

## Making Environmental Justice Whole<sup>1</sup>

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### **Abstract:**

*In response to the National Sierra Club's "End Commercial Logging" initiative, the Santa Fe Group of the Sierra Club commissioned a report to document traditional forestry practices and investigate the environmental and social justice consequences of such a policy for Indo-Hispano communities in northern New Mexico. This paper is one chapter of the soon-to-be-published report. Considering the idea that environmental health, social justice, and economic justice are fundamentally intertwined in the modern context, with no one part more important than the others, I argue that we should reflect that reality through a broader and more holistic approach to environmental justice and environmental protection. This approach addresses social and economic justices as integral components, embraces a diversity of people and perspectives to solve our environmental problems, and recognizes that cycles of environmental abuses, social inequity, and poverty are inextricably interconnected and perpetuated by the same forces behind our global political economy. Decisions affecting impoverished or ethnic communities which are dependent on local natural resources – like the communities described here – should be considered within this broad framework of environmental justice. A unique and particularly salient local dimension to this story is that many of the "public" lands at issue were once community-owned land grants that have been almost completely lost due to the government's failure to honor international treaties after the U.S. conquest 150 years ago. Rightful ownership remains an open question. I provide a few historic examples of a broader environmental justice.*

*"It is important for the poor and people of color, and for those whose allegiance is to them, to enter this debate to urge that social and economic justice and democracy be established as measures of sustainability as valid as clean air, clean water or recycled paper products."*

Catherine Lerza, *Defining Sustainable Communities*

### **Introduction**

One of the most unique enclaves of culture and tradition in the U.S. quietly persists in the rural communities of northern New Mexico and southern Colorado. In terms of political and cultural history, this region is the northernmost extension of the vast Latin American geography that stretches south to Tierra del Fuego. Even into the high-tech information age of this new millennium, a land-based Indo-Hispano village culture thrives here against all odds.

For over four centuries these isolated ranching and farming communities endured the rigors of frontier life in a far corner of the Spanish kingdom, generations of raiding by nomadic tribes, rebellions, wars and conquest, the vagaries of weather, dispossession of community lands, and desperate poverty. Beyond simple survival this distinctive culture remains a dynamic and defining presence today. After generations of continuity and adaptation, rural villagers have a powerful native sense of belonging, a rooted knowledge, and a reverence for their homeland that has

become rare in the modern world.

Although rich in culture and history, local Hispanics have not shared in national economic prosperity throughout most of the twentieth century. While the United States enjoyed the strongest economic boom in its history around the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, New Mexico remained the poorest state with the highest rate of "food insecurity" in the nation. The largely rural, north-central counties are among the poorest in the state (NMDL 2000; Nord et al. 1999; USBC 2001).

Perhaps the most important piece of the story, and one that makes northern New Mexico unique in this country, is the inescapable fact that many of the local "public" lands discussed in this report, controlled now by the U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management, were once community-owned land grants set aside by the Spanish and Mexican governments to provide basic natural resources for local residents. These land grants have been dismantled and almost completely lost over the last 150 years through what has been called "a history of chicanery" readily

facilitated through the machinations of the U.S. legal system. Rightful ownership remains an open question (Ebright 1980). Impoverished rural families still rely on the meager economic buffer provided by traditional access to federal lands. Further restrictions upon or eliminations of access to basic resources would have a devastating economic effect on already-struggling local families and could begin to unravel the centuries of continuity in one of the most unique cultures on the continent.

### **Justice for All**

During the last decade, the environmental movement has been forced to recognize the fact that people of color and the poor have been left out of the dialogue about environmental issues and often fall through the cracks of environmental regulations. While we were busy worrying about the pressing problems of dwindling wildlands, dammed, over-appropriated, and polluted rivers, and threats to biodiversity, poor people got poorer and continued to bear the brunt of toxic industry.

In 1990 the Albuquerque-based SouthWest Organizing Project shook things up with a powerful letter to ten big national environmental organizations known as the “Group of Ten”: Environmental Defense Fund; Environmental Policy Institute/Friends of the Earth; Izaak Walton League; National Audubon Society; National Parks and Conservation Association; National Wildlife Federation; Natural Resources Defense Council; Sierra Club; Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund; and The Wilderness Society. Signed by 105 activists from throughout the country, the letter charged the Group of Ten with ignoring environmental problems in communities of color and ignoring ethnic and class discrimination within their organizations (Sierra Club 1993; SWOP 1990).

