

# Noted author says black kids' problems linked to environment

By T. KEVIN WALKER  
THE CHRONICLE

Although it affects the air we breathe and the water we drink, environmental racism has taken a backseat to more audacious forms of discrimination.

But an expert in the field warned last week that environmental racism is more serious than a racial slur could ever be.

"As black people, we really have to be involved and educated because our communities are on the front-lines," said Robert Bullard. Bullard is the Ware Professor of Sociology at Clark Atlanta University and the director of the school's Environmental Justice Resource Center.

Bullard told students and faculty at Wake Forest University that landfills, chemical plants, lead smelters and other environmental hazards exist in poor and minority neighborhoods at a disproportionately high rate.

Until fairly recently, Bullard said, existing environmental laws have failed to protect those communities from the serious health risks posed by hazardous sites.

"We have one set of environmental laws. Those laws need to be applied equally across the board," he said. "The Environmental Protection Agency is just now beginning to understand what equal environmental protection is all about."

Race, though, is not always a factor when hazardous facilities spring-up in communities, Bullard said.

Poor white communities, like those in Appalachia, also find themselves victims because they lack economic and political muscle. Economics and class have been factored into environmental racism and has produced a much more far-reaching movement called environmental justice or justice.

"Environmental justice is broader than just race because poor white communities get dumped on too; (however) when poor white folks get dumped on it's because they are poor, but when middle-class blacks get dumped on it's (more racial). We don't find a

lot of cases where middle-class or upper-class whites are being dumped on," Bullard said.

Bullard first became involved in the issue more than 20 years ago. His wife, a lawyer, had filed a suit on behalf of middle-class African Americans in Houston whose community was chosen as the site for a solid waste dump.

Bullard was convinced by his wife to do research for the case and over the years he has been involved in dozens of similar cases.

Bullard showed slides of the Houston dump's entrance, with its neatly trimmed hedges and stately wooden gate. He said private companies and local governments often try to dress-up environmentally-unsafe sites so that they will appear to be harmless.

"You can put a bow on it, dress it up and dress it up, but a garbage dump is a garbage dump," he said.

He has written a number of books on the subject. Bullard's most famous book, perhaps, is 1990's "Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class and Environmental Quality." The book chronicles a bevy of

Bullard also pointed to a more recent example, where grassroots efforts actually thwarted a Japanese company's attempts to construct a hazardous chemical plant in a black community in Louisiana.

The Shintech Corporation promised to bring high paying jobs to the community, but a group of protesters, headed by a retired school teacher and a grandmother, balked at the idea and complained to EPA officials. Eventually Shintech backed down and set its sights elsewhere.

"The environmental justice movement is not anti-jobs; it's not anti-development. It's pro justice and equity," Bullard said.

The South doesn't have a monopoly on incidents of environmental-injustice. It is happening all over the country, Bullard said.

He showed the audience a slide of a high-tech park in the heart of Harlem, N.Y. The park, with its immense artificial-turf football field, lay in a neighborhood that has a balanced mix of middle-class, affluent and low-income people.

