A Case for Environmental Justice

Teacher’s Notes

**This activity/discussion is estimated to take ½ to 1 hour. The optional activities will increase the hours accordingly.**

The purpose of this activity is to help students understand that there are environmental justice issues occurring both in our communities and globally. These issues affect people and the environment alike. But there is a disproportional exposure issue that some of our citizens face. For example, “race is the number one indicator for the placement of toxic facilities in this country.” (NAACP, 2017). So, these issues are not only environmental issues but are also human rights and civil rights issues (social justice). Environmental justice is the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income, with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies. (EPA, 2017)  Students can be part of the solution of scientists, engineers, teachers, activists, policy-makers, artists, communicators, etc who can help prevent or help remediate these injustice issues in their futures. Research shows that community engagement is an indicator of academic student success, particularly with students of color and females. This activity can help engage students in issues they may already be facing and connect them to both regional and international concerns.

**Note:**

This activity can be expanded to address the following Next Generation Science Standard:

*HS-LS2-7 Ecosystems: Interactions, Energy, and Dynamics: Design, evaluate, and refine a solution for reducing the impacts of human activities on the environment and biodiversity.*

To do so, have the student groups, after identifying a particular environmental justice issue, begin the process of designing, evaluating and refining a solution to reduce the reoccurrence potential of that issue or “clean up” the effects of the issue that’s already happened. You may wish to limit the category that the student can choose from to make it more appropriate for your classroom.

Next Generation Science Standards: “Must be organized, maintained, and used in student investigations in a safe and effective manner.”

Supplemental Readings

The following are supplemental readings for you and your students to read more about Environmental Justice:

Environmental Justice Atlas. (2017). Homepage. Retrieved from <https://ejatlas.org/>

Environmental Protection Agency. (2017). Environmental justice. Retrieved from <https://www.epa.gov/environmentaljustice>

Environmental Protection Agency. (2017). Environmental justice timeline. Retrieved from <https://www.epa.gov/environmentaljustice/environmental-justice-timeline>

GreenFaith. (2017). Environmental justice advocacy. Retrieved from <http://www.greenfaith.org/resource-center/justice/environmental-justice-advocacy>

NAACP. (2017). Environmental and climate justice. Retrieved from <http://www.naacp.org/issues/environmental-justice/>

Natural Resources Defense Council. (2017). The environmental justice movement. Retrieved from <https://www.nrdc.org/stories/environmental-justice-movement>

Pachamama Alliance. (2017). How social justice and environmental justice are intrinsically interconnected. Retrieved from <https://www.pachamama.org/blog/how-social-justice-and-environmental-justice-are-intrinsically-interconnected>

University of Washington. (2017). Environmental justice. Retrieved from <http://deohs.washington.edu/environmental-justice>

Student Learning Objectives

At the end of this activity, the student will be able to:

* Identify environmental justice issues.
* Recognize the impact that environmental justice issues has on affected populations.
* Discuss issues of environmental impact, community impact, and policy-impact related to justice issues.
* Propose solutions to prevent the occurrence of the issue or resolve the current issue.
* (Optional) Design a solution to address an environmental justice issue.

Real World Application

There are thousands of environmental justice issues around the globe. If there are issues and threats in your community, you understand how close to home these issues are. If there are not, you might find they are closer thank you think. By understanding the root of the causes, and considering ways to fix those issues, we may be able to prevent them from continuing to happen.

Activity Instructions

**For this activity**

Gather into groups of 2-3 and choose an event on the Environmental Justice Atlas (EJ Atlas) map, either where you live or an event you’ve heard about in the news, etc. Your teacher may direct you to choose one from a particular category, such as fossil fuels and climate justice.

<https://ejatlas.org/>

*More About the Environmental Justice Atlas from their website:*

“The EJ Atlas collects … stories of communities struggling for environmental justice from around the world. It aims to make these mobilization more visible, highlight claims and testimonies and to make the case for true corporate and state accountability for the injustices inflicted through their activities. It also attempts to serve as a virtual space for those working on environmental justice issues to get information, find other groups working on related issues, and increase the visibility of environmental conflicts. The EJ Atlas maps conflicts across 10 main categories:

* Nuclear
* Mineral Ores and Building Extractions
* Waste Management
* Biomass and Land Conflicts
* Fossil Fuels and Climate Justice/Energy
* Water Management
* Infrastructure and Built Environment
* Tourism Recreation
* Biodiversity Conservation Conflicts
* Industrial and Utilities Conflicts

When you find a relevant event, click on the name. This will bring up more detailed information about the event. Spend the next 20-30 minutes researching and discussing more about the details of the event. Consider these questions to guide you through your research:

* Is the event mentioned in the news?
* Was it significantly or poorly covered?
* What additional information did you learn outside of the information on the EJ Atlas page?

Next, determine which populations of people were (or will continue to be) disproportionally affected by this event.

* What are the race, ethnicity, and income characteristics of the population most affected by this environmental justice issue?
* How are issues of race and income related to this environmental justice issue, if at all?
* Think about what barriers there might be for this population/community preventing or fighting this injustice. What are some of the challenges you identified?
* Think about how the community was affected: Were they people who fished the river? Those who lived near the fracking site? Those who used a particular product? Randomly associated with it? Was there an ecological/animal issue instead of a community issue?
* Was there some level of choice whether to be involved in the incidence or not?

Next, discuss the event as if it happened in your backyard or that the vulnerable population was you or your family. How would you view this environmental justice event differently? How do you think the actual people are feeling about this?

Some additional questions to discuss in your group:

* Why do you think this event happened in the first place? What are some of the factors that went into the event occurring?
* What are some suggestions that you can give for changes in policy or law to help prevent this from happening in the future?
* How can science be used to create different or safer alternatives that may prevent this problem from happening again?
* What would you propose as a means to help the affected people or their land?

**Optional Activity**

After discussing the issues and answering these questions within your group, prepare a 3-4 minute summary of the environmental justice issue and present it to the class. Be sure to include:

1. A main summary of the issue
2. The affected population and how they were affected (or continue to be)
3. Any environmental impacts the issue may also have caused
4. Any ideas around how it could have been prevented
5. Any ideas about how to prevent it from happening again in the future.