

Standing up for Standing Rock

Environmental Racism in Modern America

It is 7:00 am on a February morning in Malibu, California. I stumble out of bed and enter the bathroom, subconsciously flipping on the light switch and turning the faucet handle to the left. I wash my face, brush my teeth, make some coffee, and head to class. Perhaps I even leave the light on.

It is 7:00 am on a February morning in the Marshall Islands. A woman wakes to the sound of waves violently crashing on the exterior of her concrete, one-room home. As she turns to check on her family, she steps into six inches of unwelcome water flooding the room. This is not the first time the people of the Marshall Islands have dealt with something like this-- this is not the first time that they have felt attacked. Decades earlier, after World War II, U.S. nuclear testing caused populations on these islands to relocate completely and exposed them to Cancer-causing radiation.¹ Now these islands are flooding due to changes in climate caused by actions like mine.

It is 7:00 am on a February morning at the Standing Rock Indian Reservation in North Dakota. A man of the Sioux Tribe wakes up where he has been sleeping for weeks: in a tent. It is frosted shut, and a bitter wind slips through the canvas. He is told that today, President Donald Trump signed executive orders to push forward with the construction of the \$3.8 billion building

¹ John Sutter. "You're Making This Island Disappear." *CNN*, 2015. Accessed February 14, 2017. <http://www.cnn.com/interactive/2015/06/opinions/sutter-two-degrees-marshall-islands/>

of the pipeline that will ruin ancient burial sites and contaminate the area's drinking water, along with the dreams and lives of this man's people.²

What is wrong with this picture? Or, truly, what is right about it? I would consider myself a moral person. But so does this woman in the Marshall Islands. And so does this Sioux man. Why do people suffer because of other people's actions? Also, why do they suffer for others' actions? Life isn't fair, but this can be stopped if people agree to take action.

The definition of environmental justice provided by the United States Environmental Protection Agency is "the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income, with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies."³ Activism for environmental justice began decades ago. More recently, due greatly to the recent Dakota Access Pipeline story, the concept of "environmental racism" has entered the political and social arena. Be it in the form of nuclear testing, placement of toxic chemicals in a particular community, or the building of a pipeline, human beings are displaced, poisoned, and stripped of their human environmental rights. The unjust reality that is environmental racism stains modern society and shows its colors both across the United States and specifically in the recent disputes over the Dakota Access Pipeline. Here I will discuss what environmental racism entails, what it means for specific populations in the United States, and how those who identify as Christians should approach such an unjust treatment of certain groups of people.

² "Standing Rock: Pope Appears to Back Dakota Pipeline Opponents." *BBC*, February 15, 2017. Accessed February 15, 2017.

³ Environmental Protection Agency, "Environmental Justice," *EPA.gov*. Accessed February 15, 2017. <https://www.epa.gov/environmentaljustice>

Environmental racism is all around us, both within United States borders and globally. This concept, as defined by author Robert D. Bullard, is “any policy, practice, or directive that differently affects or disadvantages (whether intended or unintended) individuals, groups, or communities based on race or color.”⁴ As our society continues to rely on oil and natural resources and our military advances as a leading geopolitical actor and political agenda-setter, we require more production of products. This comes with harmful environmental repercussions. The placement of foregone nuclear byproducts and the consequences brought about by the manufacturing of goods must be considered as factors in responsible production planning. More importantly, this waste siting (or placement of hazardous chemicals) impacts the communities where they are placed with detrimental health effects. Because of a history of racial segregation in American neighborhoods, these pollutants are often placed in predominantly African American or Hispanic areas, where affluence is low.

This residential segregation was created decades ago, explain authors Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton. “[R]esidential segregation was constructed and imposed through various public and private processes—discriminatory real estate practices, exclusionary and expulsive zoning, redlining, and white flight... that both contained growing urban black populations and limited the mobility of blacks and other people of color.” Populations in many communities around the United States are therefore often defined and sectioned demographically by race.⁵ This segregation, says Bullard, has led to an “uneven development between central cities and

⁴ Robert D. Bullard, “Environmental Justice in the 21st Century,” *ejrc.cau.edu*, August 15, 2008. Accessed February 15, 2017. <http://www.ejrc.cau.edu/ejinthe21century.htm>

