

City Care

Historical and Contemporary Lessons from Environmental Justice Coalition-Building

ELIZABETH GRENNAN BROWNING

ABSTRACT

This article examines the historical roots of the challenges facing contemporary climate justice advocacy campaigns, and draws lessons from this history regarding how to more comprehensively address racial equity in resilience planning and environmentalist advocacy. As the modern US environmental movement gained momentum in the 1970s, fault lines developed between environmentalists and civil rights advocates. A key source of tension was debates over whether urban environments were deserving of the same kinds of environmental protections as more traditional and pristine forms of “nature.” African Americans’ prioritization of economic equity alongside legal equality also led to a critical dialogue about economic growth and the economic externalities of regulating industry and safeguarding the environment. This article draws on environmental justice and environmental history scholarship as integrated lenses for analyzing racialized debates during the early years of the modern American environmental movement.

I trace how public deliberations played out regarding the first Earth Day in 1970, and the City Care Conference of 1979—the first national conference that brought together major environmental groups such as the Sierra Club and civil rights organizations such as the National Urban League to deliberate the linkages between racial equity and environmentalism. Finally, I connect these historical analyses to recent data from the Indiana University Environmental Resilience Institute’s Hoosier Life Survey in order to better understand contemporary racialized disparities of climate change vulnerability, and relatedly, of climate change opinion.

KEY WORDS

- environmental justice
- environmental racism
- civil rights
- US environmental movement
- coalition-building
- vulnerability
- climate change opinion

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Over the course of the past year, Black and Brown communities have experienced disproportionate burdens from the health and economic effects of the global coronavirus pandemic, and the national pandemic of police brutality. Now perhaps more than ever in our lifetimes, we have seen the contours of structural racism rise violently to the surface. These intertwined crises have led to a moment of racial reckoning, of accounting for the long-standing effects of racial inequality in our communities, and how we discuss these issues in our public forums and teach about them in our schools. By structural racism, I mean to recognize how both white privilege and racial oppression against BIPOC communities manifest not just in individuals' behaviors, but in our public policies and our public infrastructure, broadly defined—from access to quality education, clean water, uncontaminated environments, and safe housing that protects families from the hazards born of anthropogenic climate change, including extreme heat and flooding.

Environmental justice scholarship offers a comprehensive, holistic view of the many layers of racialized injustices that plague communities of color. (Sze 2020). These environmental and public health problems did not emerge in situ, but rather bear the mark of historical legacies of public policies and practices that facilitated unequal treatment, including Jim Crow segregation laws, restrictive covenants, racial zoning, redlining, and the use of eminent domain in urban renewal measures (Pulido 2017). Climate justice advocates must examine the history of coalition-building between civil rights and environmental organizations to better understand our current challenges and devise more effective agendas and strategies for creating just and resilient communities.

In this article, I analyze coalition-building between

civil rights activists and environmentalists during the 1970s, as the modern environmental movement gained momentum in the United States. The 1979 “City Care” national conference is an especially important benchmark to measure both the progress and continuing challenges of environmental justice movements in the United States. I then draw on data from the recent Indiana University Hoosier Life Survey (conducted by a team of social scientists in 2019 to better understand Hoosiers' opinions about climate change, mitigation, and adaptation) in order to underscore the importance of approaching climate change resilience practices from a lens of racial equity.

City Care, 1979: Coalition-Building Among Civil Rights and Environmental Advocates

The origins of the modern environmental movement are clear from examining the roots of the first Earth Day on April 22, 1970. Senator Gaylord Nelson of Wisconsin was the main force in bringing the national teach-in together, but his success was only made possible from the broader national cultural and political context at the time. Rachel Carson's publication of *Silent Spring* in 1962 had stirred a widespread sense of concern about the post-World War II chemical regime and its effects on wildlife and habitats. An acute precursor to Earth Day's activism was a set of environmental disasters in 1969: first, a major oil spill off the coast of Santa Barbara in January, and second, the polluted Cuyahoga River in Cleveland catching fire in June. Growing concern about pollution and biodiversity loss led to a bipartisan commitment to environmental protection, with Republican President Richard Nixon signing major pieces of environmental legislation in the early 1970s, including the National Environmental

Policy Act, and the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency (Rome 2013).

