

**ENVIRONMENTAL EQUITY, ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE:
COALITION-BUILDING BETWEEN THE ENVIRONMENTAL
COMMUNITY AND THE BLACK COMMUNITY**

by

Christina Page

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ABSTRACT

Historically and presently, there has been little Black involvement in the mainstream national environmental movement. The two branches of the mainstream environmental movement, defined here as the incremental reformists and the radical reformists, are comprised mostly of upper-middle class white people. The reasons for the lack of involvement in these groups from people of color in general, and Black people in particular, include social conditioning, economic barriers, exclusionary agenda from the mainstream environmental movement, and the rather low priority that environmental issues have traditionally possessed on the agenda of Black organizations.

However, it is a mistake to conclude that there is little or no concern for or action around environmental issues from members of the Black community. Recent studies indicate that Blacks and other people of color are disproportionately affected in their neighborhoods and in the workplace by various environmental hazards. Thus, in particular regarding hazardous and solid waste dumping, lead poisoning, air and water quality, and environmental hazards in the workplace, many members of the Black community have an immediate and direct concern for environmental issues, and are taking steps to address these concerns.

The majority of Black environmental activism is currently occurring within a third category known as the environmental equity movement. Unlike the mainstream environmental movement, the environmental equity movement's members include people of color and members of disadvantaged communities. The movement often operates on a grassroots level, and stems more from a civil rights base and agenda than a conventional environmental one.

Both the mainstream environmental community and the Black community stand to gain from cooperating and building coalitions around the environmental hazards that are of concern to both groups. In particular, national mainstream environmental groups -- incremental and radical reformists -- and multicultural grassroots groups -- the environmental equity people -- need to establish firm channels of communication and cooperation. National environmental organizations are experiencing increasing pressure from a variety of sources to diversify its membership and staff. Besides answering this call, cooperating with Black and multicultural grassroots groups can help the nationals tap into local perspective on environmental battles and can offer a "reality check" regarding who is being affected by environmental problems, and how they may best be helped.

From the perspective of Black grassroots environmental groups (and other members of the environmental equity movement), coalition-building with national environmental groups can open the door to increased access to technical information and assistance, can add to their political resources, can help a single-issue, grassroots environmental struggle gain continuity and endurance, and can give the members of the community an opportunity to help set the environmental agenda of the 1990's.

If the majority of the nationals and grassroots are going to make the effort to cooperate, however, ultimately both groups must have a commitment to promoting the ideals of environmental equity and justice. The practical benefits are simply not enough to make coalition-building worthwhile unless both parties have an altruistic motivation and commitment as well.

There are, of course, problems with coalition-building. Tokenism, power dynamics, corporate politics that have become an unfortunate part of most mainstream national environmental groups, and blatant or subtle racism all act as barriers to building links between the nationals and the grassroots. Such problems should be given consideration by both parties when cooperation is attempted.

If the environmental movement is to grow and survive into the next century, it must broaden and diversify its members and agenda. It must also address the issues of environmental equity and justice. The first can be at least superficially accomplished by recruiting a greater number of Black people, and other people of color, into the workforce of mainstream environmental organizations without changing the agenda of those groups in any significant manner. And, in fact, many national environmental organizations are focusing their energies on this particular approach. But if any substantive change is to occur, and if both diversity and environmental equity are to be achieved, then there must be a merging of the concerns and efforts of the predominantly white and upper-middle class, mainstream environmental movement, and the multicultural, grassroots environmental equity movement. Merely diversifying, although important, serves only to treat the symptom. Coalition-building is an active attempt to cure the disease.