⁵ Luke W. Cole and Sheila R. Foster, “From the Ground Up: Environmental Racism and the Rise of the Environmental Justice Movement” in *Environmental Racism*. (New York: New York University Press), 54-78.

suburbs combined with the systematic avoidance of inner-city areas by many businesses have heightened social and economic inequalities... economically depressed communities do not have a lot of choices available to them.”⁶ This idea of “zoning” gives environmental racism an avenue for its presence in modern society. Because land values are lower in industrial and rural areas, businesses often seek to do business at a lower cost. Therefore, they often take advantage of land surrounding these communities. Ultimately, land value and race are connected. Authors Luke W. Cole and Sheila R. Foster explain that “while these zoning decisions are not made with reference to race, their impact, given racial segregation, has profound racial implications.”⁷

These “implications” constitute much more serious issues. Bullard writes that an estimated “71 percent of African Americans and 50 percent of Latinos reside in areas with the most polluted air, while only 34 percent of whites live in the highly polluted areas.”⁸ In other words, this racial segregation can determine what kind of resources and environments that certain groups can access. Some groups, like those with “poor English skills,” say Cole and Foster, are generally concentrated in the “most dangerous sectors of our workforce; they face more severe hazards on the job, in the home, in the air they breathe, in the water they drink, in the food they eat... people of color have the least access to health care and often can not get it at all.”⁹ This is not to mention the medical effects that waste siting has on the people where they

⁶ Robert D. Bullard, “Environmental Justice in the 21st Century,” *ejrc.cau.edu*, August 15, 2008. Accessed February 15, 2017. <http://www.ejrc.cau.edu/ejinthe21century.htm>

⁷ Luke W. Cole and Sheila R. Foster, “From the Ground Up: Environmental Racism and the Rise of the Environmental Justice Movement” in *Environmental Racism*. (New York: New York University Press), 54-78.

⁸ Robert D. Bullard, “Environmental Justice in the 21st Century,” *ejrc.cau.edu*, August 15, 2008. Accessed February 15, 2017. <http://www.ejrc.cau.edu/ejinthe21century.htm>

take place, and ultimately around the world. Race is the biggest determinate of where air pollution is located. This contamination of the air leads to lead poisoning and asthma in children. Bullard explains that former Health and Human Services Secretary Louis Sullivan “tagged [lead poisoning] the ‘number one environmental health threat to children.’” Independent of class, he continues, lead poisoning “disproportionately affects children at every class level.” 3 to 4 million children are affected with the poisoning in the country, “most of whom are African American and Latinos who live in urban areas.” 68 percent of children from African American families earning \$6,000 or less have lead poisoning. Often it is exposed in paint, soil, dust, or contamination from vehicle exhaust. Asthma is taking its toll as well. Between 1980 and 1991, the annual, age-adjusted death rate from asthma increased by 40 percent, with blacks aged 15-24 dying at the highest rate.¹⁰ Of course, the actions that American companies take in order to support American life causes pollution damage in the immediate areas where they are located. “There is a direct correlation between exploitation of land and exploitation of people,” writes Bullard. These actions are pushing people of color off of their islands sinking in the Pacific because of our carbon emissions. Lakes in Bolivia are drying up completely, driving entire cultures out of the area. Native Americans are prime targets for waste trading.

Racial discrimination against Native Americans continues to result in a history of mistreatment toward native people. “More than three dozen Indian reservations have been targeted for landfills, incinerators, and other waste facilities,” writes Bullard. Many Native

⁹ Luke W. Cole and Sheila R. Foster, “From the Ground Up: Environmental Racism and the Rise of the Environmental Justice Movement” in *Environmental Racism*. (New York: New York University Press), 54-78.

¹⁰ Robert D. Bullard, “Environmental Justice in the 21st Century,” *ejrc.cau.edu*, August 15, 2008. Accessed February 15, 2017. <http://www.ejrc.cau.edu/ejinthe21century.htm>

American nations have poor “economic infrastructure to address poverty, unemployment, inadequate education and health care, and a host of other social problems.”¹¹ Keep in mind that Robert Bullard wrote that piece in the 1990s. Today we still face these issues that date back hundreds of years. Because of media exposure, the Standing Rock debacle has sparked a realization in American society today: environmental racism is very real and very dangerous.