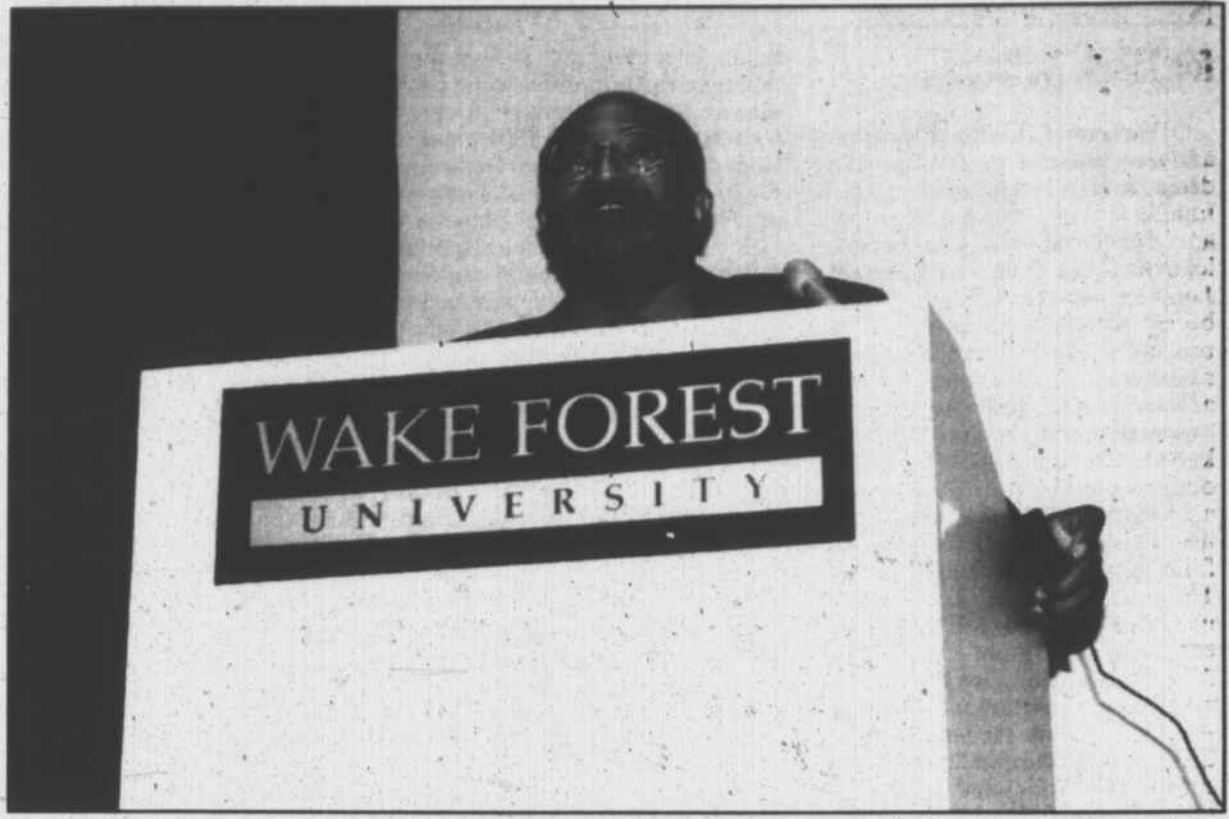
But those who frequent it are getting more than a walk in the park.

"It sits on top of a sewer treatment plant," Bullard said, using his laser pen to highlight pipes that sprout near the edge of the park. "Everybody's children should have a right to play outside on a clean playground."

In the long run, Bullard said, the effects of environmentally-hazardous plants and landfills may be seen in the intellectual and social development of the children who live near the sites and in upsurges in disease rates.

Compounding the situation, Bullard said, is lead poisoning. Lead levels are also higher in poor communities, where many families live in old houses which still have lead pipes.

"A lot of times, our kids are being labeled as dumb and slow learners, but a lot of it has to do with where we live," Bullard said. "Lead poisoning is affecting one-third of all African American children as I speak. We have gotten lead out of gasoline, but we still have lead left in housing."



Robert Bullard spoke to students and faculty at Wake Forest University last week. Environmental Racism is rampant throughout the nation, Bullard says.

But Bullard says environmental injustice doesn't begin and end with hazardous conditions in neighborhoods and homes. It also extends into the workplace, where poor and minority people often work environmentally-hazardous jobs that put them at the greatest risk for serious health problems.

"You shouldn't have to have a trade-off: your health for a good job," he said.

"It's a triple whammy- it's in the neighborhood, on the job and in the home. An environmental problem can also translate into a social problem and an economic problem."

Bullard says that during his early days in the movement, many law suits, including the Houston case, were lost because plaintiffs could not prove that environmentally-unsafe facilities were placed in their communities because they were minorities or poor. Although legal action is the last resort, Bullard says those involved in the movement have successfully used a 35-year-old law to win suits.

"We've become more sophisticated," Bullard said. "Now, we are using Title VI of the Civil Rights

Act of 1964 to prove there is a pattern (in environmental injustice). We don't have to show intent."

In 1994, President Bill Clinton signed Executive Order 12898, which reinforced the '64 Civil Rights Act and environmental laws enacted over the years. Bullard, who served on the EPA National Environmental Justice Advisory Council, joined EPA Secretary Carol Browner, Clinton and other council members in the Oval Office for the signing. The environmental justice center he heads assists communities that are facing environmental threats by, among other things, answering questions and doing research on sites that pose possible dangers.

