

As we celebrate Earth Day 2021, we do so remembering George Floyd in Minneapolis, MN. Breonna Taylor in Louisville, KY., Ahmaud Arbery in Glynn County, GA., Marcus-David Peters in Richmond, VA, and countless other victims of police violence who sparked last summer's protests. Recently, a police officer right here in Virginia has been fired after pointing a gun at, and pepper spraying, a black US Army lieutenant during a traffic stop. We do so saying emphatically that Black Lives Matter! We do so asserting that because Black lives matter, Black *environments* matter as well. We need to address the ways systematic racism determines the air we breathe, the water we drink, the communities in which we live, the toxins which surround us, and the burdens we suffer from climate change.

In 1982 African American civil rights leader Benjamin Chavis spoke of "environmental racism." He described it as "racial discrimination in environmental policy-making, the enforcement of regulations and laws, the deliberate targeting of communities of color for toxic waste facilities, the official sanctioning of the life-threatening presence of poisons and pollutants in our communities, and the history of excluding people of color from leadership of the ecology movements."

Here is what environmental racism looks like in Virginia:

- Two Fracked gas power plants are proposed in Charles City County, where 44% of residents are Black, and 7% are indigenous.
- In the East End of Newport News, where the majority of residents are Black, rail shipments of coal and Interstate 664 slice through the neighborhood. Asthma, heart disease, and chronic lower-respiratory disease death rates are higher than in other areas of the Peninsula Health District and in the state of Virginia.
- In January of 2020, the U.S. Court of Appeals threw out the eighth Dominion Energy permit for a fracked gas compressor and pipeline planned to go through Union Hill, a historically Black community in Buckingham County.

In short, if you are poor, if you are a person of color, if you are disadvantaged, you are very likely to suffer the most as a result of environmental degradation.

Black communities have become frontline communities who disproportionately suffer the burden of climate change. On August 24, 2020, the New York Times ran an article titled: "How Decades of Racist Housing Policy Left Neighborhoods Sweltering". The article reviews research linking environmental health disparities in the city of Richmond with the historic, racist practice of *redlining*. A 20th-century practice by federal and local officials as well as banks and realtors, redlining reinforced racial segregation in cities and diverted investment from minority neighborhoods. Today the scars of this form of systemic racism appear as ongoing inequities suffered by Black communities in Richmond and across the nation, including disparities in the urban heat environment. Cut through by polluting highways, devoid of tree canopy and surrounded by heat-trapping pavement, historically redlined communities suffer

disproportionately from heat-related illness. Heat is the nation's deadliest weather disaster, killing as many as 12,000 people a year.

How do we ensure that the wonders of the natural world are used in a sustainable, equitable way? How do we address the costs of abusing the earth that Black, poor, and brown communities inequitably suffer? We do so by taking measures to listen carefully to the cry of the earth and the peoples who suffer the most from climate change and environmental degradation. Pope Francis says it best in his encyclical, *Laudato Si'*: "We have to realize that a true ecological approach always becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor."

The environment and the people that inhabit it are interconnected; all of God's creation is one. God calls us to be stewards of the resources which we have been given, to look out for one another by sharing and collaborating, rather than grabbing up everything we can get now and worrying about others later. We know that God's gift of creation can enable us to thrive through good soil for planting, clean air to breathe, beauty to enjoy. So, then, what conditions of poverty do we condemn people to when we destroy or mistreat this great gift?

There is good news: Virginia's Environmental Justice Advisory Board became a permanent advisory body to the Executive Branch in June 2020. It is a 27 member council to provide recommendations to the governor to maintain environmental justice principles. Chief among those principles is the commitment to amplify the voice of communities most impacted by climate change and environmental degradation. Black Lives matter! Black voices and environments matter! The Environmental Justice Advisory Board initiates a conscious and inclusive approach toward decision-making that considers how our laws and policies affect our environment, protecting the environment for all.

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