In late July of 2016, the Standing Rock Sioux were told by the Dallas-based Energy Transfer Partners that just five days remained before a new project was to begin: the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline adjacent to the Sioux Reservation— in what would be America’s largest crude oil pipeline. It was to be 1,172 miles long, able to transport 570,000 barrels of crude across the country each day.¹² The Standing Rock Reservation’s water supply is Lake Oahe, which has already been a source of trouble for the Sioux. In 1958, when the Oahe dam was built, the resulting lake flooded the tribe’s farmlands and homes.¹³ As the plans were, the Dakota Access Pipeline was to run underneath the lake. Threatened yet again under different circumstances, the lake had the potential to be contaminated from a leak or spill in the pipeline. This would poison as many as 10 million people’s source of drinking water. Liquid releases could also result in unintentional fire or explosion. The U.S. Department of Transportation’s Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration (PHMSA) explained that these risks are

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Wes Enzinna. “How Standing Rock Sparked an Environmental Movement Toward Justice.” *Grist.com*, December 6, 2016. Accessed February 14, 2017. <http://grist.org/justice/how-standing-rock-sparked-a-national-movement-toward-environmental-justice>

¹³ Michael Gonchar and Kate Harris. “Battle Over an Oil Pipeline: Teaching About the Standing Rock Sioux Protests.” *the New York Times*, November 30, 2016. Accessed February 14, 2017. <https://nyti.ms/2gM7ZNT>

“Significant Incidents.” It would also effectively plow through and destroy ancient burial sites.¹⁴ LaDonna Allard is a Sioux woman hosting a protest camp on her land. Reporter Wes Enzinna of Grist.org writes that Allard’s father and son were buried along the pipeline’s path. Historically, this is not the first time that Native Americans have dealt with an issue in which they have felt totally undeserving of the consequences.

Racism has rooted itself in Native American life for centuries, dating back to the Columbian exchange in the 1400s. Allard “recalled the life of her great-great-grandmother, Nape Hote Win, who, as a 9-year-old survived the 1863 Whitestone Massacre, an attack by the U.S. Army 50 miles east of Standing Rock. She was held in a prisoner-of-war camp for seven years.”¹⁵ Because of this battle, the Sioux of Standing Rock were to be confined to their current location. Enzinna continues that “Allard’s father had to flee his land in 1948 after the government dammed the Missouri, flooding his farm.”¹⁶

Racial conflict exists today, this time in the form of environmental racism. Much like the risks the pipeline presents to the Indian nation, writes author Kachia Yeager, “[i]n Southeastern Minnesota, the Prarie Island Indian Community has spent years dealing with more than 39 casks of highly radioactive waste being stored outside of Xcel Energy’s nuclear power plant, with the spent fuel lying just 600 yards from the tribal homes and businesses.”¹⁷ It becomes increasingly

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶ Wes Enzinna. “How Standing Rock Sparked an Environmental Movement Toward Justice.” *Grist.com*, December 6, 2016. Accessed February 14, 2017. <http://grist.org/justice/how-standing-rock-sparked-a-national-movement-toward-environmental-justice>

¹⁷ Kachina Keagar. “Environmental Racism: Standing Rock and Beyond.” *The Radical Notion*, November 14, 2016. Accessed February 14, 2017. <http://www.theradicalnotion.com/environmental-racism-standing-rock-beyond/>

evident that the federal government is perhaps uninterested in the wellbeing of certain subpopulations, like the 1982 Nuclear Waste Policy Act to remove the spent fuel. This act “supports the use of deep geologic repositories for the safe storage and/or disposal of radioactive waste.”¹⁸

Today the Sioux Tribe faces another problem: the advancement of the pipeline. However, yet again, they find themselves essentially defenseless against the government with the feeling that they have done nothing to deserve the burdens of others’ actions. The New York Times reports that the poverty rate in Standing Rock is 43.2 percent, “nearly triple the national average of 14.5 percent.”¹⁹ Childhood mortality, suicide, and dropout rates are among the “highest in the nation”. An alternative plan was proposed to let the pipeline run through the nearby—predominately white— town of Bismarck. This proposal was rejected, as concerns were raised about Bismarck’s water supply being tainted.²⁰ What is wrong with this picture?

