

Instructor Notes

Environmental Justice in Chester, PA

Environmental justice is a sensitive social issue as well as an environmental concern. The goal of this exercise is to increase participants' awareness of environmental justice issues through discussion and role-playing.



The activity is written for workshop participants and may need modification for classroom use.

Suggested Background Reading

- An Introduction to Solid Waste Management and the Environment

National Science Education Standards for Grades 5–12

Science as Inquiry

- Abilities Necessary to Do Scientific Inquiry
Communicate and defend a scientific argument. During a role-play debate on environmental justice issues in Chester, PA, students learn to review information, summarize data, speak clearly and logically, construct a reasoned argument, and respond appropriately to critical comments.

Science in Personal and Social Perspectives

- Environmental Quality
Many factors influence environmental quality. Students investigate the roles poverty, politics, and economics have on the presence of major waste-treatment facilities in Chester.
- Natural and Human-Induced Hazards
Human-induced hazards present the need for humans to assess potential danger and risk. While humans design many changes in the environment that benefit society, students learn that these changes also come with some risk. Group discussions analyze who benefits from Chester's waste-treatment plants and who is exposed to the plants' associated health risks.

Materials

Per class



- *Laid to Waste* video
This video is available from the University of California Extension, Center for Media and Independent Learning, 2000 Center Street, Fourth Floor, Berkeley, CA 94704; 510/642-0460, fax 510/643-9271.

Procedure Notes and Outcomes

Part 1: What Is Environmental Justice?

Begin by having participants write a definition of environmental justice. What comes to mind when they hear this phrase? Do they experience any specific feelings? Have they heard this phrase before? Give the class several minutes to jot these ideas down.

Part 2: A History of Chester, PA

Present the following historical background on Chester, PA, to the class. This information will help participants understand the video they will be watching in Part 4. Historical information plays a particularly important role in understanding the environmental problems taking place in this town.

Located in Delaware County, about 15 miles southeast of Philadelphia, this city of 43,000 people has the highest poverty and unemployment rates in the state. Once an industrial boomtown, Chester hosted numerous large-scale shipbuilding facilities, oil refineries, and automobile plants. In the 1940s and 1950s, many people, including African-Americans from the south and immigrants from Eastern Europe, flocked to Chester to find well-paying jobs. However, between 1950 and 1980, 32% of the jobs in Chester disappeared and the economy collapsed. Most of the upwardly mobile residents left the city, leaving behind a largely poor and minority population.

New industries moved in, but not the kind many of the residents planned for or wanted. Chester now houses four large hazardous and municipal waste-treatment facilities. Daily, trucks from Pennsylvania, Delaware, and as far away as Virginia roll through Chester's West End, delivering thousands of tons of waste. Claiming that the waste facilities are disrupting their lives and polluting the air that they breathe, the residents formed the Chester Residents Concerned for Quality Living (CRCQL).

Nearly all of Delaware County's municipal solid waste and sewage is treated at the Chester facilities. In addition, 90% of all monitored air pollutants released in the county are from Chester-area sources. The city's autoclave facility is the largest in the country and receives medical waste from Ohio, Virginia, Maryland, Delaware, New York, and New Jersey. In March 1998, *George* magazine dubbed Chester "Toxic Town U.S.A."

The poverty rate in Chester is about 25%, which is three times the national average. About 65% of Chester residents are African-American, many of whom suffer from chronic respiratory problems, high blood-lead levels, and other illnesses. Chester has a mortality and lung cancer rate that is 60% higher than the rest of Delaware County. It also has the highest percentages of low birth rate and infant mortality in the entire state.

However, the relationship between pollution and the health problems seen in Chester residents is not without controversy. Poorer communities often have high levels of infant mortality and certain diseases because of high rates of teenage pregnancy, smoking, drug abuse, and other lifestyle habits.

Some question the extent to which racial discrimination was involved in the placement of the waste facilities. Common Pleas Judge Ed Zetusky was a Chester solicitor and councilman who was involved in the “Trash War” of the late 1980s when Westinghouse and the city were competing for a single Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) permit. “What people forget,” he said, “is when the request came to consider the Westinghouse plant, the West End of Chester was predominantly white; it wasn’t black.”

In any case, Zetusky said studies have shown that the plants in question don’t come close to emitting the amount of pollution that was present in Chester when the city enjoyed its industrial heyday a few decades earlier (Pennsylvania Environmental Network Website).

Part 3: Assigning Roles

Using the following master, make enough photocopies for each participant to have one card. Cut apart and fold all the cards and have each participant randomly choose one. The roles will be used in Part 5 of this activity. Not all roles are presented in the video, but students will gain a general understanding of all of the roles from watching it.

