persons living in the greater Pottstown, Pennsylvania area. The mission of ACE is to educate the public and government concerning the effects of exposure to hazardous substances in surrounding communities.

“Arbor Hill Environmental Justice Corporation” Web. 4/15/2012

<<http://www.timesunion.com/communities/ahej/>>

The Arbor Hill Environmental Justice Corporation is an organization that conducts environmental testing, revives green and open space, and serves as an advocate for public health and environmental justice.

"Environmental Justice/Environmental Racism." Web. 2/20/2012

<<http://www.ejnet.org/ej/>>.

The Energy Justice Network is an organization that advocates for clean energy and zero emission and zero waste. They work to provide support and education to communities affected by pollution and waste. They base their organization on the Principles of Environmental Justice, and are located in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

“Norris Square Neighborhood Project, Inc.” Web. 6/11/2012

<<http://nsnp.com/>>

This is a Philadelphia-based program who’s mission is to involve neighborhood children and their families in learning responsibility for self, culture, community, and environment.