

Why the Larger Climate Movement Is Finally Embracing the Fight Against Environmental Racism



The Philadelphia Energy Solutions Refining Complex after catching fire on June 21, 2019 Matt Rourke—AP

BY **JUSTIN WORLAND**

JULY 9, 2020 6:23 AM EDT

The 2019 fire at the Philadelphia Energy Solutions refinery started with a simple failure: one leaky elbow pipe in a 1,400-acre facility covered with pipes, tanks and industrial towers. Within a few hours last June, enough gaseous propane had seeped into the air to ignite the facility into a fiery hellscape with an explosion hurling human-size pieces of industrial equipment

into the air and shaking the ground miles away. Workers rapidly shut down the facility, which had for decades converted crude oil into usable products.

The workers escaped with only a few minor injuries, but the facility had already spent decades killing its neighbors in South Philadelphia. The refinery—the largest on the East Coast, dating back to the early days of the oil industry in the 19th century—was single-handedly responsible for more than half of the city’s cancer-causing air toxics, according to a report from the city. And it contributed to the 125 premature deaths that the American Thoracic Society and New York University say result from air pollution in Philadelphia each year. The South Philadelphia area surrounding the facility, where 60% of residents are Black, has some of the highest asthma-hospitalization rates in the city, where asthma numbers top those in all but a few U.S. cities. The explosion “was kind of a wake-up call for the rest of the city,” says Derek S. Green, an at-large city-council member in Philadelphia. “If you’re living there every day, the pollution is something that you were constantly dealing with.”

Eight months later and five miles away, a group of Black voters from across Philadelphia filed into a bland conference room of a downtown office building for a **focus group on climate change organized by Third Way**, a center-left Washington, D.C., policy think tank. The warming planet ranked low on the attendees’ list of priorities, at least at first, but the conversation turned passionate when it came to the pollution in their own backyard.

“You come out and it’s hard to breathe on most days,” said one attendee. Another noted that in Southwest Philadelphia, “all the African Americans grew up with asthma.” The Energy Solutions refinery drew near universal condemnation. “All y’all did was put out the fire,” said another attendee, pointing to the government response. “You didn’t do nothing for those thousand houses who have to breathe in this air. It’s messed up.”

These dynamics are nothing new. For decades, environmental-justice advocates in the U.S. have worked to bring attention to the heightened environmental risks faced by communities of color: higher levels of lead exposure, higher risks of facing catastrophic flooding, and poorer air quality, to name just a few. But progress has been slow on the national stage as the most powerful groups

fighting for environmental rules, not to mention government leaders, have largely ignored them.

Today, that conversation is changing. With partisanship at record levels and Republicans still skeptical of climate rules, environmental activists have realized they need a big coalition to pass legislation, and that means getting the enthusiastic backing of people of color. To do that, they are not only talking about the environmental hazards faced by people of color but also putting their concerns at the core of their campaigns.

“Silo activism is exactly what the extremists want,” the minister and activist William J. Barber II told me ahead of a speech at a climate event last year. “Historically, the only way we’ve had great transformation in this country is when there’s been fusion of all coalitions.”

COVID-19, which is killing Black Americans at twice the rate of their white counterparts in large part because of environmental issues like pollution-caused asthma and heart disease, has only advanced the urgency for climate backers.

And so as the U.S. approaches an election and, potentially, a once-in-a-decade opportunity to pass climate legislation, finding a way to address centuries of systemic environmental racism has emerged as a key concern. The stakes are high: failure means not only that people of color will continue facing disproportionate environmental hazards, but also the possible failure of efforts to reduce emissions and take humanity off a crash course with dangerous global warming.

Long before the phrase I can’t breathe became a rallying cry for Black Lives Matter activists protesting the deaths of Black people at the hands of police, environmental-justice activists warned that pollution was choking and killing people of color in the U.S.

They had good reason: study after study in the 1970s and 1980s emerged to document how minority groups—and Black people in particular—suffered disproportionately from a slew of environmental hazards, and resonated with

many who saw this in their own backyards. The research was crystallized in a landmark 1987 report called “Toxic Wastes and Race.” Across the country, race was the single greatest determining factor of whether an individual lived near a hazardous-waste facility, which in turn contributed to a range of ailments. Three of five landfills were in predominantly Black or Hispanic neighborhoods, the study found, affecting 60% of Americans in those groups.