Legend has it that the old Sioux prophecy, as told by a Standing Rock resident, “says that a black snake will come to destroy the world at a moment of great uncertainty... unless the youth stop it.”²¹ If this is true, the youth, along with thousands of others, certainly did their part. Native protesters were joined by natives from other tribes along with activist groups from around the

¹⁸ Environmental Protection Agency, “Summary of the Nuclear Waste Policy Act,” *EPA.gov*. Accessed February 15, 2017. <https://www.epa.gov/laws-regulations/summary-nuclear-waste-policy-act>

¹⁹ Michael Gonchar and Kate Harris. “Battle Over an Oil Pipeline: Teaching About the Standing Rock Sioux Protests.” *the New York Times*, November 30, 2016. Accessed February 14, 2017. <https://nyti.ms/2gM7ZNT>

²⁰ Wes Enzinna. “How Standing Rock Sparked an Environmental Movement Toward Justice.” *Grist.com*, December 6, 2016. Accessed February 14, 2017. <http://grist.org/justice/how-standing-rock-sparked-a-national-movement-toward-environmental-justice>

²¹ Ibid.

country. In August of 2016, the governor of North Dakota, Jack Dalrymple, declared a state of emergency, encouraging the National Guard to mobilize. Protesters blocked the path, withstanding vicious dogs, tear gas, tasers, and arrests. Enzinna writes that “Native Americans are more likely to be killed by police than any other group, even African Americans.” Police commanders forcefully announced statements like “this is a state highway,” and “you must clear the road,” but the protesters persisted.²² The blatant injustice of the situation can be explained in no way other than the fact that environmental racism exists and is morally incorrect.

What does this injustice mean for humanity? Will it ever end? As a person who identifies as a Christian, what is one’s moral duty to do something about this injustice? In 1968, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. went on an environmental and economic justice mission to Memphis for the striking of black garbage men.²³ In 2016, protesters from around the world stood at the Standing Rock Reservation to fight for basic human environmental rights for their national neighbors.

What does it mean to love one’s neighbor, as Jesus instructs Christians to do in the book of Mark, in society today? Author James Nash might explain that “distributive justice is giving everyone his or her due or fair share... Rights are, in my view, concepts of justice, and are implicit also in biblical concepts of justice.”²⁴ Why is it, then, that people of underprivileged backgrounds and people of certain demographics are being punished for actions they did not take? Though Nash paints a wonderful picture of what life might be like if it were just, it simply is not. We are a broken species, and we do not, in fact, always love our neighbors. Where is this

²² Ibid.

²³ Robert D. Bullard, “Environmental Justice in the 21st Century,” *ejrc.cau.edu*, August 15, 2008. Accessed February 15, 2017. <http://www.ejrc.cau.edu/ejinthe21century.htm>

²⁴ James A. Nash, *Loving Nature*. (Abingdon Press, 1991), 169.

particular environmental injustice rooted? In racism. As people privileged with an education and fair living standards, perhaps it is our responsibility to take action in order to create the just world that God envisions for us. Nash continues, “[b]ased on the... interpretation of human rights, do human beings have environmental rights? The only reasonable answer seems to be an empathetic yes!... Since environmental health is essential for human survival and creativity, environmental rights are certainly no less important than social, political, and economic rights.”²⁵

All human beings have the rights to breathe clean air and drink clean water. There exists not a single human being who deserves to be poisoned by lead or nuclear radiation or to contract asthma. But, these problems do exist. Perhaps acknowledgement and awareness of the problem is the first and most difficult first action to take. Nash argues that human environmental rights are a “manifestation of social justice,” something that every human deserves.

What, then, is our duty? Perhaps we should look to Pope Francis. BBC reports that just recently the Pope stated that indigenous cultures had an inherent right to defend “their ancestral relationship to the earth.”²⁶ Much at odds with United States President Donald Trump, the Pope argues that solidarity with native people is the way for a Christian to approach the issue. As Christians acting in response to the tragedy that is environmental racism, we must ask ourselves, “what makes a human life more important or more valuable than another?” Nothing. In the eyes of God, we are all equal, and it is our responsibility to care for our brothers and sisters, as Jesus commands in Mark 12:31. We must speak up against the injustice that continues to stain this country.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 167.

²⁶ “Standing Rock: Pope Appears to Back Dakota Pipeline Opponents.” *BBC*, February 15, 2017. Accessed February 15, 2017.