The now-legendary letter stirred things up for a while. A few organizations responded commendably by broadening their approach to at least consider environmental justice issues, established environmental justice committees, and tacked the phrase “environmental justice” onto their mission statements. Twelve years later, little has really changed. Some environmental groups make a genuine effort; others just pay lip service; in general, environmental justice tends to fall to the bottom of the priority list. The more pressing demands of “environmental protection”

usually take precedence, and addressing environmental justice is a byproduct at best. Some populations and some issues continue to fall through the cracks, as they always have.

Public health impacts from environmental conditions or hazardous waste or discrimination in the implementation and enforcement of environmental policies are unquestionably critical problems, but environmental justice is about more than that. It is also about widening the discourse on environmental issues to include the perspectives, values, and concerns of the usually ignored populations of people of color and the poor. Ben Chavis, one of the founders of the environmental justice movement, said ten years ago, “Environmental racism is [among other things] the history of excluding people of color from the leadership of the environmental movement” (Eileen Gauna 2000, 4). These days you don’t have to be poor or ethnic to suffer the effects of environmental injustice. It is also about enormous power imbalances in policy decision-making that have more to do with class divisions, what one does for a living, and whether one lives in an urban or a rural community (McLain and McDonald 2000).

In 1992 then Sierra Club Executive Director Michael Fischer called for “a friendly takeover of the Sierra Club by people of color,” and optimistically declared that “the struggle for environmental justice in this country and around the globe must be a primary goal of the Sierra Club during its second century” (Sierra Club 1993, 51).

Despite the intentions for the best that may be at work, a *de facto* exclusion still holds true. For example, at meetings on environmental issues in New Mexico, a state where the Anglo population is still a little less than half, I am often the only person of an ethnic or working-class background among dozens of other environmentalists. In my experience, a limited perspective and a generally narrow range of discourse within the environmental movement are obvious results of the lack of diversity. Embracing the concerns of people of color and the poor, including rural communities dependent on natural resources, would expand that perspective and that discourse to include the issues of social and economic hardships faced by people of color and the poor every day. What do these issues have to do with the environment? The mainstream environmental movement resists the idea that protecting the environment has anything to do

with social justice and social change. But I believe that in the broader long-term perspective fundamental social change, not lawsuits and confrontation, is what will save the planet. An anthropologist at a conference I recently attended suggested that there will soon be no nature to protect unless we address social justice issues to share the world's resources more equitably (Parajuli 1999). Protecting natural ecosystems will become a moot point, in other words, if the poor of the world continue to be left farther and farther behind, struggling for their shrinking slice of the natural resources pie. As Deeohn Ferris put it, "In the metaphor of a rapidly sinking ship, we are all in the same boat, and the people of color are closest to the hole"(Jeanne Gauna 2000, 6).

Even worse, the world's poor are often blamed for environmental destruction and the fundamental problem of runaway population growth. "But it takes no special math to figure out that the 10 percent of American families who control 72 percent of this country's wealth are probably responsible for consuming a huge percentage of the world's resources on their own, with very little assistance from the poor," says Catherine Lerza of the Defining Sustainable Communities project of the Tides Foundation (1994). The American middle class certainly consumes its fair share as well.

"The mainstream environmental movement has long been averse to dealing with issues of race, class and gender," says Lerza (1994, 1, 4). Dealing with these issues is not the dreaded coalitional approach, says Eric Mann, "but rather strategy – for no environmental theory can be devoid of an economic theory and no economic theory can avoid issues of class structure and class conflict." Mann goes on to say that claiming neutrality on issues of race and class, often heard in environmental circles, by default perpetuates the injustices of existing economic and social arrangements (Lerza 1994, 2).

Law professor Eileen Gauna frames environmental justice as "a challenge that all should be concerned about in a society that is committed to the ethical precept of basic fairness" (2000, 4). Providing support and economic and social safety nets for those less privileged has long been part of our national culture. In the context of this report, access to public lands resources is part of the safety net that keeps some families from destitute poverty or displacement to some

poor inner-city *barrio*. Assuring access to forest resources represents no compromise to the health of the land; rather, it is an opportunity to improve the land, reduce fire hazard, and strengthen local capacity for sustainable stewardship.

Beyond issues of basic justice, keeping traditional practices and local voices out of the debate does not make for workable conservation, says María Varela. "We cannot afford to have ecosystems taken care of by weekend or summer stewards, ivory tower researchers, corporate conservation warriors, and urban-based policy makers," she says:

Sustainable environmentalism develops people to use the best of ancient sciences and meld them with the best of modern technology. It values and takes great stock in the observations and experiences of rural people who live on and watch the land. It creates partnerships from within and outside the community in order to bring the best thinking possible to solve problems. But the result is awesome to envision (Varela 1995, 9; McLain and McDonald 2000; Raish 2000).