Scholars explained the problem simply as environmental racism: discriminatory housing policy throughout the country forced people of color into the same neighborhoods, and racist lending practices meant land in those neighborhoods was worth less just because minorities resided there. This made the land ripe for polluting industries, which need large spaces for their facilities and were able to get local buy-in in part by arguing they created jobs. Moreover, the companies that owned and operated these facilities knew that minority groups largely lacked the political power to stop them.

With this in mind, hundreds of early environmental-justice advocates gathered in Washington, D.C., for the first People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit, in 1991. Over four days, the attendees discussed their experiences with environmental racism, from widespread cancer on Native American reservations where nuclear waste was dumped to higher-than-average asthma rates in predominantly Black communities near industrial sites. Going forward, their mission would be to put these concerns at the heart of environmental policy; they drafted 17 principles to reflect that. “That first People of Color conference is where environmentalism and conservationism were redefined,” says Richard Moore, co-coordinator of the Environmental Justice Health Alliance.

For a few years afterward, progress seemed to come quickly. In 1992, the 17 principles were distributed to thousands of environmental activists from around the globe who gathered in Rio de Janeiro for the U.N. Earth Summit. In subsequent international meetings, poorer nations would use the principles to argue for climate action that addressed their needs. In the U.S., President Bill Clinton signed an Executive Order in 1994 requiring agencies like the Environmental Protection Agency and Federal Emergency Management Agency to consider environmental justice in their policies.

But when it came to the domestic conversation around new laws to address climate change specifically—already emerging as the defining environmental challenge of the time—some of the national environmental groups paid the activists little attention, fearing that concerns about racial justice would distract from efforts to reduce emissions. “We were taken for granted,” says longtime environmental-justice leader Beverly Wright, executive director of the Deep South Center for Environmental Justice, “like a gnat that just wouldn’t go away.”

The philosophy—focus first on stopping greenhouse gases and worry later about how to fix the disparate socioeconomic effects—still guides many climate activists to this day, but thus far it has proved a mistake. Not only did ignoring environmental-justice concerns leave people of color behind, but the decision also alienated a bloc whose support would have helped pass climate legislation.

The George W. Bush presidency saw little progress on climate issues, but when President Barack Obama took office in 2009, national environmental groups sensed an opportunity. To capitalize on it, they partnered with some of the country’s biggest corporations and lobbied for cap-and-trade, which would have set a limit on carbon-dioxide emissions and required companies to pay if they exceeded it. This was, in many ways, a smart compromise: cut emissions without alienating businesses that had the ear of the GOP.

Environmental-justice activists were furious. Not only were they left out of the discussion, but they argued that cap-and-trade would worsen the plight of people of color by allowing Big Industry to continue polluting minority communities so long as they cleaned up their act elsewhere. That argument, largely theoretical at the time, has since been backed up by research, including a 2016 study by researchers from four California universities that showed the state’s cap-and-trade program reduced the greenhouse-gas emissions that cause climate change but did nothing to alleviate the toxic pollution facing communities of color.

With those concerns in mind, the environmental-justice activists, along with many other progressives, actively fought against a federal cap-and-trade system. “We were brought in after they made their decisions,” says Wright.

“Whatever decision they made, we were throwing bricks at the window.”

The legislation passed the House in 2009 by only seven votes, and the grand coalition supporting cap-and-trade fell apart before it could be brought to the Senate floor. Sensing the lack of a mandate for the policy, many of the corporate leaders who had supported cap-and-trade reversed their position. They had come to the table in hopes of a compromise, but they were just as happy to let the legislation fail and avoid new rules altogether.

The lack of support from environmental-justice activists didn't doom cap-and-trade on its own, but a slew of analyses of why the bill foundered cited a failure to earn grassroots support. And there was a clear missed opportunity: both groups shared a common rival in the fossil-fuel industry, which is responsible for both greenhouse-gas emissions and air pollution and uses its deep pockets to fight regulation.

Since then, significant opportunities to advance the climate cause in the U.S. have been few and far between. Obama enacted a range of rules to slow emissions and cut pollution, most notably the Clean Power Plan, which targeted coal. But even members of his Administration have said the initiatives fell short.

