

The Moral Case for Environmental Justice

We must treat others as we ourselves would want to be treated. No other principle has ever been shown to result in greater potential for human flourishing.

The earth is a gift bestowed upon all humanity. And with it comes a central tenant of the moral life —that we are all part of an interconnected community of life. To be a moral person demands that we treat others as we would want to be treated because, on a profound level, we rise or fall together. No other principle has ever been shown to result in greater potential for human flourishing. **When making critical decisions that have environmental impacts, we must hold ourselves accountable for our choices, individually and collectively, personally and politically.**

America has a deep and painful history of environmental injustice with polluting industries being concentrated in poor communities and communities of color which historically have not had the resources to effectively resist. Environmental racism is of particular concern. In 2007, the United Church of Christ Commission on Racial Justice reported: “...**people of color are found to be more concentrated around hazardous waste facilities.**” There are documented cases of environmental injustice in Maryland targeting low-income communities regardless of race, and others targeting communities of color, regardless of income. When industrial development follows the path of least resistance, driven solely by a profitable bottom line, people and communities suffer.

The Human Experience of Environmental Injustice in Maryland: Three Stories



“Children born in Brandywine will suffer severe pollution every day...”

1. Environmental burdens are higher in some regions

Brandywine in southern Prince George’s County is a majority African American community with a median income that exceeds the state average. The community has historically been a sacrifice zone of high polluting industrial facilities. Surface mining, power plants, a coal ash landfill, a Superfund site, and truck traffic are all contributing pollution here. In this region, there are five (5) permitted power plants within a 13-mile radius, including two that are fully built and two under construction. Director of Bethel House in Brandywine, Ethel Shepard-Powell is worn down by the oppressive nature of repeated permitting of plants in Brandywine. “Children born in Brandywine will suffer pollution every day for the rest of their lives. If you go outside your house, go to school, no matter where you are, you will be affected by this your whole life.” What Ethel wants is pretty simple: **“All I ask is that no more power plants are built in Brandywine. That’s all.”**

2. Locked out of decisions in their own communities

Home to the epicenter of the poultry industry in Maryland, Somerset County chicken-houses generate millions of pounds of poultry manure and other wastes. The heavy concentration of these facilities in Somerset County is concerning, but now even more so is the placement of a municipal size 'manure to energy' bio-digester power plant to manage the chicken waste. In addition to community concerns that the technology is still undergoing development and has not been widely used successfully, the size of this plant will require stockpiled storage of chicken waste, increased truck traffic to transport the waste, and significant withdrawal of groundwater to start up the system. According to the 2010 US Census, Somerset County is 42.4% African American, by far the greatest percentage of all the Eastern Shore counties. Based on median household income, 25% of residents live in poverty, almost double the national average. **It appears that diminished capacity of the community to engage in the decision-making process has been exploited with the sole goal to expand poultry production at any cost.**



"I feel disrespected, like they're taking advantage of us."

3. Where protections exist, enforcement is spotty

Pat Tracey was born and raised in Baltimore and remembers a time when demolition of vacant buildings with a wrecking ball would spew dust about the neighborhood. Kids walking to Tench Tilghman Middle School would be passing alongside these demo sites in order to get to and from school, exposed to the respiratory risks of lead dust and asbestos. **It wasn't until the early 2000s when residents, researchers, and public health officials started advocating for change that new demolition standards were put in place.** Residents worked with City regulators to require that water be sprayed over demolition activities to control dust. But, Pat says, adherence to the dust control standard remains spotty, and often residents are not informed when these activities will be taking place.

"The neighborhood deserves to be informed. When you don't have those conversations, then the contractor feels like nobody's watching and they do what they want. I feel disrespected, like they're taking advantage of us."

If we are convinced children should be protected from violence and abuse, then protecting children from life-shortening lead and asbestos dust is also society's moral duty. Residents should be well informed and empowered to assure full enforcement of the standard.



What's Legal Isn't Always Moral – Maryland Can Do Better

The preceding stories demonstrate that Maryland laws have failed to protect its citizens from environmental injustice. Specifically, in 2015 in the case of power plant permitting in Brandywine, the Maryland Public Service Commission said: "If a proposed plant to be sited in Brandywine meets all legal requirements, the fact that other plants are located nearby is not a legal restriction to another one being built. This is true even though the negative impacts of a plant fall most severely upon Brandywine while the benefits are distributed across a much larger geographic area."¹

This is immoral and is the most blatant proof that just because an action is "legal" doesn't make it right.

Powerless communities are casualties of the failing of our moral compass. Without a moral compass, decisions are driven by the quest for money and power. Maryland laws alone have failed to guide a just and fair society, in which environmental degradation is minimized and no group disproportionately endures environmental hazards.

Maryland must be at the forefront of confronting environmental injustice through developing policies that promote safe, fair, and healthy living conditions for all. Maryland must acknowledge the systemic failures of the past that have allowed environmental racism and injustice to proliferate, and take seriously the moral implications of all future actions.

¹Order No. 87243, Public Service Commission Case No. 9330, Docket. No. 126 (Nov. 13, 2015) at 10-11.

*Prepared by a coalition of environmental justice advocates,
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