Environmental justice and environmental protection cannot be whole, then, unless they address social and economic justice as integral components, embrace a diversity of people and perspectives to solve our environmental problems, and recognize that cycles of environmental abuses, social inequity, and poverty are inescapably interconnected and perpetuated by the same forces behind our global political economy.

### **Environmental Justice at Work**

Concrete examples of applying broader principles of environmental justice exist in northern New Mexico. The Sustained Yield Forest Management Act of 1944, part of the New Deal plan to stem debilitating poverty, was, in effect, a pioneering effort in environmental justice many decades before the term even existed. The act designated five forest units throughout the country and mandated for those units not only sustainable forest management but management that provided income for poor, forest-dependent local communities. Perhaps because of the long and continuing tradition of natural resource dependence in this region, of the five units initially established only one in Oregon, and the Vallecitos Unit on the Carson National Forest in northern New Mexico, still exist. Despite the ongoing

struggle to stay the course through legal fights and shifting federal regulations, Vallecitos still aspires to its original dual mission (David Benavides in *La Jicarita News* 2001, 6).

The Rio Grande Land project was another New Deal-era attempt at revitalizing the economic lives of Pueblo and Hispano villagers in northern New Mexico by expanding their recently lost land base. Under the Land Program of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, 1934-1942, the project acquired about one million acres of marginal lands that were set aside for the exclusive use of these communities for subsistence livestock grazing (Dinwoodie 1986). A small percentage of those areas have since been converted to reservation land but the rest remain federal lands with no special access provisions.

A third example is the return of 48,000 acres of U.S. Forest Service land to the Taos Pueblo Tribe in the 1970 Blue Lake Act. Taos Pueblo's traditional possessory right to their sacred Blue Lake and surrounding lands were protected under Spanish and Mexican rule and should have been honored under the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo along with Hispano land grants, but the Forest Service illegally seized the area in 1906. After generations of struggle, Congress, with Richard Nixon's strong support, finally recognized that the land had been wrongfully taken and restored it to the Tribe for traditional and religious use (Gordon-McCutchan 1995).

## Conclusion

Environmental justice issues and remedies can take many forms. The Sustained Yield Forest Management Act the remedy was to address the economic needs of struggling, forest-dependent communities by assuring them long-term access to traditional-use forest resources (although more needs to be done). The Rio Grande Land project attempted to reinvigorate local economies by partially restoring the land base that had been unjustly pulled out from under local communities. The Blue Lake Act corrected a historic injustice that had been committed against the Taos Pueblo people by returning the land to its rightful owners.

The question of logging and woodcutting on public lands in northern New Mexico stirs up the very same thorny questions as these three examples but also offers the same opportunities to set things right. The

proposed policy to end all "commercial" woodcutting in this area would have an impact on a predominantly poor Hispano population as negative as any discriminatory environmental policy that threatens the health and welfare of disenfranchised populations in any other context. Beyond the narrow economic consequences, denying local communities traditional-use access to fundamental natural resources would undermine the social and cultural fiber that holds together this centuries-old Hispano culture. Following a guiding principle of broad-minded, holistic environmental justice, we should choose instead to remedy historical injustices and foster greater social and economic equity by assuring access to public lands resources for some of the poorest members of our society through the community-based approach to sustainable forestry described throughout this report, fostering greater ecosystem health as well.

"Given the key role they are fated to play in the politics of an ever-shrinking world, it is past time for environmentalists to face their own history, in which they have too often stood not for justice and freedom, or even for realism, but merely for the comforts and aesthetics of affluent nature lovers," says social ecologist Tom Athanasiou. "They have no choice. History will judge greens by whether they stand with the world's poor" (Athanasiou 1998, 304).

## Notes

1. This work is an excerpt from *La Vida Floresta: Environmental Justice Meets Traditional Forestry in Northern New Mexico*, by Ernest Atencio, in press at the Santa Fe Group of the Sierra Club.
2. Ernest Atencio is an applied anthropologist, writer, and activist who works on environmental, social justice, and public lands issues in his native northern New Mexico. The author gratefully acknowledges local community members and a long list of others who provided interviews, information, and assistance for this project. Thanks also for the generous sponsorship of the Santa Fe Group of the Sierra Club, whose members recognized the need for this report and footed the bills. Mr. Atencio can be contacted at: PO Box 537, Arroyo Hondo, NM 87513; (505) 776-1882; eatencio@newmex.com.

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