

Environmental Victims: An Introduction

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*Icky oil all over our feet
Black waters
Our food has run away
Plants have gone bad...*

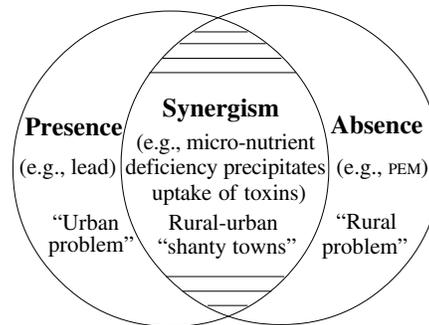
IN THESE FEW WORDS FROM HER POEM, *THE DISGRACE OF SHELL OIL* (SEE p. 10), EIGHT-year-old Mali McGee presents the paradigm of environmental victimization better than many academics. We are not just faced with the consequences of pollution *or* contaminated food *or* land degradation *or* a loss of biodiversity. Human well-being is threatened in distinct, but *related* ways that are complex chemically, although simple conceptually. The threat resides first in the *presence* of environmental agents that injure, such as lead, which we perceive generally as an urban problem. Second, it lies in the *absence* of environmental macro- and micro-nutrients that are vital to human survival, leading to conditions such as Protein Energy Malnutrition (PEM), which is seen mainly as a rural problem caused by land degradation. Most important, yet least considered, it lies in the *synergistic* effects between the two; for example, iron deficiency can precipitate the uptake of lead (see Figure 1).

This last aspect is not just relevant in its biological form. Filthy factories are increasingly relocating to remote rural areas where their impact compounds the rural nutritional problems. These rural threats are also apparent in the towns. Micro-nutrient deficiencies are now a concern in relation to pregnant women in many urban settings, including those from poor areas of London. In Denmark, 75% of adults lack sufficient iodine in their diet. Urbanized endeavors can also create rural problems that return to haunt urban life. In 1996, there were for the first time outbreaks of a rural disease, cerebral malaria, in urban regions of India. This is linked with the overuse of pesticides, dam-building, and the excessive prescription of curative drugs. More graphically, the ever-burgeoning “shanty towns”

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bring together the rural-urban problems creating the social synergism that hosts and precipitates the biological synergism (Williams, 1997).

Figure 1:
Synergistic Effects Between Environmental Agents and Vital Nutrients



These threats are not, of course, "caused" by the environment, but by human beings. So let us start by getting our discourse right. We are talking about environmentally *mediated* hazards. Moreover, the outcomes are not principally diseases and health problems — they are first and foremost injuries and justice problems.

So-called Minamata disease in Japan can neither be caught nor cured. More properly, the term describes an injury resulting from mercury poisoning by known perpetrators. The disease label no doubt contributed to a circumstance whereby it was not until 1995 that compensation was finally awarded. By then, the victims were in their seventies. They received about £16,000 (\$26,600) each for injuries that, had they been caused by medical negligence, would have attracted payments of anything up to £7 million (\$11,637,500). *Chisso* successfully delayed payment for 22 years after the initial court ruling. It is crucial to conceptualize what is happening via our environment in terms of social justice, instead of through medicalized discourse that favors the interests of the perpetrator, or thoughtless phraseology that creates an impression that "the environment" is to blame.

Hit a child on the head with a hammer, causing an intellectual impairment, and the event is seen first as a question of justice, with medicine doing its best to mitigate the consequences. Drive a car using leaded gasoline, causing intellectual impairments in countless children, and the outcome is seen only as a medical problem. A court is not the place to deal with medical problems, so redress is unlikely. The purpose of this issue of *Social Justice* is to challenge the conceptualizations that have created such a warped view of environmentally mediated injury, and to change the perception of those who suffer from that of sick patients who are simply in need of treatment, to that of environmental victims who deserve justice.

