

# What is environmental justice?

By Gale, Cengage Learning, adapted by Newsela staff on 11.16.17

Word Count **1,008**

Level **1090L**



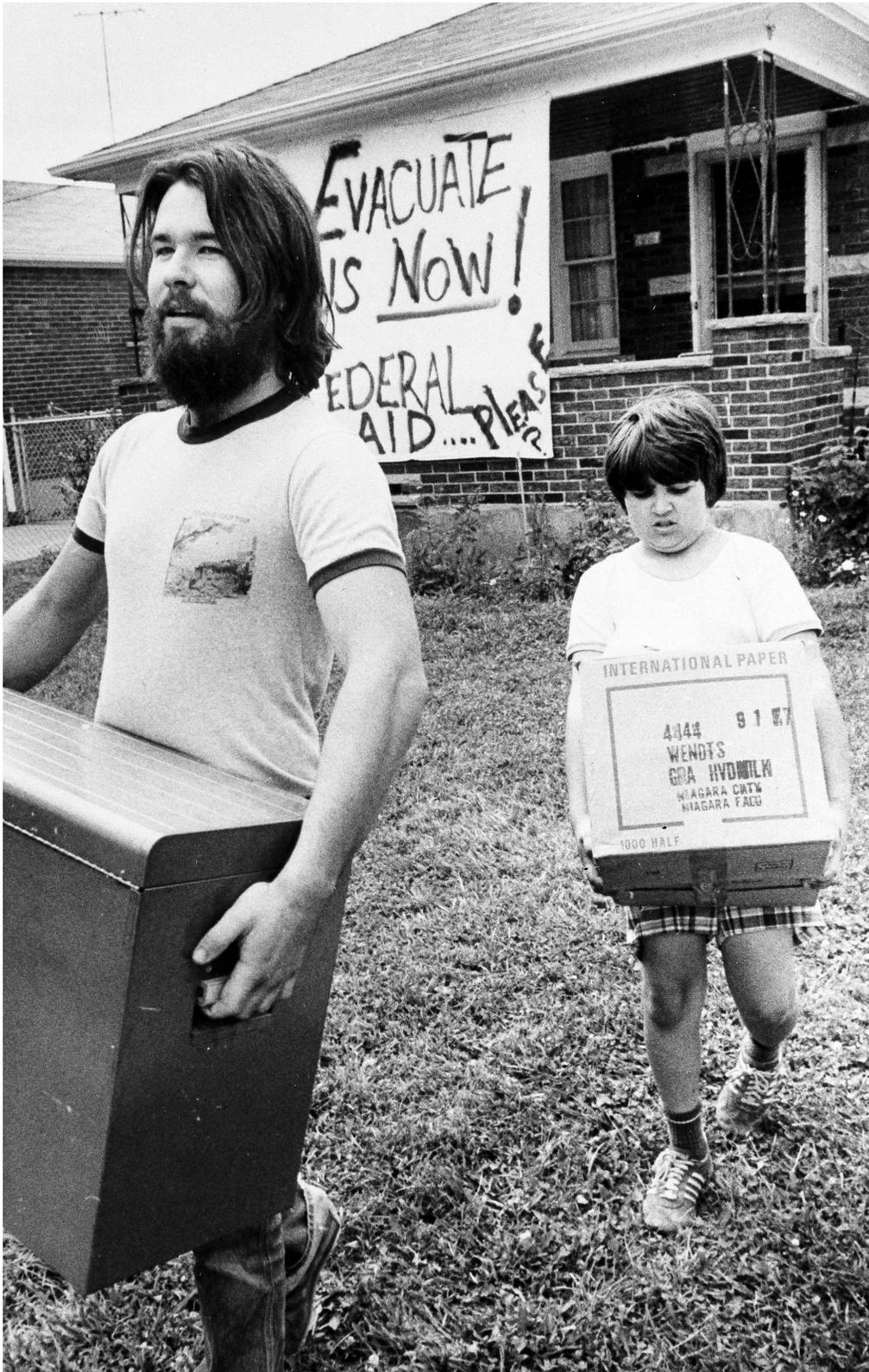
Protesters against the Dakota Access Pipeline and Keystone XL Pipeline hold a sit-in in the street next to the San Francisco Federal Building in January 2017. Demonstrations against these pipelines are part of the present-day fight for environmental justice, protesters say. Photo by: Wikimedia/Public Domain

What is environmental justice? The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) defines environmental justice as the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income when it comes to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations and policies.

In other words, environmental justice means that every person has the right to be treated equally to the benefits of a healthy environment, and that every person has the right to be involved in decisions about what happens to that environment.

## **Environmental Justice Movement Fights**

The beginnings of the environmental justice movement in the United States might be seen as protests led by Lois Gibbs (1951–). In 1978 she protested the contamination of a neighborhood known as “Love Canal” in upstate New York. Gibbs and other families complained that their children had gotten sick from toxic waste buried under their town in the 1950s. The activists wanted to stop corporations from dumping hazardous wastes in local communities. Various industries dumped hazardous waste into local ecosystems in different ways, including releasing substances into rivers, burying waste in the ground, and releasing it into the air.



Activists realized that this pollution was causing health problems for people who lived near these areas. They protested as a way to get the government to take action. The efforts of Gibbs and her neighbors led to the creation of the Comprehensive Response, Compensation, and Liability Act of 1980. The law allowed the U.S. government to collect millions of dollars from those responsible for the pollution.

