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## Environmental Activism in Warren County, North Carolina

### **Abstract**

The modern environmental justice movement has stemmed from the activism that took place in Warren County, North Carolina following the decision to construct a toxic waste landfill in a majority black and low-income community. This contributed to the historically unjust political decisions and lack of regulation that has targeted vulnerable populations and forced them to suffer the detrimental health impacts as a result of private and federal company's actions. The activism that took place in the 1980s-90s influenced social and political reform by drawing national attention to the issue of environmental racism. While the United States has come a long way since Warren County, there is still injustice and discrimination that must be addressed in order to protect the health and wellbeing of unprotected and underrepresented communities.

### **Introduction**

The events in Warren County nearly 40 years ago redefined environmental activism and has significantly influenced many socioeconomic, racial, and environmental decisions we make today. It took a catastrophic event that resulted significant mental and physical trauma to many innocent people to grasp the attention of the nation and the government and finally bring justice to those who have been wrongfully targeted as victims of environmental racism. Although discrimination is still very much an issue, the actions taken by those who affected by this incident have forever changed how people of color stand up for their civil rights.

## **Background**

The event that inspired the modern environmental activism movement began in 1978 in Warren County, North Carolina. This predominantly black and low-income community was intentionally victimized as large quantities of liquid contaminated with PCBs, a well-known carcinogen, were taken from the Ward Transformer Company and intentionally dumped in the roadside ditches of these neighborhoods. McGurty (2007) describes, “This violation of the Toxic Substance Control Act (TSCA) continued for nearly two weeks until 240 miles of road shoulders were contaminated”. This act was purposefully ignored because there had been the recent creation of regulations that posed a fee for the proper disposal of hazardous substances such as PCB’s. The state of North Carolina was responsible for the clean-up of the state-owned drainage ditches and had the option between two areas to build a waste site. According to Banzhaf et al. (2019), the choices were between a privately owned foreclosed piece of land in Warren County with no local government or a public landfill in Chatham County with an active council that allowed for the public to voice their concerns. The demographics were also comparably different, “Warren county was 60 percent black and 25 percent of its families were below the poverty line...Chatham County were only 27 percent and 6 percent” (Banzhaf et al., 2019). After brief consideration and with little hesitation, Warren County was chosen as the site for the toxic landfill without regard for its shallow water table which would indefinitely contaminate the resident’s drinking water and local food sources.

This decision was not taken lightly by the resident of Warren County who actively protested and made their voices heard. This was one of the first examples of a modern form of activism, but this was not the first example of people of color standing up for their rights. In 1968 the Memphis Sanitation strike was “the first time African Americans had mobilized a

national, broad-based group to oppose what they considered environmental injustices” (EPA, n.d.). During this strike Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. advocated for safer working conditions and better pay for sanitation workers. Following the start of construction on the Warren County landfill in 1982, activists mobilized and gained national attention due to their nonviolent protests and use of human barricades in order to stop further construction. These actions resulted in a much different outcome as “Over 500 environmentalists and civil rights activists were arrested and the protest was unsuccessful in halting construction” (EPA, n.d.). These were the first arrests in U.S. history over the construction of a landfill. Although the residents of Warren County were unsuccessful in their fight to protect themselves from the toxic waste surrounding their community, they were able to bring light to this form of environmental racism. Skelton and Miller of the National Resource Defense Council (2016) claim, “The street protests and legal challenges mounted by the people of Warren County to fight the landfill are considered by many to be the first major milestone in the national movement for environmental justice.” The actions of these victims helped coin the term environmental racism and lead to national action to combat this life-threatening issue.

## **Economics**

The location of environmental sacrifice zones is not coincidental, the major influence of these sites being the economy. As mentioned before, illegal actions such as dumping have been deemed a more cost-effective method of disposal than paying the proper mandated fees. There is a direct correlation between the demographics of a community and the amount of pollution in that area. The TRI or Toxic Release Inventory is a national database that records the number of emissions through air pollution and landfills that are released by both private and government-maintained facilities. Further analysis of these records observed a pattern, “the share of TRI

facilities operating in tracts with per capita income below \$21,000 is 63 percent” (Banzhaf et al., 2019). This supports the case that polluting operations are highly concentrated in low-income communities. Nearly  $\frac{2}{3}$  of all major polluting factories are located in communities where people make less than the current suggested minimum living wage of \$21,355 in Warren County (Living Wage, 2019). People living in these areas statistically do not have the financial ability to move away from these pollutants or to file for legal action. These large corporations and government owned facilities also take advantage of the lack of education in these communities knowing there will be limited resistance and attention to those who are suffering the consequences of their actions. According to an Action Oriented Community Diagnosis published in Warrenton Warren County in 2001, “the racial makeup of the Warren County school system’s student body was 74% African American, 20% White, and 5% Native American...the dropout rate was 3.8%, the third highest rate in the RTRP” (Aselage, 2001). The study also acknowledged that the overall performance was at or below the state average, demonstrating the inequity of counties with higher diversity rates. The lack of education within Warrenton depicts how residents are more vulnerable to misinformation and dishonesty regarding the impacts of what is happening within their community.

