RACISM

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sure it's race or is it class or economics?," says Executive Director David Harris. "The answer to that question is that, yes, it is economics and class. But the predominant factor is race."

NORTH CAROLINA ROOTS

Use of the term "environmental racism" dates to 1982, when civil rights leader Ben Chavis led a successful protest against a toxic waste dump planned for a section of mostly-black Warren County.

Marchers criticized industry and local government leaders for selecting the community as a chemical dumpsite — a move they defined as environmental racism.

The movement picked up speed five years later when the United Church of Christ issued a report showing that three out of five black and Hispanic Americans live in communities with one or more uncontrolled toxic waste sites. The report identified race as the key factor in locating hazardous facilities.

More recently, the issue of environmental racism has been propelled into the political spotlight.

In North Carolina, the N.C. Environmental Review Commission has been holding hearings on "environmental justice" to help lawmakers better understand the issue.

In Washington, the White House and federal agencies are working on a new executive order that would require more careful study of health risks involved in government building projects in minority neighborhoods.

Bolstered by renewed attention from government and the media, a growing number of nonprofit environmental groups have placed environmental racism at the top of their agendas.

"There is a growing knowledge that there's a link between social needs and environmental situations," says Jane Preyer, a project coordinator for the N.C. Environmental Defense Fund in Raleigh.

"This issue is part of the changing way we are looking at environmentalism in general."

FORGING NEW LINKS

Pressure from grassroots organizations has led traditional conservation groups to be more responsive to the needs of minority and low-income communities.

In Tyrrell County, for example, The Conservation Fund, based in Chapel Hill, recently joined forces with county leaders to create a non-profit dedicated to environmentally-sound job development.

Last summer, the Tyrrell County Community Development Corp. established a youth conservation corps that trains mostly black teenagers from poor, rural communities to work in state parks and a local wildlife refuge.

Supporters say the presence of the Development Corp. has helped ease pressures that often lead poor and minority communities to accept toxic facilities or massive building projects.

"What we're trying to prove is that you don't need to go either with economic development or environmental preservation. The two can be compatible," says Mikki Sager, program coordinator for The Conservation Fund.

FUNDERS SEEK SOLUTIONS

In 1992, North Carolina foundations gave $5.7 million — or 3 percent of the $222 million in total grants that year — to environmental causes.

Although breakdowns were not available for the amount that went to programs on environmental racism, grantmakers agree that foundation support for the issue is growing.

But while money is flowing, activists say the bulk of support is going to existing environmental groups — not to fledgling grassroots efforts.

"I get a sense from the philanthropic community that, well, you've dealt with the issue of environmental racism. It's a fad," says Angela Brown, a staff member of the Southern Organizing Committee and board member of the Fund for Southern Communities.

Part of the problem is that issues involving race still are thorny ones for foundations.

"The staffs and boards of foundations are generally white and middle class," says Victor De Luca, a program officer with the New York City-based Jessie Smith Noyes Foundation — a leading national environmental funder. "Some of the issues raised by the environmental justice movement contradict some of notions and beliefs that middle class folks have lived by."

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>
> JANE PREYER
> Environmental Defense Fund

Other grantmakers cite the small, localized nature of groups fighting environmental racism as the reason foundations have been slower to support their work than that of state or regional environmental networks.

A QUESTION OF DEMOCRACY

Responding to criticisms that government has also reacted slowly to the issue, Richard Regan, a legislative analyst in Governor Hunt's Washington office, has this to say:

"Like North Carolina, a lot of states are institutionalizing the issue by studying it first. That troubles some folks who say it's been studied for some time. But I think it's a good first step in solving it."

Regan says the federal government is surveying some 500 solid waste landfills — approximately 15 of which are located in North Carolina — to see whether they have been placed in predominantly poor and minority communities.

He believes the results will give citizens the evidence they need to convince lawmakers that they are the victims of environmental racism.

Such evidence is needed, state officials say, because despite growing awareness of the issue, not everyone agrees on the source of the problem.

"It means different things to different people," says George Givens, counsel for the state Environmental Review Commission "For some people it means the siting of controversial facilities in minority or disadvantaged areas. To some it has to do with worker exposure or workplace safety."

Industry leaders insist they use only scientific data when locating hazardous waste dumps or other facilities.

"Our hope is that as the public becomes more educated on the safety, the economic benefit and the environmental responsibility of disposing of the waste we all seem to continue to create, issues like this will be less necessary and people will find it less necessary to mount opposition," says Maureen Allen, a spokeswoman for Browning-Ferris Industries Inc., which operates several waste disposal and recycling plants in North Carolina.

FUTURE CHALLENGES

Observers say the most pressing task facing the environmental justice movement is defining issues in ways that do not alienate potential supporters.

"Initially, the movement was speaking in terms of equity in the sense that there was an inequitable distribution of environmental risk," says Robert Cox, a professor of communications studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill who spoke at recent state hearings on environmental justice.

"Increasingly, those communities dropped the term "equity" because they found they were being misunderstood. They were being labeled NIMBYs [for "Not in my back yard"] by the press and politicians."

Although the number of environmental justice groups seeking support poses a challenge for fonndations, many see the movement as a chance to rethink giving priorities.

"This will be an opportunity for environmental funders to collaborate more with human services and urban funders to do something bigger for the whole sector," says Pam Maurath, assistant coordinator for the Environmental Grantmaker Association in New York City.

Expanding environmental work to incorporate issues of race and class also can boost organizing efforts.

"The state is doing the social change movement a service by having these big, bad facilities come in, because people who have not traditionally worked together are now coming together on the same goal," says Vick of the Blue Ridge Environmental Defense League.

"What we as people of North Carolina need to realize is that if we stop indiscriminate dumping on poor and minorities, its going to help all of us."

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