ROLE 1	ROLE 2	ROLE 3	ROLE 4
Leader of local citizen's action group, Chester Residents Concerned for Quality Living (CRCQL)	Local City Council Representative	Owner/operator of a local restaurant located on the truck route to Chester's waste facilities	Local parent with 2 children who lives 1 mile from the biohazardous waste facility
ROLE 5	ROLE 6	ROLE 7	ROLE 8
Local resident in desperate need of employment	Lawyer specializing in environmental justice issues	Public Relations Representative for Westinghouse	Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection official

Part 4: Laid to Waste

Before showing the 55-minute *Laid to Waste* video, allow participants to ask any questions about the history of the town. This video examines the impact of the waste-treatment facilities located in Chester. The story is told through the perspective of local residents and activists who organized the production of this documentary.

Instruct participants to watch the video from the perspective of their assigned roles. Remind participants that in Part 5 they will meet with members of other groups and must be able to explain their perception of the Chester situation. Then show the video.

Part 5: Role-Play

Have participants form three or four debate groups with members representing each of the roles on the role sheet. Participants should discuss their assigned viewpoint based on the *Laid to Waste* video. Emphasize that participants should allow each member of the group to express his or her assigned point of view. The phrases listed on the Activity Instructions should only be used as a guideline to lead the discussion. During the discussion, participants should consider whether any other members of the group agree with their views and what some of the major sources of disagreement in the group are.

After the small group debates, have participants form groups by roles. For example, have all the council members get together. Again, be sure participants allow each member of the group to comment on his or her “debate group” experience. Some questions that may spark group discussion include the following:

- Were your comments heard and accepted by the group?
- Did you feel that your opinions were in the majority or the minority?
- Did listening to any of the other members of the group persuade you to change your stance on any issues? If so, which ones?

Part 6: Group Presentations

Have each role group prepare a 5-minute presentation of its members’ experiences in debate group meetings. Each group should then select one member to present the prepared material to the rest of the class.

Part 7: Now...What Is Environmental Justice?

Now that your participants have discussed the concept of environmental justice, have each one silently reread his or her personal comments from Part 1. How have their opinions changed? What would they add or delete from their initial comments? Use the following information to conduct a class discussion.

The situation in Chester highlights environmental justice, a social issue that has come to national prominence in recent decades, which is also known by the more inflammatory

term, environmental racism. The concern centers on the claim that poor and minority communities frequently bear a disproportionate burden of polluting industries and waste facilities when compared to more affluent, white communities. A second claim is that minority communities suffer more adverse health effects than the general public due to the presence of these facilities.

Chester, PA, isn't the only place where people have felt victimized by pollution because of their race or poverty. Altgeld Gardens, an African-American community in Chicago, and "Cancer Alley" in Louisiana are other examples.

Beginning in the 1980s, many communities of color organized to protest what they saw as environmental racism. The movement got national attention in 1982 when minority groups protested the locating of a hazardous-waste landfill in a predominantly black neighborhood of Warren County, NC. This landfill did ultimately open.

Prompted by the protests, District of Columbia congressional delegate Walter E. Fauntroy requested that the government's General Accounting Office (GAO) conduct a study of four major hazardous-waste dumps in the South. The GAO found that three were located in largely minority neighborhoods. African-Americans made up 52%, 66%, and 90% of the population in those three communities. In contrast, African-Americans made up between 22% and 30% of the host states' populations.

Other studies followed to support the claim of environmental justice activists. A landmark 1987 study by the United Church of Christ's Commission for Racial Justice concluded that "race was the most significant factor in determining the location of hazardous-waste facilities." The study concluded that communities with hazardous-waste facilities have twice as many residents of color as communities without hazardous sites. Then in 1992, the *National Law Journal* published a study showing that environmental laws were enforced more aggressively in white neighborhoods than in minority communities. Also in 1992, a People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit convened and adopted 17 Principles of Environmental Justice. (See <http://www.nacce.org/1992/summit2.html>.)

In February 1994, President Clinton responded to the concerns of environmental justice advocates when he signed Executive Order 12898, which instructs all federal agencies to incorporate environmental justice considerations into their activities. That same year, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) set up its Office of Environmental Equity to investigate claims of environmental injustice. However, the success of environmental justice initiatives and legislation is uncertain. Agency efforts to implement the environmental justice order have varied considerably. HUD's written strategy, for example, is nearly 30 pages long. The Labor Department's is three pages. Others mainly repackaged existing programs and labeled them environmental justice initiatives.

Most Americans want a clean environment and social justice. However, the environmental justice movement contend that charges of racism in the locating of polluting industries are misguided. Some argue that studies using different methods often show that poverty—not race—is the strongest factor determining who will live next to a polluted area. Others argue that most of the polluting facilities were already in place before a significant minority population moved into the area. Poor and minority populations moved in later because they were attracted by industrial jobs and lower housing costs.