However, as the environmental movement got under way, fault lines quickly formed around issues of race, class, and the dilemma of determining which environments were deserving of protections. Whitney M. Young, Jr., Executive Director of the National Urban League (a civil rights and urban advocacy organization founded in New York City in 1910), pointed to these fissures in his syndicated newspaper column several days after the first Earth Day celebration. Young explained that the recent wave of environmentalism cohered around Americans' concerns about their "quality of life." He was concerned that white people who had suddenly discovered the problem of pollution were mostly focused on improving the plight of the middle class. Noting that people living in the lily-white refuges of white flight—America's suburbs—sought to preserve their clean air and water, Young flipped the definition of pollution to emphasize Blacks' unique concerns which often went unremarked by white liberal environmentalists: "if their town is segregated, if it bars blacks from buying homes, or has zoning laws that keep low-income people out, it is polluted in a far graver sense."

Young expressed hope that the environmental campaign would succeed in cleaning up the nation's air and water, but worried that this would all just become another fad, and an additional distraction from the most important issues that American society needed to confront: racial injustice. He pointed to how the civil rights movement's white allies had become distracted by the anti-Vietnam War movement, and the campaign for campus democracy led by the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). Environmental activists, Young argued, needed to consider the social ecology of America: "if the

relationship between men and fishes has come to be such an important topic, then surely the relationship between blacks and whites is even more pressing." He went on to explain, "We must be concerned about air pollution from auto exhausts and from factory smokestacks. But we must also be concerned with the far more insidious pollution of poverty that poisons the lives of 30 million Americans. We should be concerned about chemical deposits in the food we eat, but also about the millions of Americans who go hungry; whose diets are perched on the thin line of malnutrition" (Young 1970).

Several years after the first Earth day, in September 1973, evidence of the racialized schism in the environmental movement was again brought to the public's attention by Vernon E. Jordan, who succeeded Young as the National Urban League's Executive Director. Jordan reflected on the ten-year anniversary of what was a watershed moment for the civil rights movement—the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, organized by A. Philip Randolph. On August 28, 1963, the March convened a quarter of a million people at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC, in a profound demonstration for equal rights. It was the highwater mark of civil rights advocacy, and helped lead to the passage of the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964. But, as Jordan warned, the great progress that advocates had made to secure African Americans' legal rights was only a precarious

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victory because Blacks still did not have economic freedom, among many other persisting racial inequalities. Echoing Young's concerns from several years before, Jordan called out "the fair-weather friends who have moved on to other causes—pollution, ecology" and various other short-lived trends. Jordan implored these former allies to return to the cause of racial equality. As Blacks' civil rights continued to suffer, those who were most closely devoted to the cause of racial equality sometimes saw the environmental movement as a zero-sum game, with urban communities of color losing out. (Jordan 1973).

This persisting divide between civil rights and environmental advocates was the focus of a groundbreaking coalition-building national conference held in April 1979 titled "City Care," which brought together representatives from the National Urban League, the Sierra Club, the Urban Environment Conference and Foundation, and several federal agencies to discuss environmental health hazards facing communities of color, as well as environmentalists' expanding definition of the "environment" to account for urban spaces (EPA 1979). In describing the goals of the conference, Vernon E. Jordan, Jr. emphasized that "groups working for constructive change...in creative coalition efforts" needed to approach their collaboration from a space of mutual understanding, and that allies needed to acknowledge and respect their partners' distinctive priorities. The priorities articulated by Jordan and other civil rights advocates for the City Care conference remain relevant for today's conversations about climate justice and resilience.

- **Prioritizing Economic Equality through Job Creation.** Jordan critiqued slow- and no-growth economic theories, arguing that perhaps Blacks' only chance to gain economic parity was "through expanding the national

economy and getting a bigger slice of that growth." He offered solar energy as an example of a successful story of uniting environmentally sustainability with economic opportunity and job creation for the urban poor.

