

The Community VOICE

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Environmental justice protects our planet

By Andy Lee Roth August 4, 2011 11:41 am

In 1982, police arrested over 500 residents of Warren County, North Carolina. After weeks of nonviolent protests failing to stop the state's plan to dump PCB-contaminated soil in their community, residents of Shocco Township, and concerned neighbors from across the county, literally laid down in the road to prevent trucks from delivering the toxic soil to the landfill. These community members helped launch a national movement for Environmental Justice.

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) defines Environmental Justice in terms of "fair treatment" — meaning no group of people should bear an unfair share of negative environmental consequences — and "meaningful involvement" — the principle that people can participate in and influence decisions that may affect their environment and health.

None of us want a toxic landfill in our community. But decades after Warren County's protest, people of color and the poor remain much more likely to live in communities targeted to host facilities with negative environmental impacts, including increased rates of asthma, birth defects, and cancer.

Today, closer to home, residents of Daly City's Midway Village, West Oakland, and North Richmond continue long-term, grassroots-struggles to create healthy homes, healthy jobs, and healthy neighborhoods. Their efforts to hold industrial polluters accountable are motivated by first hand experience of the connection between the environment and public health.

The term "environment" traces back over four centuries to the French word "environ," which means "to surround or encircle." This original meaning shapes how we understand the environment today: We act IN an environment, we try to do good FOR it, and we protest actions that do damage TO it.

All three meanings reflect a view of the environment as something "out there," separate from us. To challenge that understanding, Michael Bell, a sociologist at the University of Wisconsin, suggests we regard the INvironment. Because we breathe air, drink water, and eat food, the environment is quite literally in our bodies.

Many readers of The Community Voice are fortunate enough to live where the air, water and soil are relatively clean. In contrast with Warren Country or North Richmond, we do not face the direct, life-threatening health risks of industrial pollution. We also benefit from local agencies, such as Sonoma County's Department of Health Services, committed to planning and offering programs that promote good health. Nonetheless, we still have a crucial stake in protecting the environment and nurturing healthy communities.

We act most powerfully when we recognize two kinds of connection: First, we have the connection between the environment and our own health. For example, developing city-wide bike lanes encourages bicycling. Compared with driving a car, riding a bike promotes physical health and reduces air pollution. Furthermore, increased opportunities for safe biking improve the mobility of people who cannot afford to own a car.

Second, we have the connection between our community and our community's neighbors. Our commitment to justice is most robust when it includes communities beyond our own. We have to show up and join their struggles for healthy environments.

Sometimes this is as easy as signing a petition to promote bike paths. Other times, the commitment to justice requires us to lay down on the asphalt, on behalf of other communities, just as residents of Warren County did to protect their neighbors in Shocco Township. Either way, by recognizing connection, we will be better prepared to act when the opportunity arises.

Andy Lee Roth is a sociologist and board member of the Media Freedom Foundation. He has written two previous Community Voice columns on water and power (February 2008) and green consumerism (October 2007).

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