Although environmental justice advocates emphasize the GAO findings, the conclusions that can be drawn from this and similar work may have some limitations. One reason is that the GAO study used 6-digit zip codes to classify the racial makeup of the communities studies. Critics of this practice claim these areas may be so large that they may disguise considerable heterogeneity. A facility located in a largely white subarea may nevertheless be interpreted as minority because the larger area in which it is located contains many minorities.

Such studies also reveal nothing about the ways or extent to which facilities might pose a hazard to human health. A 1999 report, *Toward Environmental Justice: Research, Education and Health Policy Needs*, concluded that research generally has failed to correlate the health problems of minority and poor communities to environmental stressors such as chemicals, noise, or air pollution. As mentioned earlier, however, it might be argued that lifestyle factors can contribute to increased health problems in poor communities.

Whenever people are faced with a proposed waste-disposal site in their neighborhood, their response usually is “Not In My Backyard!” This response, called the “NIMBY” principle, is understandable. People fear for their families’ health, the appearance of the neighborhood, and the maintenance of their property values. Since the early 1980s, local community groups have petitioned their state and local governments to prevent waste-disposal facilities from locating in their neighborhoods. In many cases they have been successful. When unsuccessful, many well-off residents simply move, leaving their now less desirable property for lower-income people, who remain because they cannot afford to relocate or who move in because the property values are lower.

Some argue that the NIMBY principle, no matter how well intentioned, can even be bad for environmental protection because it can prevent the construction of new “environmentally safe” landfills and force waste-disposal companies to operate at already contaminated sites that are frequently located in poor neighborhoods.

Others contend that waste facilities can result in much needed jobs for depressed communities. A study by the Competitive Enterprise Institute (CEI) claims that municipal solid waste can be an economic benefit to residents. Angela Logomasini of CEI explains that “many communities choose to host regional landfills, agreeing to allow waste imports

in exchange for free trash disposal and a cut in the landfill profits. These agreements have enabled communities nationwide to cut taxes, repair and upgrade infrastructure, give pay raises to teachers, build schools and courthouses, as well as close and clean up old, substandard landfills" (Competitive Enterprise Institute Website).

According to David Mastio of the Detroit News, "The EPA environmental justice push...is opposed by a growing bipartisan coalition of mayors, governors, congressmen and business groups." These critics contend the regulations would stifle development in inner-city minority areas and instead push those jobs to places where whites make up the majority (The Science and Environmental Policy Project Website).

Robert Bullard recommends shifting the burden of proof from the community to the polluter: "Environmental justice would require the entities that are applying for operating permits for landfills, incinerators, smelters, refineries, and chemical plants, for example, to prove that their operations are not harmful to human health, will not disproportionately affect minorities or the poor, and are not discriminatory." Critics argue that this requirement would curtail any new development in inner-city areas because it involves proving a negative (Leone, de Koster, Barbour, and Petrikin).

No easy answers exist on the issue of environmental justice. How participants react or feel about the issue will reflect individual political opinions, social or ethnic background, and class. Americans will likely debate the environmental justice issue for many years to come.

Extension

Have participants research other cases of environmental justice or NIMBY.

References

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University of Michigan Environmental Justice Resource Center Website. Environmental Justice Case Studies. Toxic Waste in Chester, Pennsylvania. <http://www.umich.edu/~snre492/polk.html> (accessed April 27, 2001).

Activity Instructions

Environmental Justice in Chester, PA

Environmental justice is a sensitive social issue as well as an environmental concern. The goal of this exercise is to increase awareness of environmental justice issues through discussion and role-playing.

Procedure

Allow all members of the group to present their points of view. The phrases listed below should only be used as a guideline to lead the discussion. During the discussion, consider whether other members of the group agree with your view and what some of the major sources of disagreement in the group are.

Use the phrases below as a guideline for discussion.

- Chester began as a predominately white community.
- The waste facilities are not the riskiest issue in Chester. Teen pregnancy and drug abuse are much more serious problems.
- The Chester Residents Concerned for Quality Living (CRCQL) office has been broken into and vandalized with racist symbols, and tires have been slashed in the parking lot. White environmental groups rarely face this type of opposition.
- Is the concentration of plants in Chester driven by race or poverty?
- Would it be racist to put a trash plant that needs water on the river if African-Americans live by the river?
- Local, state, and federal government agencies have no authority in this situation. It's up to the people of Chester to instigate change.
- Is there a point where you should probably not burden a community with additional facilities?
- Where else are we going to put waste facilities?