Contributors to this issue represent a wide range of interested parties. Naturally, an academic input has its place, but this is greatly illuminated by the perspectives of front-line activists and those within related professions, who are putting ideas into action. In *Part One*, existing concepts are challenged and developed. *Part Two* provides a set of classic case studies that broadly reflect the initial conceptual arguments. *Part Three* provides a glimmer of hope, not so much through documenting success in upholding the rights of environmental victims — it is too early for that — as through showing that we are at least able to come up with ideas that might change the world for the better.

The conceptual starting point for *Part One* is the environmental justice movement. A few decades ago this emergent U.S. movement challenged the white middle-class perception that environmental problems only concerned the natural world. Activists, especially from minority groups, suffering the effects of environmentally mediated poisoning reminded the world that saving humans is as important as saving whales. The impact of the movement has been effective, but it, too, has its limitations. As the introductory article argues, it is time for complementary thinking that moves us from an exclusively activist stance framed in the light of U.S. experience, to a broader and more objective framework that has global relevance. Not least is the need for a definition of “environmental victim” and “environmental causation” that does not lead to the dismissal of subsequent arguments as merely concerning a peripheral quality-of-life debate.

Peter Penz develops this baseline through a meticulous discussion in relation to state sovereignty and national borders. In an earlier issue of *Social Justice*, Merideth and Brown (1995) provided an outline of the practical aspects of this debate, in relation to the Mexican *maquiladoras*. “If you want to get there — I wouldn't start from here” is a common quip, expressing frustration in relation to international agencies, global governance, and cross-border ecopolitics. We must nonetheless start from here — the nation-state — though Penz quickly takes his argument from a succinct appreciation of its benefits to the point at which “a federal system of divided authority, extended down to the local level and up to the global level” starts to appear feasible.

“Glocal” — the word that reminds of the necessary relationship between the global and the local — is also the theme of Sharon Stephens' article, which deals with that locally omnipresent, but globally invisible minority, children. She further elaborates the starting point of the first article and questions why the environmental justice movement has largely forgotten the specific concerns of children — an inherent problem among social movements, which tend by their nature to be adult-centered. Stephens reminds us that children need not be seen just as vulnerable victims. They can be part of our common fight against environmental injustice. Things are changing. At the time of this *Social Justice* issue going to press, the EPA released a much-needed report detailing the health threats faced by children from toxics in the environment.

In *Part Two*, the case studies cover some of the classic stories from the end of the second millennium. Anthropologist Alicia Fentiman makes a unique contribution to the study of environmental victimization through a culturally informed analysis of the circumstances in the Niger Delta. Her approach is quite distinct from the “race” perspectives of the U.S. environmental justice literature.

The Union Carbide poisoning at Bhopal has already received attention in *Social Justice*, from a theoretical standpoint in relation to corporate crime (Pearce and Tombs, 1989: 116–144). By contrast, the Bhopal activist Satinath Sarangi provides a current update of circumstances in Bhopal and an insightful assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the victim movement, displaying a sense of balance that is rare from an observer who has been so closely involved.

The case of RTZ in Bougainville should rank with the Union Carbide (Bhopal) poisoning in importance. Yet Bougainville is an isolated island in the South Pacific, far from the gaze of the media, and events are an embarrassment to responsible states and to the responsible sector of the commercial world. Thus, its problems remain largely unknown. Rosemary Gillespie is an Australian barrister and environmental activist, who takes great personal risks to assist and monitor the conditions of victims in Bougainville. Her article nearly did not make the deadline for this issue because she was cut off behind the Papuan blockade. Although it eventually arrived in a format far from that normally required by *Social Justice*, it is to the credit of the journal’s editors that they took circumstances, and the importance of the paper, into account and worked from what they were given. Let us hope that Gillespie’s article helps to put Bougainville more firmly on the global human rights agenda.

When nations are in political transition, environmental issues become a low public and state priority. The case of Central and Eastern Europe is an obvious example. There, although environmental activism played a part in bringing about political change leading to the events of 1989, environmental victimization remains rampant. South Africa is the other example. It seems unlikely that there could ever be a public uprising against the Mandela government because of, for instance, a polluting state industry. Yet, despite competing demands, the South African Constitution set a world benchmark in relation to adverse environmental impacts on human beings. Intentionally or not, Article 29 would relate to the whole environmental victimization paradigm (Figure 1), not just the *presence* aspect. Moreover, it might even embrace acts by South African citizens that affect others outside South Africa’s borders. It states, without qualification, that “Every person shall have the right to an environment which is not detrimental to his or her health or well-being” (Article 29, Act 200, 1993).

