Rachel's Environment & Health News
#733 - The Environmental Movement -- Part 2: Failures And Successes
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In this series, we are exploring the evolution of the modern environmental movement, from about 1965 onward. The mainstream environmental organizations with the largest budgets are Environmental Defense, Natural Resources Defense Council, National Wildlife Federation, Sierra Club, and Wilderness Society. Since the late 1970s, a new environmental movement has appeared. This "environmental justice" (EJ) movement is composed of roughly five hundred locally-based groups. Descriptions of many of these groups can be found among the 2700 organizations now described on our web site, http://www.rachel.org. (Environmental groups of all kinds are encouraged to add themselves to our web site, thus helping to make the movement visible. If you know of groups that we are missing, please send E-mail to erf@rachel.org or call us toll-free at (888) 272-2435.)

The vast majority of U.S. citizens -- roughly 80% -- express strong support for environmental values,[1] yet most have never allied themselves with either the traditional or the environmental justice movements, so both movements are politically weaker than they could be. An obvious question is, Why?

Historically, many mainstream-professional environmentalists have viewed humans mainly as a source of trouble. This view has turned the nation's environmental agenda away from human concerns. Some within the Sierra Club have now rejected this view, but it remains widely held.

An excellent short history of the environmental movement has recently been published by MIT Press: William Shutkin's THE LAND THAT COULD BE. Shutkin observes, "...traditional environmentalism has focused on places where very few of us actually live and work, such as wilderness and national parks, while overlooking densely populated areas like cities and suburbs." [2, pg. 127]

Shutkin goes on to say, "Left out of the [traditional environmental] movement have been the people themselves and the environmental issues that, quite literally, hit home -- local issues like lack of open space, brownfields [contaminated urban sites] , asthma brought on by air pollution, and other environmental problems endemic to many American communities.... Local communities and constituencies have been relegated to the back burner by both the public interest environmental establishment and the environmental law and policy system itself."[2, pg. 120]

Importantly, mainstream-professional environmentalists have traditionally viewed community development and economic development as incompatible with environmental protection, thus turning their backs on the bread-and-butter concerns of a majority of Americans -- the working class, the poor, and people of color.

Shutkin: "Despite the importance of economic investment and employment opportunities to overall community health, including environmental protection and the availability of environmentally sustainable production methods, these issues have not risen to prominence among mainstream-professional environmentalists. Similarly, the movement has failed to address the persistent segregation of communities along racial lines, which has resulted in the continuing development of suburban and rural areas, with the associated environmental costs."[2, pgs.124-125]

The mainstream-professional environmental movement has not only ignored the importance of economic development and the corrosive effects of persistent racism, it has also solidified and institutionalized a system of environmental protection designed (intentionally or not) to funnel pollutants into poor communities. As attorney Luke Cole has written, "Environmental laws are not designed by or for poor people. The theory and ideology behind environmental laws ignores the systemic genesis of pollution. Environmental statutes actually legitimate the pollution of low-income neighborhoods." [3, pg. 642]

Cole goes on, "Mainstream environmentalists see pollution as the FAILURE of government and industry -- if the environmentalists could only shape up the few bad apples, our environment would be protected. But grassroots activists come to view pollution as the SUCCESS of government and industry, success at industry's primary objective: maximizing profits by externalizing environmental costs. Pollution of our air, land, and water that is literally killing people is often not in violation of environmental laws...." [3, pg. 643]

Because mainstream-professional environmentalism excluded other key concerns of the working class, the poor and minorities, a new approach to environmental protection began to emerge in the U.S. in the late 1970s.

This new approach -- environmental justice -- focuses on the environments in which people live, work, and play, and it assumes that environmental protection and justice require a political struggle against corporations. It also recognizes that environmental protection requires us to engage, defend, and rebuild our communities. Paragraph 12 of the 1991 Principles of Environmental Justice said, "Environmental justice affirms the need for urban and rural ecological policies to clean up and rebuild our cities and rural areas in balance with nature, honoring the cultural integrity of all our communities, and providing fair access for all to the full range of resources." [4]

In practice the EJ movement has had considerable success keeping bad projects, such as garbage incinerators, out of poor communities and communities of color. And it has established the principle that everyone has the right to a clean environment.