### **Health Impacts**

In order to know the health impacts of toxic pollutants on a community, one must know what the pollutant consists of. The contaminants introduced in Warren County were PCBs, “polychlorinated biphenyls...PCBs are a class of commercially synthesized chemicals, and consist of 209 different congeners” (Christensen & Paul, 2011). Congeners are a chemical constituent that gives alcohol physiological effects. Exposure to this chemical compound can lead to physical illness symptoms including: “conjunctivitis, swollen eyelids, and chloracne all

over the body...pigmentation of nails, skin, and mucous membranes, increased sweating of the palms, severe headache, swollen joints, feelings of weakness, and in half of the victims, chronic bronchitis” (Hens & Hens, 2017). While these symptoms are more visible and obvious to report, there are also many psychological, cognitive, and mental effects that are more serious and life-threatening. According to the same study, “exposure of pregnant women to PCBs showed mental and physical retardation in their offspring...potential for these molecules to interfere with DNA and cause damage” (Hens & Hens, 2017). This demonstrates the intergenerational impacts of exposure that leads to a vicious cycle to health impacts within communities. Minority and low-income communities often lack proper resources such as medical treatment, mental health and developmental experts which allows for many of these conditions to be left untreated. Present day, people living in these sacrifice zones are dying of COVID-19 at some of the highest rates in the U.S., proving that this is a current and ongoing issue that is plaguing the lives of innocent people.

### **Legacy and Impact on Present**

Following the events in Warren County, many coalitions and organizations were formed, and various laws and regulations were put in place. On a local government level, “Delegate Fauntroy asked the General Accounting Office (GAO) to review hazardous waste siting decisions in U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Region 4” (Environmental Justice History, n.d.). A study was completed and determined that 4 hazardous waste sites were located in communities where at least a quarter of residents were low-income and majority black. This was the first major study conducted by a federal agency that supported the claims of environmental injustice. At a national level in 1992, President George Bush Sr. called “for the establishment of an Environmental Equity Working Group, headed by EPA Administrator

William Reilly, and the initiation of federally sponsored meetings on environmental justice with community leaders to seek solutions” (Environmental Justice History, n.d.). This was the first significant action taken by a sitting president since the Warren County crisis. Two years later President Clinton made similar efforts by issuing executive orders calling for justice for low-income and minority peoples. Although these actions have not solved the issue of environmental racism as seen by current events, taking initiative at a national level is a step in the right direction for those affected.

Outside of government action, the leaders of the uprising justice movement created coalitions, protests, and various conferences in order to gain traction on this issue. Some prominent examples include the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in 1991 which resulted in “the ‘Principles of Environmental Justice’ and the ‘Call to Action’, two foundational documents of the environmental justice movement” (Skelton & Miller, 2016). During this time, minority activists also made an effort to become allies with historically white, mainstream environmental groups such as the NDRC and Sierra Club in order to enlighten their focus on racial environmental issues, not just conservation efforts. The product of this was these organizations creating their first justice initiatives and hiring more diversity onto their boards. Public action has made arguably the most impact on this issue through bringing national attention to the affected communities, which is currently happening today in areas such as Flint, Michigan. Little state or federal government action has been taken since the water crisis began in 2016, but most of what the public knows about the crisis sprang from community activism and efforts from the residents themselves.

## **Conclusion**

The environmental injustice that occurred in Warren County, North Carolina was the event that forever changed the face of environmental activism. Not only had the focus of environmental issues shifted from wealthier, white activists to poorer black communities, but nationwide action was taken as a result of protests and legal action. This movement has inspired countless organizations and modern movements, but also proves how far we still have to go in order to achieve racial and environmental justice for those who have suffered this cruel discrimination. It is crucial that environmental racism is not ignored and that people of all levels of power advocate for stricter protections and rights for minority populations. In order to make a lasting change intergenerational support and youth involvement is key, and with the capabilities of modern technology and media, spreading information in mass quantities is easier than ever. The power of change is in the hands of the people and it is this generation's societal obligation to put an end to all forms of environmental injustice.

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