It is one of four such centers that exist today, all of which are located at historically black colleges and universities.

In the epic war against environmental injustice, Bullard says citizens, especially poor and minority people, must prepare themselves for combat with information and awareness because the battles will take place on many fronts.

"A clean workplace. A decent wage and a healthy community,

these are things we see as rights, not as privileges," Bullard said.

In his latest book, "Just Transportation: Dismantling Race and Class Barriers to Mobility," Bullard tackles yet another aspect of environmental injustice.

He says, one reason why asthma and other respiratory problems plague many poor and minority children is because major highways are often constructed near their neighborhoods.

Like its close cousins, the phenomenon, known as transportation injustice, is not unique to any one part of the country.

It could be the next major legal challenge in the ever-growing environmental justice movement.

"Civil Rights is embodied in transportation beginning with Plessy versus Ferguson," Bullard said. "We are still dealing with Plessy, even though Brown versus the Board of Education overturned Plessy. The closest distance between two points is not always a straight line because highways go around affluent areas, but they can cut straight through our neighborhoods."

**RECHARGE, REUSE, RECYCLE.**

We all know recycling aluminum, plastic and paper is great for the environment. Now you can recycle Nickel-Cadmium (Ni-Cd) rechargeable batteries. These batteries are used in many portable products such as cellular phones, power tools and camcorders, and they can be recycled when they're no longer useful.

IT'S EASY. Just look for the RBC Recycling Seal and for me, Richard Karn, wherever you buy Ni-Cd batteries.

For more information, call 1-800-8-BATTERY or visit our website, [www.rbcc.com](http://www.rbcc.com).

**CHARGE UP TO RECYCLE!**

The Charge Up to Recycle! International spokesperson is Richard Karn of TV's Home Improvement.

**Look for the Seal**

**WAKE FOREST UNIVERSITY**  
BARBOCK GRADUATE SCHOOL OF MANAGEMENT

YOUR **SPRINGBOARD** TO SUCCESS

**MBA**  
Evening and Executive Programs  
Winston-Salem  
Information Session

Thursday, March 25  
5:30 - 7:30 p.m.  
(Formal remarks begin at 6 p.m.)

Wake Forest University  
Worrell Professional Center

Call today! 800.428.6012 or 336.758.4584  
[www.mba.wfu.edu](http://www.mba.wfu.edu)

12 Advantages won't nickel-and-dime you with annoying fees.

1. Your Advantage checks? Free, of course.

2. Add a second checking account with no monthly fee.

3. No fees for official checks, stop payments, money orders or single-signature traveler's checks.

4. Review all your (linked NationsBank) accounts in one consolidated monthly statement.

5. Discounted rates on loans and lines of credit? You got it.

6. Earn more with preferred rates on new CDs!

7. Make purchases the easy way with a free NationsBank CheckCard!

8. Free Personal Advantage Program workbooks that are filled with helpful financial information.

9. Free standard-size safe-deposit box.

10. No monthly fee for NationsBank PC Banking with Managing Your Money.

11. Nearly 7,000 NationsBank ATMs at your service.

**NationsBank Advantage**

**Need A Good Reason To Open A New Checking Account? How About A Dozen?**

A NationsBank Advantage® account offers you everything you want in a checking account, without nickel-and-dime you with fees. With Advantage, you pay nothing for many of the services you use the most: ATMs, telephone banking, overdraft protection transfers, even a second checking account with no monthly fee. Think of it as a reward for your business.

You can qualify by meeting required balances in any of your NationsBank accounts. Just call or stop by for details.

You'll see that the Advantage account really lives up to its name.

**NationsBank**

To talk with us about the rewards of Advantage, stop by NationsBank today. Or call 1-800-338-6386.  
[www.nationsbank.com](http://www.nationsbank.com)

\*Credit subject to approval. \*\*Preferred rates on new standard-term CDs of \$5,000 or more. Interest penalty for early withdrawal of funds. PC Banking with Managing Your Money is a registered trademark of M&A, LLC. NationsBank Corporation subsidiary banks are members FDIC and Equal Housing Lenders. © 1999 Bank of America Corporation.

**THE CHRONICLE**

[wschron@netunlimited.net](mailto:wschron@netunlimited.net)