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Environmental Justice

“Environmentalism in the United States has always been as diverse as our country itself. In the 19th century, for example, African-American abolitionists fought slavery as well as the use of arsenic in tobacco fields. Later, Cesar Chavez and Martin Luther King Jr. were only two of thousands of people of color whose movements for justice set the template for Earth Day.” This and many insights on environmentalism and environmental justice can be found in an article, “The Soul of Environmentalism: Rediscovering Transformational Politics in the 21st Century” by Michel Gelobter, et. al.

As we prepare to celebrate the life and work of Martin Luther King Jr., it’s an apt time to reflect on the issues that affect people who are poor and marginalized in our country. Since the early 1980s, the term “sustainability” has come to focus efforts not only on environmental issues like pollution control and land protection but also social justice, economic sufficiency, and democratic governance. Thus, the movement toward sustainability links closely to environmental justice, and creating a better future for *all* of our children.

According to the Yale Peabody Museum of Natural Science, “Environmental Justice is based on the principle that all members of a society have the right to clean air, water, and soil, as well as a right to live in communities where they can raise their families and send their kids out to play in healthy and nurturing natural environments. Further, it embraces the notion that no one possesses the right to degrade and destroy the environment, whether the government at all levels, private industry, or individual citizens. Finally, environmental justice includes a guarantee of equal access to relief and the possibility of meaningful community participation in the decisions of government and industry.”

It includes the idea of community responsibility and what we owe our children – future generations. This idea also includes the personal responsibility to vote and have a say in our destiny politically and socially. It includes how we manage our resources, including our land, and as Gelobter notes, “It includes a different definition of what it means to be rich on this earth and in the hereafter.”

As www.onearth.org noted in an article from April 2013, part of Martin Luther King Jr.’s “genius, part of his strength, part of what inspires us still, is his recognition that the American dream is not just for the few, it is the sum of all our dreams. That’s what has guided one movement after another in our national quest to build that more perfect union of our forebear's own dreams. Countless decades from now, it will still be what matters most.”

In 1991, Delegates to the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit held in Washington DC, drafted and adopted 17 principles of Environmental Justice. Since then, the Principles have served as a defining document for the growing grassroots movement for

environmental justice. Their website includes the 17 principles and links to information on the disparate burdens on low income and communities of color (see www.ejnet.org/ej/).

Massachusetts developed an Environmental Justice Policy in 2002 (www.mass.gov/eea/grants-and-tech-assistance/environmental-justice-policy.html**).** According to the Massachusetts Department of Energy and Environmental Affairs, in 2010 “nearly 30% of Massachusetts residents lived in ‘Environmental Justice neighborhoods’. These neighborhoods meet economic and/or demographic criteria which may indicate barriers to accessing the state's environmental programs." The state's policy aims to enhance the quality of life for these populations but they need our support to succeed.

We end with a thought from Gelobter’s article: “Writ large, the soul of environmentalism shares with the Civil Rights Movement and many others one central characteristic: empathy. Empathy is what makes us reach out when we see a wounded bird. It is what calls to us when a child suffers from poverty or asthma. It is how we know our children will miss the snow when the latitudes of climate change have passed us by.”

All the material comforts of the world will have little value if we do not take care of the environment that sustains us.

A column by Reading Climate Committee members Gina Snyder, Stephanie Anderberg and Michele Benson