## Introduction

# What Is Environmental Justice?

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The history of environmental policy in South Africa is a cruel and perverse one. Under colonial and apartheid governments, thousands of black South Africans were forcibly removed from their ancestral lands to make way for game parks, and billions of rands were spent on preserving wildlife and protecting wild flowers while people in "townships" and "homelands"[1] lived without adequate food, shelter, and clean water. Whites-only policies in national parks meant that black South Africans could not enjoy the country's rich natural heritage, and draconian poaching laws kept the rural poor from desperately needed resources (Beinart and Coates 1995; Carruthers 1995). In short, flora and fauna were often considered more important than the majority of the country's population.

As a result, black South Africans (and anti-apartheid activists in general) paid little attention to environmental debates during the apartheid era. At best, the *environment* was seen to be a white, suburban issue of little relevance to the anti-apartheid struggle. At worst, environmental policy was seen as an explicit tool of racially based oppression.

With the easing of apartheid legislation in the late 1980s and the

unbanning of anti-apartheid political parties and activists in the early 1990s, all of this changed. The liberalization of South African politics created discursive and institutional space for a rethinking of environmental issues, and a vibrant debate on the meaning, causes, and effects of environmental decay began in earnest. Perhaps the most fundamental of these developments was the simplest: a broadening of the definition of ecology. Once the *environment* was redefined to include the working and living space of black South Africans it quickly became apparent that environmental initiatives were akin to other post-apartheid, democratic objectives. A wide range of trade unions, nongovernmental organizations, civic associations, and academics quickly adopted the new environmental discourse and within a few short years began to challenge the environmental practices and policies of the past (Cock and Koch 1991; Ramphele and McDowell 1991).

Central to this new discourse was the concept of environmental justice—a language that found its first concrete expression in 1992 at a conference organized by Earthlife Africa, entitled "What Does It Mean to Be Green in the New South Africa?" (Hallowes 1993). The conference brought together leading South African environmentalists and academics with their counterparts from around the world in an attempt to map out a future for the environmental justice movement in South Africa. One of the outcomes of the conference was the creation of the Environmental Justice Networking Forum (EJNF), a nationwide umbrella organization designed to coordinate the activities of environmental activists and organizations interested in social and environmental justice. The network rapidly expanded to include 150 member organizations by 1995 and well over 600 member organizations by 2000.

With the election of the African National Congress (ANC) in 1994, the environmental justice movement had an ally in government as well. Noting that "poverty and environmental degradation have been closely linked" in South Africa, the ANC made it clear that social, economic, and political relations were also part of the environmental equation and that environmental inequalities and injustices would be addressed as an integral part of the party's post-apartheid reconstruction and development mandate (ANC 1994, 38). Indeed, the new South African Constitution, finalized in 1996, includes a Bill of Rights that grants all South Africans the right to an "environment that is not harmful to their health

and well-being" and the right to "ecologically sustainable development" (section 24).

*Environmental Justice in South Africa* provides an overview of this relatively new environmental justice movement in South Africa: its history in the 1990s; where it stands today; and where it might (or should) be headed in the future. In the same way that the edited collections of *Going Green* (Cock and Koch 1991) and *Restoring the Land* (Ramphele and McDowell 1991) captured the changing environmental tenor of the late 1980s and early 1990s, this book attempts to outline the key theoretical and practical issues facing the environmental justice movement in South Africa ten years on. How have things changed? What has remained the same? What are the most (and least) effective strategies for environmental activism and how do we conceptualize environmental justice in South Africa in the twenty-first century?

We begin here with a brief discussion of the meaning of environmental justice and then move on to discuss the organization and purpose of the book in more detail.

## Defining Environmental Justice

At its core, environmental justice is about incorporating environmental issues into the broader intellectual and institutional framework of human rights and democratic accountability (Wenz 1988; Bullard 1990; Capek 1993; Bryant 1995; Cutter 1995; Goldman 1996; Harvey 1996; Heiman 1996; Dobson 1998; Schlosberg 1999; Bowen and Haynes 2000). The term necessarily encompasses the widest possible definition of what is considered "environmental" and is unrepentantly anthropocentric in its orientation—placing people, rather than flora and fauna, at the center of a complex web of social, economic, political, and environmental relationships. Most important, it concerns itself primarily with the environmental *in*justices of these relationships, and the ways and means of rectifying these wrongs and/or avoiding them in the future. Locating a toxic waste site next to a poor, black community simply because it is poor and black, for example, is an environmental injustice that violates basic human rights and democratic accountability and demands remediation and prevention.

At this most basic level, it is easy to see why the environmental

justice movement in South Africa has been able to attract a significant following. Forcibly removing people from their ancestral land, without any consultation or compensation, to make way for a game park is wrong by most moral standards. Spending millions of rands on municipal services for one group of people and not providing the most basic necessities to others is simply undemocratic. Environmental inequities of this sort are so manifestly unjust that it makes sense to speak of an environmental justice movement to address them.

