



Explore, enjoy, and protect the planet

Global Warming and Environmental Justice

THE BURDEN ON VULNERABLE POPULATIONS

NO COMMUNITY SHOULD BEAR disproportionate risks of harm because of their demographic characteristics or economic condition — but that is what will happen with global warming if we don't take action. Because some populations will be more vulnerable to global warming, we must take steps that benefit everyone — a concept called “Climate Justice.”

GLOBAL WARMING'S DISPROPORTIONATE EFFECTS

Increased heat waves, floods, drought, and air pollution — which in turn will impact health and economic prosperity — are some of the global warming effects that vulnerable communities are already feeling and which will worsen over the years unless we take action.

According to the report *A Climate of Change: African Americans, Global Warming, and a Just Climate Policy in the U.S.*, “African Americans are 13% of the U.S. population and on average emit 20% less greenhouse gases than non-Hispanic whites per capita. Though far less responsible for climate change, African Americans are significantly more vulnerable to its effects than non-Hispanic white households.”¹

For Hispanics, the situation is similar: “Latinos have an increased risk of developing acute and chronic illnesses like asthma and other respiratory and pulmonary disease from exposure to air pollution because a disproportionate number of Latinos live in areas failing to meet one or more federal standards for clean air.”²

A 2007 report from the University of Colorado shows that global warming is likely to hit American Indians and Native People especially hard as rising seas flood Native lands in Florida and droughts trigger water wars in the Southwest. Alaska's native people will also be affected, as global warming

is “already eroding the northern permafrost under homes and melting sea ice, leaving coastal towns — mostly inhabited by Native Alaskans — vulnerable to storm surges and high waves.”³

Regions that have a high concentration of Asian-Americans — including Southern California, the Southwest, and the upper Midwest — are already seeing the effects of increased droughts brought on by climate change. Two cities that have an especially high Asian-American population are seeing the worst of it: Los Angeles and Chicago. In Los Angeles, the number of heat wave days is projected to increase from 12 up to 95 days by the year 2100. The number of heat wave days in Chicago is expected to go up 25%.⁴

GLOBAL WARMING POLICY SOLUTIONS

The U.S. must begin to curb greenhouse gas emissions to avoid the most dangerous impacts of global warming and contain the high costs of inaction. We need to act fast, but we also need to ensure that the policy we set is effective and sustainable.

As the U.S. moves steadily toward some type of global warming plan, it must include protection and adaptation assistance for vulnerable populations, ensure a just transition for workers, and help induce



PHOTOGRAPH BY: DAVID BODDIGER



world action. Allowances and auction revenues from any permits for carbon emissions should be used to protect low- and moderate-income citizens from negative economic impacts, create new jobs, ensure fair treatment for affected workers and their communities, and drive technology transfer to help achieve emissions reductions around the world. By crafting a global warming policy that meets these goals, we can solve global warming while protecting working families and vulnerable groups of people around the world.

SIERRA CLUB SUPPORTS COMMUNITIES

Fortunately, many people of color and low-income communities are taking action against global warming. Coalitions and organizations are educating communities about the problem and working together toward solutions – solutions that have economic bonuses as well.

In Detroit, Sierra Club Environmental Justice Organizer Rhonda Anderson works closely with residents in the predominantly African-American south side of the city who are fighting plans for more industrial facilities that will continue harming the area. “Instead of making another short-sighted investment in yesterday’s dirty, polluting industries, Michigan should be investing in tomorrow’s clean energy economy, bringing green jobs to Detroit and clean air and water to our communities,” says Anderson.

In New Orleans’ Lower Ninth Ward, Sierra Club Environmental Justice Organizer Darryl Malek-Wiley works with the Holy Cross Neighborhood Association (HCNA www.Helpholycross.org) where the community is taking the lead in rebuilding “greener” after Hurricane Katrina in order to help save energy, curb global warming and protect people from rising waters by restoring a cypress swamp area. The HCNA has a goal of becoming a carbon neutral neighborhood by 2030. He is also working with the Vietnamese-American community in New Orleans East to fight the discriminatory placement of toxic sites in their neighborhood.

SOURCES

- 1 Hoerner, J. Andrew and Nia Robinson. “A Climate of Change: African Americans, Global Warming, and a Just Climate Policy for the U.S.” May 2008. Environmental Justice and Climate Change Initiative. www.ejcc.org
- 2 “Global Warming and Latinos.” National Hispanic Environmental Council. 30 May 2008. <http://www.nheec.org/LatinoGWFactSheetwithReferences.pdf>
- 3 Human, Katy. “Climate Shift to hit Indians hard.” The Denver Post. 9 September 2007. http://www.denverpost.com/news/ci_6921868
- 4 Kay, Jane. “Global warming health effect.” The San Francisco Chronicle. 17 April 2007. <http://www.commondreams.org/archive/2007/04/17/589/>

The Sierra Club is part of the Just Transition Coalition working to ensure funding for renewable energy projects on Navajo and Hopi lands through an unprecedented plan now under consideration by the California Public Utility Commission. The Sierra Club is also currently working in partnership with other coalition organizations, including the Black Mesa Water Coalition, Indigenous Environmental Network, Grand Canyon Trust, Apollo Alliance, and Honor the Earth.

According to the first national survey of Hispanic voters on environmental issues, conducted by Bendixen & Associates for the Sierra Club in 2008, 80% of Hispanic voters view “energy and global warming” to be one of the two most important environmental problems for their families (the other was clean air and water). And more than 80% agree that “shifting to a new ‘clean energy economy’ could create millions of jobs, improve the quality of the environment and protect everyone’s children.”

TAKE ACTION

If you want to help take action against global warming, visit the Sierra Club’s Environmental Justice Program online at: www.sierraclub.org/ej

For more information on the Sierra Club’s involvement in the Just Transition Coalition, please visit: www.sierraclub.org/partnerships/tribal

For more information on and complete results of the first national survey of Hispanic voters on environmental issues, visit: www.sierraclub.org/ecocentro/survey

For more information on the report released by the University of Colorado on Climate Change and Native Americans, visit: http://www.colorado.edu/law/centers/nrlc/publications/Climate_Report_Exec_Summary.pdf

For further information on African Americans and Global Warming, visit: <http://www.ejrc.cau.edu/ClimateBib1.htm>