

Lesson 4

What is Environmental Justice?

A. Read this excerpt taken from the book *Sharing the Earth: An Environmental Justice Reader*, edited by Elizabeth Ammons and Modhumita Roy and answer the questions that follow.

1. When an explosion in the Union Carbide Chemical Plant in Bhopal, India, killed thousands of people on the night of December 2, 1984, it was regarded as a terrible but singular disaster. When a reactor at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant in the Ukraine in the former Soviet Union exploded just two years later killing an undisclosed number of workers, it was regarded as a terrible but singular disaster. So too when the world learned of the ecological and human cost of decades of petroleum-waste dumping in the Niger Delta by Royal Dutch Shell in the last quarter of the twentieth century, the attempt to privatize water in Bolivia by the Bechtel Corporation in the 1990s, the death of close to two thousand people in New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina in 2005, or even the horrific aftermath of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki six decades earlier, each was regarded as a terrible but singular disaster.

2. In fact, these and other similar environmental disasters are neither singular nor isolated. Rather, they are clearly interconnected; they are caused by human beings; and they disproportionately negatively impact poor people and women. That is what Environmental Justice as a movement understands. What is often regarded as a natural disaster is upon closer examination the result of sometimes shortsighted and other times reckless even pernicious corporate, governmental, or individual environmental practices that target and disadvantage vulnerable groups.

3. As a concept and a movement now global in scope, Environmental Justice holds that environmental burdens and benefits should be shared equally by all people. It recognizes that currently the negative impacts of ecological devastation, particularly the environmental harm and hazards created by overconsumption of resources in the global North and by elites worldwide, fall disproportionately on the world's Poor, the vast majority of whom are people of colour, especially women and children.



4. Simultaneously, the benefits of that overconsumption are enjoyed primarily by the privileged around the world, a fraction of the earth's population. Environmental Justice, commonly referred to as EJ, seeks to make these facts visible and to bring people together to work for positive change.

5. Environmental Justice links two large, foundational bodies of modern thought and activist engagement. It yokes concern for the environment, including all life on the planet, to commitment to social justice: human equity in terms of race, gender, religion, nationality, and class. Environmental Justice bridges the gap between [the] two movements: environmentalism and human rights advocacy. It not only brings them together for positive change but also shows their inextricable connectedness.

6. Environmental Justice therefore represents a new, important body of thought and action at the beginning of the twenty-first century, especially as people around the world face the realities of climate change, increasing toxicity, resource depletion, and the rapid disappearance of species and arable land on which the health of many human communities depends. Fundamental to both the concept of Environmental Justice and the activist EJ movement is the search for fair ways of sharing environmental burdens and benefits and collectively creating a future in which the dignity and rights of all people are respected.

B. Match the words in Column A with their meanings in Column B

Column A	Column B
undisclosed	having a very harmful effect or influence
disproportionately	unable to be separated, released, or escaped from
pernicious	to combine or connect two things
overconsumption	reduction in the number or quantity of something
yoke	the quality of being poisonous
inextricable	not revealed or made known publicly
toxicity	fit for or used for the growing of crops
depletion	the action or fact of consuming something to excess.
arable	to an extent that is too large or too small in comparison with something else



C. Read paragraphs 3-5 again and fill in the blanks taking appropriate words from there:

Environmental Justice (EJ) focuses on the _____ distribution of environmental benefits and _____. It emphasizes that the negative effects of ecological damage, caused by _____ in the global North and by _____ worldwide, largely affect the _____. In particular, _____ and _____ suffer the most. At the same time, the _____ enjoy the benefits of excessive resource use. EJ seeks to connect environmental issues with _____, showing the link between _____ and human rights efforts to promote positive change.

D. Answer the questions below:

- a) What are some examples of environmental disasters that show how human actions can harm the environment and affect people unfairly?
- b) How does Environmental Justice view the connection between environmental harm and social inequality?
- c) Why do poor people, especially women and children, tend to suffer more from environmental problems than others?
- d) How does the Environmental Justice movement seek to address the unequal sharing of environmental burdens and benefits?
- e) How are environmental issues like climate change and pollution linked to human rights and social justice?
- f) What role does overconsumption in wealthy countries play in causing environmental harm in poorer regions?
- g) How can the principles of Environmental Justice help us create a more fair and sustainable future for everyone?



E. Read these ‘17 Principles of Environmental Justice’ carefully and follow the instructions.

Held in Washington, D.C. in 1991, the People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit brought together over six hundred participants from grassroots and national organizations, marking the birth of the Environmental Justice Movement in the United States. At this historic event, the attendees created the foundational document known as the "Principles of Environmental Justice." The summit addressed various aspects of life, including housing, education, healthcare, transportation, employment, food, water, air quality, and access to parks and green spaces.

The Principles of Environmental Justice (EJ)

- 1) Environmental Justice affirms the sacredness of Mother Earth, ecological unity and the interdependence of all species, and the right to be free from ecological destruction.
- 2) Environmental Justice demands that public policy be based on mutual respect and justice for all peoples, free from any form of discrimination or bias.
- 3) Environmental Justice mandates the right to ethical, balanced and responsible uses of land and renewable resources in the interest of a sustainable planet for humans and other living things.
- 4) Environmental Justice calls for universal protection from nuclear testing, extraction, production and disposal of toxic/hazardous wastes and poisons and nuclear testing that threaten the fundamental right to clean air, land, water, and food.
- 5) Environmental Justice affirms the fundamental right to political, economic, cultural and environmental self-determination of all peoples.
- 6) Environmental Justice demands the cessation of the production of all toxins, hazardous wastes, and radioactive materials, and that all past and current producers be held strictly accountable to the people for detoxification and the containment at the point of production.
- 7) Environmental Justice demands the right to participate as equal partners at every level of decision-making, including needs assessment, planning, implementation, enforcement and evaluation.
- 8) Environmental Justice affirms the right of all workers to a safe and healthy work environment without being forced to choose between an unsafe livelihood and unemployment. It also affirms the right of those who work at home to be free from environmental hazards.



- 9) Environmental Justice protects the right of victims of environmental injustice to receive full compensation and reparations for damages as well as quality health care.
- 10) Environmental Justice considers governmental acts of environmental injustice a violation of international law, the Universal Declaration On Human Rights, and the United Nations Convention on Genocide.
- 11) Environmental Justice must recognize a special legal and natural relationship of Native Peoples to the U.S. government through treaties, agreements, compacts, and covenants affirming sovereignty and self-determination.
- 12) 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 provided fair access for all to the full range of resources.
- 13) Environmental Justice calls for the strict enforcement of principles of informed consent, and a halt to the testing of experimental reproductive and medical procedures and vaccinations on people of color.
- 14) Environmental Justice opposes the destructive operations of multi-national corporations.
- 15) Environmental Justice opposes military occupation, repression and exploitation of lands, peoples and cultures, and other life forms.
- 16) Environmental Justice calls for the education of present and future generations which emphasizes social and environmental issues, based on our experience and an appreciation of our diverse cultural perspectives.
- 17) Environmental Justice requires that we, as individuals, make personal and consumer choices to consume as little of Mother Earth's resources and to produce as little waste as possible; and make the conscious decision to challenge and reprioritize our lifestyles to ensure the health of the natural world for present and future generations.

F. Find out the words that are unknown to you and look them up in the dictionary and write down two synonyms for each word.

G. Write a summary of the text above in 100 words.

H. How many principles of environmental justice can you relate with?