- **Ensuring Racial Equity in Environmental Regulations.** Jordan criticized political demands to curtail federal oversight of environmental regulations, reminding his audience that Black neighborhoods were "most affected by pollution," and Black workers were "of-ten locked into the most hazardous jobs that are most liable to result in health and safety risks." The notion of "environment" needed to expand, Jordan argued, to account for "all external factors affecting people—economic and social, as well as physical." Creating a more sustainable environment needed to include finding solutions for poverty, unemployment, and unsanitary housing conditions in American cities.
- **Cleaning up environmental toxins and contaminants in minority neighborhoods.** Jordan identified children's lead contamination from polluted air and auto exhaust as a uniquely urgent concern for low-income neighborhoods. As the City Care Conference was under way in Detroit, the Three Mile Island nuclear accident occurred near Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, spurring skepticism about nuclear energy among environmentalists gathered at the conference. Jordan suggested that nuclear energy was not the best path forward because of the potential disproportionate health impacts that it presented for poor communities.
- **Fighting for Energy Justice.** Jordan underscored the inequities of the nation's energy consumption patterns: "Poor people use less energy but spend more of their incomes for it."

The spiraling cost of utilities exacerbated the economic vulnerability of low-income minorities, and degraded their quality of life as well as their physical safety. Jordan identified energy justice as “an issue this emerging coalition can run with,” and a “key test of whether the concerned groups can move beyond rhetoric to effective advocacy for the urban poor.”

Jordan’s key takeaways from the City Care conference remain front and center in today’s climate justice activism. In fact, they map directly onto the NAACP’s contemporary Environment & Climate Justice Program’s main objectives: reducing harmful emissions, advancing energy efficiency and clean energy, and strengthening community resistance and livability (NAACP 2021). As we’ve seen over the past few years, the environmental movement has increasingly reckoned with its history of racism, including mainstream organizations’ neglect of environmental justice issues and exclusion of marginalized minorities. (Finney 2014, Taylor 2016). We have begun to witness some small degrees of change. For example, the Sierra Club elected the first African American president of the organization—Aaron Mair in 2015—and in 2020, the first Latinx president, Ramon Cruz. However, there is clearly still much work to be done to ensure that voices from low-income communities of color are represented in environmental organizations’ and government agencies’ leadership ranks. Nonwhite researchers, naturalists, and outdoor enthusiasts have been critical to disrupting stereotypes within environmental research and activism and to ensuring that BIPOC researchers lend their expertise to public policy (Thompson 2020). New appointees in the Biden Administration, including Shalanda Baker as Director of the Office of Minority Economic Impact in the Department of Energy, recognize that the energy system operates with racial

disparities across the board, from the economic impact of utilities pricing to pollution from energy production and waste. (Baker 2021). We must approach resilience planning in all its facets with a critical reflexivity that keeps us attuned to the question of “resilience for whom?”—which will remind us to prioritize fairness, environmental justice, and equitable access to resources. (Cutter 2016).

Former Sierra Club president Aaron Mair pointed to Wendell Berry’s 1989 book *The Hidden Wound* as a valuable resource for reflecting upon how America’s democratic institutions and social organization have resulted in the unintended degradation of both the environment and humanity, and the importance of focusing on the intersection of race and environmentalism. When Berry started writing this book in 1968 during the civil rights movement, he said he was trying to understand his own identity with respect to the “crisis of racial awareness.” Berry’s book attempted to allow him to reckon with his ancestors’ history as slaveholders, with Berry’s own personal history growing up on a farm in the segregated South, where he developed a commitment to environmentalism. In doing so, he links racism and environmental degradation: “the psychic wound of racism has resulted inevitably in wounds in the land, the country itself.” (Berry 1970).

