

Top 10 Environmental Issues Affecting Urban America



Earth Day turns 40 this year, but many African-Americans have never seen environmentalism as a priority until recently. With Van Jones and Majora Carter becoming household names, green is now the new black. Here is a list of 10 environmental justice issues affecting the black community that should be given full attention by all Americans.

1. Air pollution

Air pollution is a serious problem in communities of color, as poor air quality can contribute to a host of health problems.

Smog contributes to outdoor air pollution which has become a serious problem in urban communities of color. According to a 2002 Environmental Protection Agency report, 71 percent of African Americans live in counties that violate federal air pollution standards, compared to 58 percent of the white population. Breathing in too much bad air can not only result in higher blood lead levels and eye problems, but also asthma, which is triggered by high quantities of particulate matter. Blacks are three times more likely to die from asthma related problems than whites. Also, poor air quality increases the risk of sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS) and other serious respiratory problems.

2. Industrial Sites and Illegal Waste Dumping

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Most communities of color live near power plants, oil refineries and waste management facilities. As a matter of fact, according to the report [Air of Injustice: African Americans and Power Plant Pollution](#), 68 percent of blacks live within 30 miles of a coal-fired power plant, as compared to 56 percent of whites. — the distance within which the maximum effects of the smokestack plume are expected to occur. Industrial waste that is not disposed of appropriately (or legally) can get into the water system and land used for housing and agriculture. Improper waste dumping creates a host of health problems, ranging from asthma to lung cancer.

3. Mercury Exposure

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Fish is an important source of animal proteins and other nutrients, but it can also contain a high percentage of mercury emissions generally from incinerators, coal-burning power plants and other industrial sites located near water resources. Over one third of all mercury pollution in the country come from these sites. Since people of color are more likely to live near industrial sites and eat more fish than whites, they are more likely to have higher levels of mercury exposure. Mercury consumption can increase the risk of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS), learning disabilities in children and other respiratory problems.

4. Water Safety

Water is considered a fundamental human right, but many communities of color lack safe drinking water, swim near waste-contaminated beaches and live near polluted flood waters.

Access to clean, safe water is considered a fundamental human right essential for a healthy populace and environment. However, many communities of color lack safe drinking water, swim near waste-contaminated beaches and live near polluted flood waters. In addition, larger numbers of communities of color live in urban areas, where city water systems are more likely to be fluoridated than in suburban and rural water systems. Studies show that fluoridation chemicals cause increased blood lead levels, premature births, learning disabilities and tooth discoloration in children. Poor water quality is also attributed to higher rates of complications related to kidney failure and diabetes among blacks.

5. Transit Justice

Public transit is used at a higher rate by more people of color and low income communities than whites. While there are environmental and economic benefits to public transit, there have been complaints made by transit justice activists in cities around the country recently about fare hikes, service cuts and lack of responsiveness to customer complaints.

Public transit is used at a higher rate by more people of color and low income communities than whites. While there are many environmental and economic benefits to taking buses and trains, recent urban policies around the country have made life more difficult for those who depend on public transport to get around. There have been complaints made by transit justice activists in cities around the country about fare hikes, service cuts and lack of responsiveness to customer complaints. In addition, many public transit systems still use diesel vehicles, which emit carbon particulate matter and nitrogen oxides that develop into smog and contribute to asthma and other health problems.

6. Food deserts

Communities of color are more likely to live in “food deserts” — areas where communities lack access to supermarkets and other sources of affordable, nutritious foods necessary for maintaining a healthy diet. Food deserts play a major role in poor health and environmental degradation.

Last year, the “U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) released a study”: <http://www.ers.usda.gov/Publications/AP/AP036/#2009-6-25> of the nation’s “food deserts” — areas where communities lack access to supermarkets and other sources of affordable, nutritious foods necessary for maintaining a healthy diet. According to the report, 2.3 million Americans live more than one mile from a supermarket and do not have access to a vehicle. The report also notes that minorities and lower-income communities are often affected, as “urban core areas with limited food access are characterized by higher levels of racial segregation and greater income inequality.” It is not uncommon to go into these communities and the only food outlets found are fast food restaurants and convenience stores stocked with products that are highly processed and genetically modified – both characteristics that contribute to poor health and environmental degradation. Food deserts have been a major contributor to obesity and other related health problems in these communities. Activists across the country have attempted to address access to healthy food with increasing farmers’ markets and community gardening.

7. Urban Green Space

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As more skyscrapers and industries find homes in urban areas, less green space becomes available, especially for communities of color. Although there have been [recent challenges](#) to land use, increasing open spaces in these communities can be beneficial in many ways, including providing more recreational opportunities, improving air and water quality, developing community gardens and creating great scenic views for nature buffs. Regarding health concerns, in a study reported by the [American Journal of Preventive Medicine](#), researchers found that black and low income children who have more access to green space had lower rates of obesity than children whose activities were limited to streets and sidewalks.

8. Lead poisoning

Lead poisoning is possible the most damaging environmental injustice.

Black and poor children are eight times more likely to be poisoned by lead than those from higher income and white families. According to the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#), over 80 percent of all homes built before 1978 in the country have lead-based paint in them. The older the house, the more likely it is to contain lead-based paint as well as lead in surrounding dust and soil. Because they are more likely to be poor and to live in older housing, black children are the obvious victims. Lead poisoning contributes to a [host of problems](#) including learning disabilities, iron, calcium and Vitamin C deficiencies.

9. Climate Change and Basic Living

The growing climate change problem means that people of color and low income communities will soon have to pay more for basic necessities.

According to [The Climate Gap: Inequalities in How Climate Change Hurts Americans & How to Close the Gap](#), a report released last year by the Program for Environmental and Regional Equity at the University of Southern California, the growing climate change problem means that people of color and low income communities will soon have to pay more for basic necessities. As it stands, low-income and minority families already spend as much as 25 percent of their entire income on just food, electricity and water, which is higher than what most whites spend. There have been recent efforts by activists to lower some of these costs by installing compact fluorescent light bulbs (CFLs) in homes in many high risk communities. These bulbs are designed to fight environmental

pollution by reducing electricity use by 75 percent and lasting an average of 10 years. A 25-watt CFL can create as much light as a 100-watt incandescent bulb.

10. Heat in the City

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Many recent studies show that climate change will increase heat-related deaths in urban areas in the next few years. Cities tend to be on average 10 degrees warmer than suburban areas. Since most people of color live in inner cities, they are twice as likely to die in a heat wave, and suffer from more heat-related stress and illnesses. Nationally, there have been discussions by policy makers and activists on ways to increase central air conditioning and swimming pools in these communities.

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