In September 1982, the state government of North Carolina decided to dump 6,000 tons of soil contaminated with polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) into a newly built landfill in Afton, a section of the town of Shocco, in Warren County. PCBs are a human-made chemical proven to cause cancer. They are used in electrical transformers and to cool machine tools.

In 1973, a company called Ward Transformers had dumped 31,000 gallons of PCBs onto the side of a road. The PCBs entered the soil. The government of North Carolina decided to remove all the contaminated soil and deposit it into a landfill. As the soil was being transported by dump trucks to the disposal site, protesters began lying in the street to prevent the trucks from passing.

### **Protesters Feared Chemicals Would Enter Water Supply**

The protesters were citizens from the town who believed that the harmful chemicals would get into their water supply and cause health problems for themselves, their pets, and their farm animals. For six weeks people held nonviolent protests. They wouldn't get their way, though.

The soil was still dumped into the landfill. Even though this can be seen as a defeat, it drew national attention through the media's coverage of the protests. This created a shift in the public's attitude, from "Not in my backyard" to "Not in anyone's backyard." The change in attitude helped to solidify the importance of the environmental justice movement.

### **Linking Hazardous Waste Dump Sites To Race**

The Warren County protest also inspired groups to create studies that brought a new focus on race to the environmental justice movement. The studies proved minorities and the communities they lived in were receiving hazardous wastes more than other communities. One such study came out in 1987 and was very important: "Toxic Waste and Race in the United States."

The early 1990s were key to the environmental justice movement.

An important book came out about toxic waste dumped in lower-class communities where mainly people of color lived. Environmental justice groups wrote a letter that asked other environmental groups to step up in the movement. The First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit happened in Washington, D.C. The summit offered people advice about making the movement stronger both in their communities and nationally.

## **President Clinton's Order Gives Boost To Movement**

President Bill Clinton issued an important executive order in 1994 that gave the environmental justice movement a boost. Clinton decided to require that the government include environmental justice in its policies and programs. His order prevented the federal government from dumping hazardous waste in low-income neighborhoods. It also forced those responsible for the waste to find safer alternative solutions.

The environmental justice movement is worldwide today. Environmental justice is essential to sustainability because environmental justice addresses how people are affected by decisions made about environmental issues by considering connections between those decisions and their impacts on the members of the communities affected.

## **Indigenous People Fight Pipeline Project**

Indigenous people are often at the front lines of the environmental justice movement.



One example is #NoDAPL. The hashtag is about protests that began in 2016. The goal of the protests was to stop the Dakota Access Pipeline project. The company behind project wanted the pipeline to carry oil underground from Illinois to North Dakota. The #NoDAPL protests started at the Standing Rock Indian Reservation, which is in North Dakota and South Dakota. Members of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe were upset that the pipeline would go through their lands, and worried it would pollute their water if it leaked. They also worried the pipeline would disrupt sacred burial grounds. Thousands of people came to protest with them. At the end of 2016 the government blocked the pipeline from being finished. Barack Obama was still president back then, but things changed. Donald Trump became president in January 2017, and he said he would let construction continue.

The protesters could not stop the project, but they still made a difference. The protests attracted much attention from the news media. A lot of people across the world paid more attention to the environmental justice movement as a result.

**Quiz**

1 Which two of the following sentences from the article include CENTRAL ideas of the article?

1. *In other words, environmental justice means that every person has the right to be treated equally to the benefits of a healthy environment, and that every person has the right to be involved in decisions about what happens to that environment.*
2. *In 1978 she protested the contamination of a neighborhood known as “Love Canal” in upstate New York.*
3. *In September 1982, the state government of North Carolina decided to dump 6,000 tons of soil contaminated with polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) into a newly built landfill in Afton, a section of the town of Shocco, in Warren County.*
4. *The Warren County protest also inspired groups to create studies that brought a new focus on race to the environmental justice movement.*

- (A) 1 and 2  
(B) 1 and 4  
(C) 2 and 3  
(D) 3 and 4

2 Which of the following summaries of this article is both accurate and objective?

- (A) People have not yet been very effective at helping the environment through protests.
- (B) People need to continue to come together if they hope to make a sustainable change in our planet.
- (C) Presidents need to be on the side of the environment to save the planet before it is too late.
- (D) Movements and protests have successfully raised awareness toward environmental issues.

- 3 Read the following sentence from the section "Environmental Justice Movement Fights."

*Various industries dumped hazardous waste into local ecosystems in different ways, including releasing substances into rivers, burying waste in the ground, and releasing it into the air.*

Which answer choice is the BEST definition of the word "ecosystems" as used in the sentence?

- (A) neighborhoods
  - (B) houses
  - (C) environments
  - (D) families
- 4 Read the paragraph from the section "Environmental Justice Movement Fights."

*In September 1982, the state government of North Carolina decided to dump 6,000 tons of soil contaminated with polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) into a newly built landfill in Afton, a section of the town of Shocco, in Warren County. PCBs are a human-made chemical proven to cause cancer. They are used in electrical transformers and to cool machine tools.*

Which word from the paragraph helps you to understand that polychlorinated biphenyls are dangerous to humans?

- (A) government
- (B) soil
- (C) cancer
- (D) transformers