The complicated history of environmental racism

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Red Water Pond Road: Community uranium tailings spill commemoration 2018. Credit: Myrriah Gómez

Many people understand the environment as a force of nature that cannot favor or disfavor different populations. However, similar to all things on Earth, the environment is subject to human influences. Unfortunately, these influences often tend to lower their hands to the worsts of our society including racism and classism. This can ultimately create environmental racism.

Honors College Assistant Professor Myrriah Gómez studies environmental racism and specifically their effects in New Mexico. When introducing the topic, she notes that Dr. Benjamin Chavis initially coined the term "environmental racism," but a comprehensive definition comes from Robert Bullard in his book "Dumping in Dixie."

Bullard defines environmental racism as "any policy, practice or directive that differentially affects or disadvantages (where intended or unintended) individuals, groups or communities based on race."

Environmental racism refers to how minority group neighborhoods—populated primarily by people of color and members of low-socioeconomic backgrounds—are burdened with disproportionate numbers of hazards including toxic waste facilitates, garbage dumps, and other sources of environmental pollutions and foul odors that lower the quality of life. This can lead to different diseases and cancers. Because of this, as the fight with climate change worsens, minority communities will be disproportionally affected.

These disparities are entirely due to power dynamics. In a study done by Nicholas Carnes in his book The Cash Ceiling, he broke down how in 2018, millionaires make up only three percent of the public, yet they control all three branches of the federal government. While more than fifty percent of U.S. citizens hold working-class jobs, less than two percent of Congress has held a blue-collar job before their Congressional career. In addition, no member from the working class has gone on to become a United States President or Supreme Court Justice. Most were millionaires before getting elected or appointed to the position.

This disparity also relays over racially. In a study done by Robin DiAngelo in White Fragility, she showed that in 2016, 90 percent of

Congress is white, and 96 percent of U.S. Governors are white. In addition, the top-10 richest Americans are also white.

This tends to be perpetuated into policies which is one way that environmental racism is perpetuated. This situation is simple. When government officials or other individuals or groups in power are faced with the decision of where to place the newest hazardous waste facility or dump site, they typically do not want it to be placed in their backyard, and instead, they decide to place these hazardous waste facilities and dumpsites in communities filled with people who do not look like them or fall under the same tax bracket.

Environmental Justice and People Acting Against It

The fight for environmental justice took off in 1982 when protests erupted in Warren County—a predominately Black community in North Carolina—over the plan to place a hazardous waste landfill in their community. Following these protests, the Environmental Protections Agency investigated three similar landfills in Southern states like South Carolina and Alabama and found that they were all located in Black or low-income areas.

Gómez notes that a large push for policy revolving around environmental justice came from a report by the United Church of Christ Racial Justice Commission done in 1987. The report titled Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States: A National Report on the Racial and Socio-Economic Characteristics of Communities with Hazardous Waste Sites was the first report of its kind and found that most hazardous waste sites were more likely to be located in minority communities.

This sparked a series of governmental actions for environmental justice starting with President George H. W. Bush founding the Office of Environmental Justice within the EPA. President Bill Clinton furthered these protections by signing an executive order that required federal agencies to address environmental justice in minority populations and low-income populations in all of their policies.

However, these efforts were not fully established because Congress never passed a bill to make the executive order law. Because of this, President George W. Bush was able to shift the focus of the Office of Environmental Justice from low income and minority communities to all people leaving vulnerable populations without a federal advocate.

While President Barack Obama recommitted to fighting for environmental justice, no firm legislation was not passed. Under President Donald Trump's administration, the EPA budget and regulations have been rolled back. This ultimately leads to vulnerable communities to fall through the cracks.

Environmental Racism Within New Mexico

Unfortunately, New Mexico is no different when it comes to environmental racism. According to Gómez, environmental racism has been deeply ingrained in the history of New Mexico and can be traced back to before it became a state.

Following the Mexican American War, the United States signed the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo which states that the newly acquired territories would become states as quickly as possible. While states like California were quickly adopted into the union because they were rich in resources such as gold, it took more than 60 years for New Mexico to become a state. One of the predominant reasons for this delay was the population in this region being predominately Indigenous and Mexican.

