

Addressing “Environmental Justice Communities”: A Nine-Step Response (p. 1 of 2)

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- Step 1. You are right to see yourselves as oppressed.**
Poor minorities do less well than affluent whites, and affluent whites benefit from the gap.
- Step 2. You are right to see us as complicit in your oppression.**
There may be specific things the company has done, or the complicity may be simply that companies are run mostly by rich whites. It may be racism or the company may be an “equal opportunity oppressor.” But surely it is the nature of the powerful to take advantage of the less powerful.
- Step 3. You have considerable power now to reduce your oppression.**
The company cannot oppress this community today as much as in earlier times or in other communities. [If this isn’t true, you won’t be doing much talking about environmental justice. See Step 2.]
- Step 4. Environmental issues are part of your oppression.**
Oppressed communities bear more weight of pollution than other communities. And this company, this plant adds (or would add) to that weight.
- Step 5. But they are a small part of your oppression.**
With rare exceptions, pollution prevention, reduction, and cleanup rank low in the priorities of oppressed communities, well behind jobs, crime, education, etc.
- Step 6. If you choose, you can leverage your power to demand environmental improvement.**
This is the essence of the environmental justice movement; if environment is your top priority, you are very likely to be able to force us to clean up ... or go away.

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Step 7. If you prefer, you can leverage your power to demand other benefits instead.

Your environmental justice rights are flexible. The ability to force environmental improvements can be “traded in” for other company-funded benefits. We think we can provide more benefits for less cost in non-environmental arenas. And we think the community can achieve a package that leaves it better off with us than without us.

Step 8. Environmental regulation will operate nonetheless.

The government requires the company to meet environmental standards no matter where the community puts its priorities. The question is whether you prefer to push for higher levels of environmental protection than the government considers necessary or to push for other benefits instead.

Step 9. The choice is yours.

The company is in the unaccustomed position of supplicant. We hope you will want to profit off of us more than you want to punish us. (But if punishing us takes priority we will have only ourselves to blame.) Environmental activists, on the other hand, hope you will want to exercise your new-won power on behalf of their policy views. We’re both hanging on your every word.

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