

Environmental Racism in Canada



As the devastating effects of climate change take place across the globe, from heat waves, to flooding, droughts and wildfires, it is evident that time is running out for our planet. The most recent report released by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has confirmed this, with the secretary general of the United Nations referring to the state of our climate as a “Code Red for Humanity” [1].

For some, the extreme weather of this past summer has been an alarming wake-up call, with an increasing demand for change in our climate action plan, for the sake of public health. The unfortunate reality is that many Black, Indigenous and people of colour (BIPOC) communities in Canada have already been experiencing unsafe environmental living conditions for years. Further, these communities are often disproportionately affected by climate change. This unjust phenomenon is known as **environmental racism** and must be addressed in the fight against climate change.

What is Environmental Racism?

Environmental racism is a form of systemic racism whereby BIPOC are disproportionately burdened with environmental and health hazards. This occurs through policies and practices that place them in proximity to sources of toxic pollution such as landfills, mines, major roads, sewage facilities, chemical facilities and sources that emit airborne or waterborne hazardous pollutants.

The term was coined by Black civil rights leader Benjamin Chavis, who described it as “racial discrimination in environmental policy-making, the enforcement of regulations and laws, the deliberate targeting of communities of colour for toxic waste facilities, the official sanctioning of the life-threatening presence of poisons and pollutants in our communities, and the history of excluding people of colour from leadership of the ecology movements.” [2]

What is Happening in Canada?

Environmental racism is not a new concept. In fact, BIPOC communities in Canada have been fighting for environmental justice for decades. A prominent example dates back to 1848, with the community of Africville, which was a primarily Black community located in the outskirts of Halifax for about 150 years. The city of Halifax refused to provide Africville basic amenities such as sewage and access to clean water, even after many requests for a change. Instead, their community was subject to unwanted land developments, including a dump, that had negative health impacts [3].

Today, many communities remain to face the negative impacts of environmental racism. Just outside of Sarnia, Ontario is a region known as Chemical Valley, which is home to about 40% of Canada’s chemical industry. A report done by the Environmental Commissioner of Ontario in 2017 found that the Aamjiwanaang First Nation surrounding the area were particularly affected by the pollution: “There is strong evidence that the pollution is causing adverse health effects, which neither the federal nor provincial government have properly investigated.” [4] The unfortunate story is all too familiar across the country. There are ongoing clean water advisories for countless First Nations communities. Moreover, researchers in Toronto found that racialized and low-income communities are disproportionately home to soil contamination, waste sites and industrial land use [5]. In every scenario of environmental racism, there is a clear display of evidence, with a lack of governmental action. This begs the question, what can we do to address this?

What Can We Do?

Although this kind of issue cannot be changed overnight, there are many steps we can take to fight against environmental racism. First and foremost, cast your vote in the upcoming federal election! It is your chance to use your voice and help elect someone who you believe can create positive change. Fortunately, there have been positive steps taken to address environmental racism in Parliament. Bill C-230 is a private member’s bill that has passed a second reading, and its aim is to address environmental racism by requiring the government to develop a national strategy to tackle it [6]. If passed, this bill would be a big step towards solving this problem.

Another important way to address environmental racism is to educate yourself and others. If you are in a position of privilege on this issue, listen to and amplify BIPOC voices in the environmental justice movement. As society works to fight against climate change, it is imperative that we prioritize the safety of communities that have already been disproportionately affected by climate disasters and subject to dangerous environmental living

conditions. It is also important to note that this is not an issue unique to Canada, but one that affects BIPOC communities worldwide. Listed below are some resources to check out that focus on environmental justice and will help you to stay informed!

- <https://www.intersectionalenvironmentalist.com/>
- <https://www.indigenousclimateaction.com/>
- <https://naacp.org/know-issues/environmental-climate-justice>
- <https://indigenousclimatehub.ca/>

Sources:

[1] <https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-58130705#:~:text=The%20landmark%20study%20warns%20of,%22%2C%20says%20the%20UN%20chief.&text=There%20is%20hope%20that%20deep,gases%20could%20stabilise%20rising%20temperatures.>

[2] <https://www.greenpeace.org/canada/en/story/46929/its-time-for-the-federal-government-to-address-environmental-racism/>

[3] <https://humanrights.ca/story/the-story-of-africville>

[4] <https://ecojustice.ca/environmental-racism-in-canada/>

[5] https://city.apps01.yorku.ca/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/file_2_ej_report_fin.pdf

[6] <https://theconversation.com/bill-c-230-marks-an-important-first-step-in-addressing-environmental-racism-in-canada-158686>