Climate activists hope they will have another chance to pass bold legislation to reduce emissions if former Vice President Joe Biden wins the presidential election in November. With the 2009 failure in mind, environmental groups have sought to build grassroots support. That effort includes partnering with youth activists like the Sunrise Movement, which advocates for a Green New Deal. These groups have been widely credited with changing the climate conversation and helping the public understand the connections of climate to everyday life, but the environmental-justice activists have played a significant role too. National groups that once avoided talking about race have adopted the language of environmental-justice activists, pointing out that climate change will hit the most vulnerable the hardest and talking about the other social benefits of stemming emissions. “Centering reducing toxic pollution in frontline communities is both the right thing to do, and it's also essential to building the power that we need to have the overwhelming support we need to

overpower the fossil-fuel industry,” says Sara Chieffo, vice president of government affairs at the League of Conservation Voters.

The new alliance may be young, but it has quickly become deep and wide. Most important, national environmental groups, Democratic political organizations and members of Congress alike have allowed environmental-justice leaders to take the reins in crafting policies to address environmental racism. Last summer, after months of consultation, a group of leading environmental-justice activists announced a coalition under the banner of an Equitable and Just Climate Platform. The platform committed groups like the Center for American Progress, a mainstay of the Democratic political establishment, along with environmental groups like the League of Conservation Voters and the Natural Resources Defense Council to combatting “systemic inequalities” alongside climate change. “We need to address greenhouse-gas emissions,” says Cecilia Martinez, a professor at the University of Delaware’s Center for Energy and Environmental Policy, who helped lead the effort. “But we cannot do that divorced and disconnected from the other types of legacy pollution that have been harming our communities.”

On the campaign trail, Biden has spoken about racial disparities as a top concern for climate policy and appointed longtime environmental-justice leaders like Martinez to help. He framed the climate plank of his platform during the primary campaign, a \$1.7 trillion spending proposal, as a plan for a “clean-energy revolution and environmental justice.”

On Capitol Hill, Democrats say they are now privileging the solutions proposed by communities affected by environmental racism. Representative Donald McEachin, a Virginia Democrat, described his proposed Environmental Justice for All Act as a collection of solutions—from amending the Civil Rights Act to allow people who face disproportionate pollution to sue, to requiring federal employees to receive environmental-justice training—suggested by those affected by environmental injustice. “This is a unique bill in that I didn’t have any part in authorship,” he says of the legislation.

Democratic leadership is taking note too. In late June, the House Committee on the Climate Crisis, formed in early 2019 by Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi,

released a 500-plus-page report outlining a path forward on climate change. The opening of the report references the police killing of George Floyd, and the document incorporates a slew of policies to address environmental racism from the Environmental Justice for All Act.

Speaking on Capitol Hill in June, Pelosi cited the work of environmental-justice leaders among others in a coalition needed to pass legislation. “They have transformed the conversation,” she said. “We cannot succeed without the outside mobilization that they bring.”

On the surface, the environment and climate change may look like minor concerns in the scheme of issues facing Black Americans and other people of color today, especially when you take a cursory glance at the past five months. The COVID-19 pandemic has hit African Americans especially hard, killing them at twice the rate of their white counterparts. The economic challenges have hurt too, leaving the unemployment rate substantially higher for Latinx, Asian and Black Americans than for their white counterparts. And the highly publicized killings of African Americans like Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Tony McDade and others have jolted the country into recognizing the systematic mistreatment of Black Americans by law enforcement.

And yet environmental racism is at the center of this moment: COVID-19 has hit Black people hard in large part because environmental hazards like air pollution lead to conditions like asthma and heart disease, which in turn make a person more likely to suffer the worst of the virus. To address systemic racism, the country needs to address environmental racism, and vice versa. “The system that created inequality in terms of pollution choking our neighborhoods is the same system that’s choking Black people and brown people when it comes to policing,” says Robert Bullard, a scholar of urban planning and environmental policy whose work earned him the moniker “the father of environmental justice.”

Climate change is only going to make the challenges for people of color worse. Just look at how Hurricane Katrina, a taste of superstorms to come, displaced New Orleans’ Black community; how Latinx agricultural workers are more likely to suffer in the stifling heat of farms; or how urban communities can be

22°F warmer than nearby areas that are less developed. Research has even linked higher temperatures to increased crime and police brutality. These realities may explain why surveys have shown people of color to be more concerned about climate change than their white counterparts.

This understanding has come slowly, but the increased attention to systemic racism and the urgency of climate change has made for a unique opportunity: address centuries of racism while saving the world from a global warming catastrophe. Indeed, tackling the two together may be a political necessity.

–With reporting by MARIAH ESPADA, MADELINE ROACHE and JOSH ROSENBERG

This appears in the July 20, 2020 issue of TIME.

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