The environmental justice movement appeared spontaneously in different places during the 1980s. In their book, FROM THE GROUND UP, authors Luke Cole and Sheila Foster compare the movement to a series of streams coming together to form a river.[1] They see the movement encompassing civil rights and environmental racism; the anti-toxics (environmental health) movement; native American struggles for land, sovereignty and cultural survival; the labor movement for a safer workplace; a group of academics who began researching the disproportionate contamination of certain communities based on race and class; and a few traditional legal/scientific environmentalists. (See also REHN #744.)

In this issue, I want to broach a taboo subject: the matter of race within the environmental justice movement. I want to do this because I believe race is creating misunderstandings, which can prevent us from working together effectively.

In some peoples’ minds “environmental justice” is still only about environmental racism but I personally believe the fight for justice is not ONLY about race -- as central as racism is in this world, especially within the U.S. I believe environmental justice is about domination, exploitation and injustice of many kinds, wearing many different faces. If we maintain the narrow definition, that environmental justice=environmental racism, then the movement may turn its back on a large number of allies and potential allies, greatly diminishing the likelihood of gaining political power in the larger society.

I have to acknowledge a valid concern that, if “environmental justice” includes white people, then white people will tend to dominate the movement and they will receive most of the available funding, which is meager at best.

The funding picture is indeed dismal. As Daniel Faber has shown, annual philanthropic giving in the U.S. totals about $22 billion; of this, 5.4% or $1.23 billion goes to “environment” including animal welfare and wildlife; of this $1.23 billion, only $49 million (or 4%) goes to “environmental justice” using the broad definition of the movement.[2, pgs. 32-33.] The other 96% goes to the traditional legal/scientific environmental movement and the animal protection organizations. To get the $49 million into perspective, we note that the five core groups of the legal/scientific environmental movement (National Wildlife Federation, National Audubon Society, Sierra Club, Environmental Defense, and Natural Resources Defense Council) have combined annual budgets of $325 million (from all sources of income combined, not just philanthropy).[3] When we identify the highest-paid individual in each of these five organizations and add up their annual pay, it totals $1.4 million, or 2.8% of the $49 million that is available to all of the environmental justice groups in the country. In other words, the legal/scientific environmental groups are receiving substantially funding while the environmental justice movement is left to fight over what amounts to scraps that may fall from the philanthropic table. Given the path-breaking accomplishments of the environmental justice movement, which I will discuss in detail next issue, this imbalance of funding is nothing short of scandalous.

So lack of resources is probably the greatest source of racial tension within the movement. But there is something else, closely-related, that creates racial tension and mistrust within the movement as well, mainly because it is so rarely discussed or even recognized by white people: white privilege.

One white writer, Peggy McIntosh at Wellesley College, has published her personal reflections on white privilege in her college work. She says, “...As a white person, I realized I had been taught about racism as something that puts others at a disadvantage, but had been taught not to see one of its corollary aspects, white privilege, which puts me at an advantage.”[4]

She goes on, “...I have come to see white privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets that I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was 'meant' to remain oblivious. White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, code books, visas, clothes, tools and blank checks.”

In her academic job, Ms. McIntosh had been examining male privilege. She says, “...After I realized the extent to which men work from a base of unacknowledged privilege, I understood that much of their oppressiveness was unconscious. Then I remembered the frequent charges from women of color that white women whom they encounter are oppressive. I began to understand why we are justly seen as oppressive, even when we don't see ourselves that way. I began to count the ways in which I enjoy unearned skin privilege and have been conditioned into oblivion about its existence.” Here are the first 25 items she listed:

1. I can, if I wish, arrange to be in the company of people of my race most of the time.
2. If I should need to move, I can be pretty sure of renting or purchasing housing in an area that I can afford and in which I would want to live.
3. I can be pretty sure that my neighbors in such a location will be neutral or pleasant to me.
4. I can go shopping alone most of the time, pretty well assured that I will not be followed or hassased.
5. I can turn on the television or open to the front page of the paper and see people of my race widely represented.
6. When I am told about our national heritage or about “civilization,” I am shown that people of my color made it what it is.
7. I can be sure that my children will be given curricular materials that testify to the existence of their race.
8. If I want to, I can be pretty sure of finding a publisher for this piece on white privilege.
9. I can go into a music shop and count on finding the music of my race represented, into a supermarket and find the staple foods that fit my cultural survival; the labor movement for a safer workplace, a group of academics who began researching the disproportionate contamination of certain communities based on race and class; and a few traditional legal/scientific environmentalists. (See also REHN #744.)
10. Whether I use checks, credit cards, or cash, I can count on my skin color not to work against the appearance of financial reliability.
11. I can arrange to protect my children most of the time from people who might not like them.
12. I can swear, or dress in second-hand clothes or not answer letters without having people attribute these choices to the bad morals, the poverty, or the illiteracy of my race.
13. I can speak in public to a powerful male group without putting my race on trial.
14. I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a failure simply because I am a woman or a member of a minority race.
15. I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group.
16. I can remain oblivious of the language and customs of persons of color, who constitute the world's majority, without feeling in my culture any penalty for such oblivion.
17. I can criticize our government and talk about how much I fear its policies and behavior without being seen as a cultural outsider.
18. I can be sure that if I ask to talk to "the person in charge" I will...
be facing a person of my race.

19. If a traffic cop pulls me over, or if the IRS audits my tax return, I can be sure I haven't been singled out because of my race.

20. I can easily buy posters, postcards, picture books, greeting cards, dolls, toys, and children's magazines featuring people of my race.

21. I can go home from most meetings or organizations I belong to feeling somewhat tied in rather than isolated, out of place, outnumbered, unheard, held at a distance, or feared.

22. I can take a job with an affirmative action employer without having coworkers on the job suspect that I got it because of race.

23. I can choose public accommodations without fearing that people of my race cannot get in or will be mistreated in the places I have chosen.

24. I can be sure that if I need legal or medical help my race will not work against me.

25. If my day, week, or year is going badly, I need not ask of each negative episode or situation whether it has racial overtones.[4]

Ms. McIntosh draws a conclusion that seems to me crucially important. She says, "I repeatedly forgot each of the realizations on this list until I wrote it down. For me white privilege has turned out to be an elusive and fugitive subject. The pressure to avoid it is great, for in facing it I must give up the myth of meritocracy. If these things are true, this is not such a free country; one's life is not what one makes it; many doors open for certain people through no virtues of their own."

She goes on, "...In proportion as my racial group was being made confident, comfortable, and oblivious, other groups were likely being made unconfident, uncomfortable, and alienated. Whiteness protected me from many kinds of hostility, distress, and violence, which I was being subtly trained to visit, in turn, upon people of color...." Many, perhaps most, of our white students in the United States think that racism doesn't affect them because they are not people of color; they do not see 'whiteness' as a racial identity. In addition, since race and sex are not the only advantaging systems at work, we need similarly to examine the daily experience of having age advantage, or ethnic advantage, or physical ability, or advantage related to nationality, religion, or sexual orientation.

"...In addition, it is hard to disentangle aspects of unearned advantage that rest more on social class, economic class, race, religion, sex, and ethnic identity than on other factors. Still, all of the oppressions are interlocking...."

"One factor seems clear about all of the interlocking oppressions. They take both active forms, which we can see, and embedded forms, which as a member of the dominant groups one is taught not to see. In my class and place, I did not see myself as a racist because I was taught to recognize racism only in individual acts of meanness by members of my group, never in invisible systems conferring unsought racial dominance on my group from birth...."

"To redesign social systems we need first to acknowledge their colossal unseen dimensions. The silences and denials surrounding privilege are the key political tool here. They keep the thinking about equality or equity incomplete, protecting unearned advantage and conferred dominance by making these subjects taboo...."

"It seems to me that obliviousness about white advantage, like obliviousness about male advantage, is kept strongly inculturated in the United States so as to maintain the myth of meritocracy, the myth that democratic choice is equally available to all. Keeping most people unaware that freedom of confident action is there for just a small number of people props up those in power and serves to keep power in the hands of the same groups that have most of it already," Ms. McIntosh says.[4]

--Peter Montague


Rachel's Environment & Health News is a publication of the Environmental Research Foundation, P.O. Box 160, New Brunswick, NJ 08903-0160; Phone: (732) 828-9995; Fax (732) 791-4603; E-mail: erf@rachel.org; http://www.rachel.org. Unless otherwise indicated, Rachel's is written by Peter Montague.