In light of the unique circumstances of this region in transition, Meena Singh, of the South Africa Common Security Forum, outlines current problems and priorities, supporting her arguments with some surprising and little-known facts and figures. Reflecting the discussion by Peter Penz, she does this not only in

relation to one nation, but also in the context of the whole Southern African region.

Part Three seeks light at the end of the tunnel. The "Good Neighbor Agreements" pioneered and documented in this issue by Sanford Lewis with Diane Henkels are one of the most interesting approaches. Working *with*, as opposed to against, potential polluters at a local level must surely be better than constant conflict between environmentalists and industry. Yet the strategy evolved in a rich nation where local communities have at their disposal well-resourced local administrators and educated individuals, able and willing to embark on the often frustrating journey toward better preventive policy. Could this approach be developed in the poorer nations?

Occupational health has long been the flagship of environmental medicine, because the endeavors of the early trade unions brought the problems of workplace hazards to the fore. However, trade unions and occupational health were essentially Western ideas, and many of the resultant approaches are barely relevant in poorer communities. Françoise Barten and Susan Fustukian provide an insightful but well-moderated critique of this circumstance, which carries a crucial message if our Western perspective of work-related environmental victimization is not to contribute further to the intellectual imperialism that has so often hampered the efforts of indigenous academics and policymakers in less-wealthy countries. A 1995 edition of *Social Justice* (Volume 22, No. 4) provides a complementary line of argument from Barry Levy.

The final sign of optimism comes in the form of the *Charter of Rights Against Industrial Hazards*. Hope does not derive simply from the Charter itself; if anything, it is further evidence of a seemingly intractable problem. It comes from the extraordinary success of the Permanent Peoples' Tribunal in creating a forum for testing the arguments that underlie the quest for justice for environmental victims. The Tribunal's meetings were not empty talking shops where academics simply reproduced further kilobytes of problematization and prescription, questioned only by other academics from the same intellectual club. It was a dynamic forum in which activists, victims, industrialists, lawyers, medics, and other professionals came together with academics to present individual cases that were then challenged vigorously as in a court of law. The result is not only a cogent and unified view, but also a robust construction of a necessary extension of human rights.

Ultimately, environmental victimization must be seen in the context of the broader global security framework. The traditional security and economic agendas have always dictated the political priorities in relation to environmental concerns. Who better to describe the broader linkages than Ken Saro-Wiwa, Jr. (1995: 15):

According to *Scorched Earth*, by Williams Thomson, "in every country except Costa Rica, the military dwarfs secondary sectors such

as...environmental protection, whose funding, expertise, and attention are...pre-empted by national security priorities.” The slow destruction of the Ogoni’s livelihood by the ecologically careless policies of Shell is of little concern to the Federal government of Nigeria — it’s secondary to the need to safeguard the vital oil revenues that provide 90% of Nigeria’s foreign exchange earnings. Thus, to protest against this devastation is to protest against “national security priorities.” The instruments for enforcing national security — the armed forces — are turned on law-abiding citizens, because the survival of communities like the Ogoni is effectively judged inimical to the survival of the nation.

It is time for change. The rethinking of the post-Cold War security agenda to embrace environmental concerns, epitomized by the title of Gwyn Prins’ book, *Threats Without Enemies* (1993), increasingly presents environmental victimization as a matter of human security — at the personal, national, and global levels.

As the case of Ken Saro-Wiwa reminds us, however, we must continually question: Security of whom? Security against what? The aim of this special issue of *Social Justice* is to provide better arguments to help us ensure that these questions can be asked more effectively to prevent further events like those perpetrated by the Nigerian government, the oil industry that created the “black waters” that Mali McGee complains of, and the countless others who are daily implicated in environmental victimization.

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