The following definition of environmental justice from the quarterly newsletter of the South African Environmental Justice Networking Forum captures these basic philosophical tenets and exemplifies the focus on human and democratic rights that is so central to environmental justice movements and literature worldwide:

> Environmental justice is about social transformation directed towards meeting basic human needs and enhancing our quality of life—economic quality, health care, housing, human rights, environmental protection, and democracy. In linking environmental and social justice issues the environmental justice approach seeks to challenge the abuse of power which results in poor people having to suffer the effects of environmental damage caused by the greed of others. This includes workers and communities exposed to dangerous chemical pollution, and rural communities without firewood, grazing and water. In recognizing that environmental damage has the greatest impact upon poor people, EJNF seeks to ensure the right of those most affected to participate at all levels of environmental decision-making. (EJNF 1997)

Beyond these core principles, however, there is much that fragments the environmental justice movement. One reason is that the movement lacks a coherent theoretical framework. There are wide differences of opinion, for example, on the relative importance of race, class, and gender, and there are major splits on the potential for reform in a market economy. Even the efficacy of judicial procedure (i.e., whether the courts are an effective means for addressing and preventing environmental injustices) is a matter of debate.

This diversity of opinion is not surprising. As the survey literature on environmental theory makes clear, there are simply too many underlying methodological and ideological differences in environmental thought to allow for any neat conceptualization of environmental justice (Pepper 1993; Merchant 1994). Ecofeminism, ecosocialism, deep ecology, ecological economics, and social ecology all have a claim of sorts to being concerned about *environmental justice* insofar as they pay attention to how environmental resources and their by-products are distributed (within and across generations) and the inequitable power relations that lead to environmental injustices. Even the World Bank can claim to be concerned about environmental justice (although it does not use the term), given its emphasis on poverty alleviation—particularly for women and children—and the improvement of basic infrastructure like sewerage and sanitation (World Bank 1992, 1994). In other words, the environmental justice literature—defined here by its concern with environmental inequalities and democratic accountability—is far from homogenous and is in fact riven with deep ideological splits on foundational questions such as race, class, and gender.

This lack of coherency is not necessarily a problem. On the contrary, the diversity lends itself to a wide range of social circumstances and ideological positions, drawing people and organizations into an ecological movement they might not otherwise have connected to. This has certainly been the case in South Africa, where trade unions, civic organizations, democratic activists, and environmentalists of many stripes have joined a loosely aligned environmental justice movement. Membership in the Environmental Justice Networking Forum has included such diverse interests as the Transport and General Workers Union, the Trust for Christian Outreach, the Wilderness Leadership School, and the Help End Marijuana Prohibition in South Africa Society. Together these organizations have contributed to the building of an important new movement in the country and have placed the central concerns of environmental equity and democratic accountability firmly on the South African environmental policy agenda.

But ideological tensions are not far from the surface. An environmental justice movement as diverse as this in its political orientation and demographic composition is bound to have deep splits. Moreover, with the end of formal apartheid has come a whole new set of highly contentious

environmental questions: Should South Africa trade with China? What are the implications of signing the Kyoto Accord? Are market-based land reforms appropriate? Should municipal services be privatized? The adoption by the national government in 1996 of a fiscally conservative approach to reconstruction and development through the Growth Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) policy has been particularly divisive of the democratic movement in the country, and these divisions are beginning to surface in the environmental justice movement as well. Funding and organizational issues are also a factor here, with historically white, suburban environmental groups accounting for the lion's share of financial resources and organizational capacity, while most township-based environmental groups struggle to make ends meet, often breaking up after a few years of effort.

Can these institutional and ideological tensions continue to exist under the banner of environmental justice in South Africa? Is it still possible to reap the benefits of a broad coalition of interests with core beliefs in the environmental rights and dignity of human beings? What are the best ways forward in this regard? What might the environmental justice movement in South Africa look like in another ten years? These are difficult questions to which there are no easy answers. Nor does this book pretend to have the answers. What it does provide is a historical and theoretical account of the environmental justice movement and an overview of what environmental justice has meant in practice since the early 1990s. Not every environmental justice issue in the country is covered—there is no dedicated discussion of land reform, for example—but the book does include many of the key environmental justice concerns in the country and raises conceptual issues that cut across all environmental justice activities.

## Structure of the Book

Drawing on the ideas and experience of leading environmental activists and academics in the country, the book is loosely divided into three parts: theory, practice, and narrative. The first four chapters cover key theoretical debates on issues of environmental justice and provide a historical account of the environmental justice movement in South Africa,

its links to the American environmental justice movement, and its relationship to the anti-apartheid democratic movement more generally. The remaining chapters are case studies of particular environmental justice issues in practice, from efforts to reform the national parks to the legislative options available to environmental activists.