In an effort to gain statehood, Gómez states that Anglos in the region relied heavily on immigration from the eastern part of the U.S. to change the social make-up from Indigenous and Mexican to white. This falls heavy when political influencers at the time, like William G. Ritch, made claims that Indigenous and Mexican communities did not know how to tend to their land, and New Mexico needed the help of Euro-Americans to truly succeed. Others, like L. Bradford Prince, pushed an identity onto Mexicans that they were Spanish, thus white, and the U.S. should accept them on this basis.

"Throughout this time [the nineteenth century], New Mexico was pushing for statehood. Up to that point, people from the Mid-West or the East Coast were considering New Mexico as uninhabited and a barren wasteland," explains Gómez. "They [Euro-American politicians] paint this picture of New Mexico as a wasteland and if more Euro-Americans [were to] come, they were going to change that makeup and truly utilize the resources here. This sets the scene for having nuclear waste in New Mexico."

Gómez goes on to note that encouraging the immigration of Euro-Americans to New Mexico was purely capitalistic in purpose, and resources in the region became a commodity. While New Mexico already had a history of forcing Indigenous populations off of their land, encouraging Euro-American immigration caused native New Mexican populations to lose more land and other resources while emphasizing a white savior complex. White savior complex refers to a white person who provides help to non-white people in a self-serving manner. This often shows itself as a white person assuming that a non-white person needs their help to succeed.

The concept of a barren wasteland made its return to New Mexico politics when the federal government was deciding where to test the first atomic bomb. New Mexico's Trinity test and the Manhattan Project were infamous for kick-starting the use of nuclear arms; however, they were detrimental to the communities here. In fact, New Mexico was not at the top of the shortlist for the Manhattan Project.

"New Mexico, and the Pajarito Plateau, was not the prime location for the Manhattan Project," states Gómez. There were more suitable locations identified. One of these was Oak City, Utah, but in Oak City, Utah, they would have had to displace 40 white, Mormon farming families."

New Mexico was ultimately chosen at the recommendation of lead scientist Robert Oppenheimer. Meanwhile, Hispanics and Indigenous populations were forced to relocate from the Pajarito Plateau in Los Alamos.

"The Manhattan Project, in 1942, decided Los Alamos was the best place to site Project Y and using eminent domain, forcibly removed Mexican American peoples living there. This was an unlawful taking of land, and many of the residents were not properly notified before they were removed," Gómez explains. "Reports of the time say that they abandoned animals that the Military Police used as target practice. Farming and ranching implements were abandoned. Families lost their livelihoods, and many lost their homes. They were not properly compensated as required by the law, and as a result, a class-action lawsuit was filed and settled on behalf of homesteaders and their families almost 60 years later."

While the Trinity test was conducted in an area with relatively no immediate surrounding communities, that did not leave communities downwind of the site without environmental repercussions. Gómez explains that the communities downwind of the site suffered from severe negative effects health-wise.

"Regardless of whether or not they knew then, they know now what the effects are, and the government has never conducted a large-scale study to fully understand the effects, including health disparities caused by the Trinity test," explains Gómez. "Hispanic communities in the surrounding area were ignored before the siting of the Trinity test site and, as a result, have been living with the consequences of nuclear fallout since then. The Radiation Exposure Compensation Act has never included the Trinity down-winders who are predominantly Hispanic and Indigenous. The government refused to even extend an apology to these communities."

New Mexico's history with environmental racism is far from over. In 1980, Congress passed the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act (CERLCA)—most commonly known as the Superfund Act—which is designed to identify hazardous sites that threaten the environment or pose public health concerns as a result of leaks, spills, or poor management and identify the responsible party. Gómez explains that once the party is identified, measures are put in place to clean the area. But this often takes years, even decades.

"Currently, there are 21 Superfund sites in New Mexico on EPA's National Priorities List, including three in Albuquerque," states Gómez. "Several of the New Mexico Superfund sites are the result of the nuclear legacy in New Mexico, including uranium mining."

The nuclear legacy that Gómez mentions dates back to the Manhattan Project but has jump-started again in the past two decades. Gómez states that the rhetoric surrounding the concept of a barren wasteland continues to find its way into New Mexico's current environmental issues especially in terms of what is considered New Mexico's Nuclear Corridor.

Much of the jump-start is linked to initiatives created by the Eddy-Lea Energy Alliance and is directly traced back to the placement of the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP) in Eddy County. Advocated for by the Eddy-Lea Energy Alliance, in 1999, WIPP was placed in

Southeastern New Mexico and was designed to hold nuclear waste and was placed there under the basis that the region was dry and isolated. While WIPP used similar rhetoric as the Manhattan Project to place the nuclear waste in New Mexico, it also predominately disadvantages the same communities.