Hoosier Life Survey Findings: Climate Justice in Indiana

For over a century, the Midwest—and Indiana in particular—has been mythologized in the popular imagination in the United States and beyond as the “heartland” of the country, a quintessentially American place, where rural and small-town values have long abided, and the nation’s so-called core identity appears intact and pristine. If we look closer, however, we see that this idea of a pristine, isolated, heartland is a myth. (Hoganson 2019).

Even with the understanding that this cultural construct of the Midwest has never been true—and that the Midwest has always been deeply interconnected with a global network of places—it is important to recognize that this mythology is still very important, because it affects how people think about this region, and how residents understand their communities and their own identities. The longstanding heartland imagery is especially poignant when it comes to understanding Midwesterners' climate change beliefs. While many onlookers, and even Midwesterners themselves, invoke the idea of a flyover country with an inordinate amount of skepticism about the scientific consensus surrounding anthropogenic climate change, social science research has helped upend this narrative, and reveal that Midwesterners are a much more diverse lot than we generally assume.

In late 2019, Indiana University's Environmental Resilience Institute conducted the Hoosier Life Survey to help Indiana's policymakers and citizens better understand how Hoosiers think and learn about climate issues, what steps they are taking to mitigate climate change risk, and what tools they would like to better adapt to the effects of climate change in the future. The survey had nearly 3,000 responses (a response rate of 29.4%), and represented a cross-section of the state, with responses from 90 of Indiana's 92 counties. (Houser and Sandweiss, et al. 2020). The survey design deliberately oversampled for members of racial minority groups to ensure that their viewpoints were represented in the data.

Lower-income households and communities of color face higher environmental risks from pollution and toxins, and these disproportionate burdens are also felt when it comes to climate change impacts, including extreme weather events such as heat waves and flooding because

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these populations do not have the resources to adapt their lifestyles or homes to mitigate these risks. And these factors then snowball into other adverse health effects—including Covid-19's disproportionate rates of infection and death among people of color. The Hoosier Life Survey has provided important insights into how the social variables of race and economic status (among others) affect Hoosiers' personal experiences of climate change impacts, and their perceptions of climate risks. A majority of Hoosiers think climate change is harming people in the US right now, and 69% believe climate change will hurt people in Indiana. However, respondents of color were twice as likely as white respondents to agree that climate change will harm them a great deal and 25 percent more likely to agree that climate change is harming people in the US right now. Respondents from lower-income Hoosier households were also more likely to report that they believe climate change will harm them personally a "great deal," compared to higher-income households.

These signs of higher concern about climate change also extended to questions about whether climate change is happening. Seventy-six percent of Black Hoosiers and 86 percent of non-Black people of color agree that climate change is happening compared to 72 percent of white Hoosiers. Furthermore, responses about policies to mitigate climate change impacts revealed similar patterns. African Americans are more likely to

live in urban heat islands, and thus have a more difficult time escaping extreme heat. In the survey, Black respondents were about twice as likely as white respondents to support measures that would reduce heat-wave risks, including public funding for air conditioning, health services, and text-based early warning systems during heat events. BIPOC communities' disproportionate experiences of vulnerability to the effects of climate change have in part led to both their higher rates of belief in anthropogenic climate change, and support for mitigation and adaptation policies..

CONCLUSION

The monumental challenge that lays before our collective society is coming to terms with the difficult but unavoidable reality that responding to climate change requires major societal changes—and these changes must address the historical legacies of racial inequality. It is not sufficient to say that engineering technological fixes will save us. Even more important is the need to address our social perspective, and how we interact together as a human society and with the nonhuman world.

In order to build our society's resilience to climate change, we must reconsider our social values and norms that support over-consumption and perpetuate inequalities in access to environmental goods and environmental decision-making. The fragile and yet integral coalition-building between environmentalists and civil rights activists in the 1970s reminds us that our current battles for climate justice must establish room for understanding the unequal burdens that climate change inflicts on BIPOC communities. Protecting those most vulnerable to our climate crisis requires that we first understand how we came to where we are as a nation today, and take accountability for a past that has long hindered moving forward toward a resilient future.

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