Interspersed between these chapters are brief accounts of environmental justice struggles in the country. From the survival strategies of people who make a living from a waste dump to the tragedies of asbestosis and mercury poisoning, these nine stories offer powerful examples of the extent and depth of environmental injustices that continue in South Africa to this day. The stories are also a reminder of the ability of individuals, organizations, and communities to challenge their situations and serve as a beacon of hope for a more environmentally just future. Observations by Archbishop Njongonkulu Ndungane on the significance of the environmental justice movement in South Africa, which follow this introduction, set the stage for these vignettes.

Chapter 1 looks at the roots of environmental racism and its relationship to the rise of environmental justice in South Africa. Environmental racism, argues Farieda Khan, is a powerful conceptual rallying point for environmental activists seeking to address racial inequalities in South Africa, but also appears, more controversially, to affect the way that environmental groups themselves operate. With the largest and best-funded environmental groups in the country dominated by white, middle-class activists, Khan asks why an equally effective black environmental group has not emerged after a decade of environmental justice activism.

Marginalization is the central theme of the chapter by David Hallowes and Mark Butler who consider the effects of neoliberal policy reforms and globalization on the ability of poor communities in South Africa to address their own environmental situations and suggest ways of conceptualizing and strategizing these matters.

Chapter 3 is a long-overdue discussion of gender and environmental justice in South Africa. Drawing on a diverse range of ecofeminist and environmental justice literature, Belinda Dodson argues that there is fertile common ground between these two broadly defined schools of environmental thought, and asserts that a recognition of this commonality would lead to a more theoretically coherent and practically useful approach to women and ecology in South Africa.

Greg Ruiters's critique in chapter 4 of environmental justice theories is perhaps the most challenging to the environmental justice movement in South Africa, arguing as it does that too much attention has been paid to race and the process of positive law and not enough to the importance of place and the politics of production. Ruiters goes on to propose a "transitional" view of environmental justice that takes cognizance of both the site-specific and universal aspects of environmental inequalities.

Chapter 5 is an analysis of the South African National Parks by Jacklyn Cock and David Fig. As noted earlier in this introduction, the national parks system was the epitome of racist conservation in South Africa under the colonial and apartheid regimes. The parks system is now struggling to overcome its institutional and ideological past, and this chapter provides a critical analysis of the evolution of this process and of its successes and failures in the 1990s.

Chapter 6 is an environmental analysis of the largest single industry in South Africa—mining. As the engines of economic growth for over a century, mining companies operated with virtual environmental impunity, producing a legacy of solid waste and water contamination that will take another century to remedy. No one has been more directly affected by this environmental fallout than mine workers and the communities that live adjacent to the mining sites and dumps. Thabo Madihlaba takes us inside one such community—Clewer—in the mining heart of South Africa to see just how much (and how little) has changed. New environmental legislation has provided the framework for environmental redress by poor communities, but mining firms, it would appear, are still solidly in the driver's seat when it comes to environmental reforms.

Chapter 7 provides a comprehensive overview of the constitutional and legislative reforms enacted since 1994 in relation to the environment and offers a litmus test of the environmental "justice" system. The oft-quoted constitutional right of all South Africans to an "an environment that is not harmful to their health or well-being" is only one of many constitutional and legislative reforms introduced by the African National Congress (ANC) that offer a formidable array of judicial tools to challenge environmental injustices. Most of these legal tools, argues Jan Glazewski, have yet to be tested in a court of law, but their potential is impressive and they could lead to the formalization of an otherwise abstract set of environmental "rights."

We return, in chapter 8, to another case study of environmental injustice with a look at the South Durban Community Environmental Alliance's struggle to stop the extension of a toxic waste site in South Durban. Bobby Peek describes the solidarity building that led the community alliance to fight the waste site as well as the evasive tactics employed by the company (and to a lesser extent the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry) to enable them to continue with the dumping. South Durban is situated in one of the most intensely industrialized and polluted areas of South Africa, and this case study helps shed light on the future of community resistance to environmental problems for the country as a whole.

Patrick Bond takes us outside South Africa in chapter 9 for an analysis of the Lesotho Highlands Water Project (LHWP). More than twenty-five years in the making, the LHWP is one of the largest infrastructure projects in the world, and, at 185 meters, Katse dam is the highest in Africa. Dams are always socially and environmentally controversial, and the World Bank–supported Lesotho project is no different in this respect, with villages displaced by rising waters and striking workers shot by Lesotho police. But the project is also controversial because of its impact on South Africa. Intended to provide water to Gauteng, the thirsty industrial and domestic heartland of the country, the first flows of water have in fact not even been needed (and may not be needed for more than a decade) and would appear to have had the environmentally unjust consequence of raising the price of water for those who can least afford it. In revealing these injustices, Bond provides a critical insight into the politics of water use and conservation in the region.

