Abstract

Environmental racism has long been an issue within the United States and globally. Over time, the environmental movement has focused on a myriad of issues including conservation and protection of biodiversity as well as the social and health implications for exposure to environmental injustices. The modern environmental justice movement which is commonly considered to have begun in 1982 in Warren County, NC, sparked a national outcry to the disproportionate exposure rates of toxins along racial lines. Many environmental justice efforts reflect similarities to the Civil Rights Movement; this is not surprising as many of the prominent figures of the Civil Rights Movement also fought for environmental justice. The U.S. government has largely responded to issues of environmental justice and environmental racism very similarly to the Civil Rights Movement; either a complete denial of the existence of the issue, or a militarized response.

Introduction

Environmental Justice (EJ) has a long history that many argue began with Indigenous Peoples responding to colonization. For this presentation, we are examining the Modern EJ Movement which is defined as beginning in 1982 in Warren County, NC at a protest in response to dumping toxic waste in a predominantly Black community.

The Civil Rights Movement reached its peak in the 1950s and 60s. It is characterized as including direct action (such as sit-ins and marches) as well as engaging many facets of community members, including students. Many of the environmental injustices in our history disproportionately impact communities of color. The movement utilized two primary methods to bring about legal change: 1. Suing recipients of federal funds and 2. Filing administrative complaints with agencies such as the EPA. In order to more effectively address these injustices, communities utilized pre-existing environmental protection laws as well as laws that were intended to protect against racial discrimination beginning in the 1990s (Huang, 2012). However, after the case Guardians Ass’n V. Civil Service Commission, 463 U.S. 582 (1983) when the court ruled that proof of intentional discrimination was required, efforts were shifted to filing administrative complaints as they were more effective.

The Civil Rights Movement has similarities to this strategy in terms of pointed efforts as well as sweeping efforts. Some of the more commonly known legal cases include 1954’s Supreme Court ruling in Brown V. Board of Education which ruled that public schools could not be segregated as it was unconstitutional. This ended what was commonly referred to as “separate but equal” public schools. This case was followed a few years later by The Civil Rights Act of 1964 which had a much broader effect as it included provisions to end employment discrimination, and segregation of public spaces (Anti-Defamation League, 2022).

Government Responses

The U.S. Government has responded to both the Civil Rights Movement and the modern EJ movement in similar manners. For example, at the march from Selma to Montgomery state troopers responded to the large mass of people with nightsticks and whips. At the Warren County, NC protests police responded with a disproportionate police presence and targeted arrests including of Rev. Ben Chavis, the central figure of the response, who was pulled over and arrested for driving too slowly.

Results and Conclusions

Legal Parallels

Many of the environmental injustices in our history disproportionately impact communities of color. The movement utilized two primary methods to bring about legal change: 1. Suing recipients of federal funds and 2. Filing administrative complaints with agencies such as the EPA. In order to more effectively address these injustices, communities utilized pre-existing environmental protection laws as well as laws that were intended to protect against racial discrimination beginning in the 1990s (Huang, 2012). However, after the case Guardians Ass’n V. Civil Service Commission, 463 U.S. 582 (1983) when the court ruled that proof of intentional discrimination was required, efforts were shifted to filing administrative complaints as they were more effective.

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Methods

The parallels between the Civil Rights Movement and the modern EJ movement are clear. In order to further develop an understanding of the two movements, first, the responses to protests were documented from recent years (such as the Flint, MI water crisis). The response of government agencies has remained largely unchanged over the decades but has more sophisticated weaponry. From today the responses by government agencies was traced to what is commonly considered the start of the modern EJ movement. Many of the important figures of the Civil Rights Movement were central in the modern EJ movement. Figures such as Rev. Ben Chavis, Rev. Joseph Lowery, and Rev. Leon White.

Additional Resources

• National Museum of African American History and Culture. https://nmaahc.si.edu/
• Environment and Society https://www.environmentandsociety.org/mml/environmental-justice-resources-online

References


Figures