As a result of EJ advocacy (and similar work by grass-roots groups overseas), the right to a clean environment is now becoming recognized as a basic human right.[5] In April of this year the United Nations Commission on Human Rights declared formally that, "Everyone has the right to live in a world free from toxic pollution and environmental degradation." In announcing this new human rights declaration, Claus Toepfer, executive director of the United Nations Environment Programme, said, "It is time to recognize that those who pollute or destroy the natural environment are not just committing a crime against nature, but are violating human rights as well.[5] This declaration transforms the main concern of the EJ movement -- equal protection against environmental harms -- into an international norm. By any standard, this is an important and lasting achievement of the EJ movement.

Furthermore, some EJ groups have made the difficult transition from environmental protection to community protection and economic development. Some EJ groups now own and manage housing units, computer-training labs, urban gardens, farmers' markets, and restaurants. Some EJ groups have taken control of the community planning process. Thus the EJ movement is beginning to take on projects that have very wide appeal, indeed -- far beyond the purview of traditional environmentalists. (We'll discuss this further in Part 3.)

William Shutkin makes the point that mainstream-professional environmentalism has failed -- even within its own terms --because it evolved a style of advocacy that failed to mobilize the democratic participation of affected people everywhere. "With its direct mail machinery, centralized structure, and top-down decision making, mainstream-professional environmentalism has cultivated a largely passive constituency and in the process has stripped itself of the ability to activate and inspire robust political participation and civic engagement, the very forces that can hold decision makers accountable, prevent environmental harms, and institute local and regional environmental strategies...." [2, pgs. 122-123]

Essentially, mainstream-professional environmentalism failed to appreciate the importance of natural and social assets in creating and maintaining robust communities:
Shutkin again: "...[E] nvironmental assets like mass transportation, parks, and tree-lined walkways are paid for by public funds, and they require ongoing public investment for their maintenance and upgrade. Such assets constitute a significant part of the country's public spaces -- the physical infrastructure that allows people to come together, associate face to face, and engage in civic activities. Without them, our communities possess none of the physical resources that allow civic life to be expressed. In essence, environmental assets are the enabling mechanisms for civic culture."

But it's a two-way street: in our cities and towns, environmental amenities are the enabling mechanism for civic life, but active civic participation is essential for the maintenance of local environments. Once again, William Shutkin:

"Most Americans have lost touch not only with their neighbors, but [also with] the physical places where they live and work -- their environment. In the course of an ordinary day, week, or month, many of us have little direct involvement in the civic life of our communities, nor do we enjoy ready access to a safe, quality environment. The two are causally connected. As a public good, a healthy physical environment demands informed, active public participation in local decision making to ensure that the private sector, government, and even one's own neighbors do not undermine long-term environmental gains in their pursuit of short-term narrow ends." [2, pg. 126]

Sociologist Manuel Pastor, Jr., draws out the implications of these ideas, as follows:

Whereas many environmental justice battles of the past have focused on stopping harmful and inequitable projects, community-based grass-roots groups can also "offer hope for a more positive and harmonious vision of the social good." Pastor sees at least two major benefits from this larger community-development approach:

(1) "... Claiming the right to clean air and water can be the beginning of a community movement to deploy natural assets in the service of community-based wealth creation [for example, in urban farms and gardens]."

(2) Once a community asserts its right to a clean environment, it is a short step to asserting a right to other "social resources" such as schools, housing, open space, and employment.

Pastor concludes that -- without diminishing in any way the accomplishments of the environmental justice movement in opposing the placement of toxic hazards in communities of color and poor communities -- environmental justice activism can go further, becoming "an important part of the general community-building movement." [6, pgs. 1-3]

No doubt William Shutkin would agree with Pastor on this point. In THE LAND THAT COULD BE Shutkin has described one version of this larger community development approach, which he calls "civic environmentalism," our subject for Part 3.

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