The role of trade unions in the environmental justice movement is the subject of chapter 10. Peter Lukey looks at the efforts of organized labor in the past ten years to address environmental health and safety for its membership and paints a mixed picture of success and failure. He argues that the age-old tension of "jobs versus the environment" is the main conceptual stumbling block to a more proactive and effective environmental justice stance by unions, and offers a possible short-term solution to this conundrum. As one of the most powerful nongovernmental voices in South Africa, trade unions have a critical role to play in environmental justice, and their positions on these issues are central to the future of the movement as a whole.

In the final chapter of the book, David McDonald looks at the

growing trend to privatize municipal services in South Africa and the impact this is having on the urban poor. The lack of basic services like sewerage and sanitation for millions of urban South Africans is arguably the most pressing environmental justice problem in the country today. The government has made impressive strides in providing these services, but the needs are overwhelming and the state has been turning to the private sector to assist with this task. Although this privatization is only in the early stages of development, there is cause for alarm at the short- and long-term environmental justice implications of having the private sector provide these services. McDonald highlights the most problematic areas.

Intended first and foremost for a South African audience of environmental activists, academics, and decision makers, the book should also resonate with international readers interested in the growing field of environmental justice. South Africa is, in many ways, a microcosm of the world, with a wealthy minority of people overconsuming, and an impoverished majority underconsuming, both contributing to environmental degradation. These inequalities symbolize the kinds of disparities that exist between the "haves" and the "have-nots" on an international scale and help shed light on the globalization and standardization of environmental injustices worldwide. The similarities between environmental racism in South Africa and the southern United States, for example, and the parallels between the privatization of municipal services in Cape Town and Buenos Aires, are powerful reminders of the need to move beyond the particular geographic and issue-specific elements of many environmental justice struggles and to see these events as part of a global shift in the production of environmental "goods" and "bads."

In the end, there are no neat conclusions to be drawn from the book. The environmental justice movement in South Africa has come a long way in a short time, but there are tensions simmering below the surface. The future of environmental justice in the country is thus both exhilarating and challenging, and the material in this book will help map out its various possibilities.

## Note

1. Township refers to urban areas of formal and informal housing that were designated "blacks only" during the apartheid era. Homeland refers to rural

areas designated as "blacks only" under apartheid, some of which were declared "independent states" by the apartheid regime but were not recognized by the international community.

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# Environmental Justice, Peace, and Prosperity

Archbishop Njongonkulu Ndungane

South Africa is a land of stunning beauty and scenic wonder, with contrasts ranging from arid semi-desert areas to lush green forests; from flat plains to towering mountains. Socially and economically it is likewise a country of extreme contrasts, ranging from the affluence of multimillion-rand mansions to the extreme poverty of people living in tin shacks or under plastic, with no employment or resources of their own.

The greatest challenge to South Africa is to eradicate poverty and develop its people while ensuring that the natural environment is not destroyed in the process. There must be development for this generation, but not at the price of destroying the natural environment for the next generation. The natural wonders of our country, including the magnificent variety of fauna and flora, as well as our water resources, our topsoil, our grazing lands, our clean air, must be preserved and protected for future generations.

The present political pressure for jobs and development at any cost could have serious consequences for future generations. The impact of human activity on the environment must be taken into account. We have ample examples from the apartheid era of damage done both to people and to the environment through the "homeland" policy. Millions of people were forced to eke out an existence on land that could not carry the number of people consigned to these remote areas. Erosion, deforestation, and poverty are the heritage. In

the cities, toxic waste, fouled water, and polluted air are commonplace. They impact directly on our health, and generally affect the poorest.

There are ever increasing demands for development, but these demands are infinite while the resources of the world are finite. We have to establish more justice between people, a more equitable distribution of the finite resources of the world, and a more sustainable use of them. We have to learn that we are part of nature and not apart from it. We cannot go on exploiting, polluting, or destroying it regardless of the consequences.

The demands of humans can be rapacious. We must ensure development is sustainable for the future. The environment cannot speak out for itself; it cannot toyitoyi [a militant dance expressing defiance and solidarity]. Just as the poor sometimes need others to speak up for them, so too does the environment.

The lesson we need to learn urgently is that if we do not treat the environment with integrity, we ourselves will pay the consequences of fouled air and water, increasing deserts, rising sea levels, denuded marine resources, and a world vastly impoverished in species diversity. Our children will ask how we could have allowed this to happen.

The protection and preservation of the natural environment has to become a priority to save the poor from becoming poorer. I hope we pay heed to the serious issues facing us in our country and world because when injustice prevails the consequences affect both people and the environment. Environmental justice is integral to peace and prosperity.