"The Eddy-Lea Energy Alliance is made up of mostly white folks who have vested interests in these businesses. They are the same people who own hotels in the city are the same that are sitting on the boards that make these proposals to bring these high-level and low-level waste facilities to southern New Mexico," explains Gómez. "When you look at the makeup of Eddy and Lea County, 64.8 percent of the population identify as people of color. Eddy County 53.8 percent of the population identifies as people of color. 41.5 percent of households in Lea and 26.6 percent in Lea speak a language other than language, which is predominately Spanish."

In recent years, the Eddy-Lea Energy Alliance has pushed to create and expand a nuclear corridor in southeast New Mexico through the placement of a high-level nuclear dump under the company Holtec International—a site that would be the only repository for high-level nuclear waste. Although they claim this site would temporarily hold high-level nuclear waste, no long-term repository site exists, which would make Holtec the de facto permanent facility for the entire nation.

"More recent examples of environmental racism deal with new siting proposals like the current Holtec International proposal to build a high-level radioactive waste facility in southern New Mexico," says Gómez. "Nearby communities that are comprised of a large number of Hispanics and Spanish speakers. Those communities have mostly been left out of the process. The New Mexico Environmental Department also gave DOE a temporary authorization to dig a new shaft at WIPP, the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant, without a permit. There was no public hearing.

Vital information was not provided in Spanish. That is environmental racism."

While New Mexico is adding more toxic waste to the environment, many New Mexico Superfund sites have yet to see any moves for cleaning the damage that has already been done.

"The Jackpile Paguate uranium mine in Laguna Pueblo as well as the United Nuclear Corporation mine, which was responsible for the 1979 Church Rock uranium spill near Red Water Pond Road community, are both Superfund sites, meaning they have not been cleaned up since the sites were closed in the early 1980s."

Gómez notes that environmental racism is in all parts of New Mexico and new cases pop up within the state frequently.

How You Can Help

The fight for environmental justice is much more difficult than one may think—especially in New Mexico. Many organizations that contribute to environmental racism often add short-term economic prosperity to the community forcing the people who live there to choose between their long-term health or providing financially for their family.

"When people, and especially people of color, are paid good money to work in these industries, then what do we do? You don't want to bite the hand that feeds you right?" explains Gómez. "Then mom, dad, auntie, uncle, and whomever are developing cancers and diseases that are linked to radiation exposure, and we become complacent because it pays us good money."

Because of this, Gómez highly emphasizes the call to action from the 1986 report that remains relevant today, a call that includes the role of universities.

"The 1986 Toxic Wastes and Race report gave many recommendations some of which remain applicable today. They called on universities to 'assist racial and ethnic students to seek training in technical and professional fields related to environmental protection such as environmental protection such as environmental engineering, medicine, law, and related fields.' They recommended creating scholarships for students to study in those fields," explains Gómez. "They recommended creating a fully-developed curriculum to study the intersections of race and environmental pollution and its effects."

But she also points out that many students do not need the university to tell them what is happening in their home communities. Students are resilient and many of them are already active against environmental racism. But funding curriculum and projects around these issues allows for the community to take back control of environmental decisions happening around them without falling into a white savior complex.

Gómez highlights the importance of amplifying voices and creating platforms for minority populations to speak about their experiences with environmental racism. This is becoming all the more important as the racist origins of big-name conservation groups like the Sierra Club are gaining public attention. Gómez also encourages people to lean away from 'slacktivism'—a new trend where people limit their activism to their social media posts.

"I would encourage people, especially students, to become familiar with and involved with grassroots organizations leading the environmental justice movement," emphasizes Gómez. "In an age where 'slacktivism' has been characterized as a 'like' and 'share' culture, we need more people to get involved and create space for BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) to share their experiences, or even donate money to these organizations that often base their budgets on grant money."

Lastly, placing pressure on people in positions of power to not only clean up current hazardous waste, but also prohibit future placements of hazardous waste near minority communities. This includes demanding critical information to be available to all residents of the area in their primary languages and giving them a seat at the table when these decisions are being made.

Gómez' forthcoming book, "Nuclear Nuevo México: Identity, Ethnicity, and Resistance in Atomic Third Spaces," further examines the effects of the nuclear industrial complex in New Mexico.

Provided by University of New Mexico

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