



SAVE OUR STREAMS

IZAAK WALTON LEAGUE OF AMERICA

ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE & WATER QUALITY



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INTRODUCTION

What Will You Learn from this Guide?

This document is meant to serve as a brief introduction to the following topics: environmental justice, environmental racism, intersectionality, environmental intersectionality, and the connection between these topics and water quality. This guide will provide resources for you to start your own learning journey and make a difference in your community!

Author's Note:

Before entering into this introductory guide, which highlights issues that have and continue to affect marginalized groups, it is important to note that we are not content experts on these topics. Additionally, as a predominately white organization, we do not share the lived experiences of the leaders highlighted in this packet. In order to introduce our audience of water quality monitors and advocates to information that is accurate and authentic, we have aimed to uplift the voices and knowledge of individuals and organizations who have long been at the forefront of movements against discrimination.

While we hope that this information serves as an introduction to environmental justice for our audience, this guide is non-exhaustive and does not address the full extent of issues involving environmental justice and racism. We encourage our volunteers to further their learning into these topics and to connect with organizations that are leading the way and supporting impacted communities directly. We also encourage you to examine how your water quality monitoring can help support diverse and inclusive clean water movements in your area. In order to secure clean water today and for future generations, we must ensure that *all communities* can participate to build a diverse data set that captures the totality of water health across the country.

If you feel that important details have been left out of this guide or that it could be improved, please contact us at sos@iwla.org and we will do our best to correct it.

ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE & WATER QUALITY

There are two critical pieces of legislation in the United States that are meant to protect communities across the country from water pollution;

- The [Clean Water Act \(CWA\)](#), passed in 1972, “establishes the basic structure for regulating discharges of pollutants into the waters of the United States and regulating quality standards for surface waters.”
- The [Safe Drinking Water Act \(SDWA\)](#), passed in 1974, “was established to protect the quality of drinking water in the U.S. This law focuses on all waters actually or potentially designed for drinking use, whether from above ground or underground sources.”

Both of these policies aimed to ensure that all persons residing in the United States would have access to clean and safe drinking and recreational water sources. While these policies have made significant progress in many parts of the country, implementation and enforcement of these policies has varied drastically. [A study published in Nature in 2021](#) found that in the United States “there are 489,836 households lacking complete plumbing, 1,165 community water systems in Safe Drinking Water Act Serious Violation, and 21,035 Clean Water Act permittees in Significant Noncompliance.” This study also demonstrated that “elevated levels of water hardship are associated with the social dimensions of rurality, poverty, indigeneity, education, and age—representing a nationwide environmental injustice.”



Another study conducted by the [National Resources Defense Council](#), the [Environmental Justice Health Alliance](#), and [Coming Clean](#) found that “race, ethnicity, or language spoken had the strongest relationship to slow and inadequate enforcement of the SDWA of any sociodemographic characteristic analyzed.” Additionally, “as racial, ethnic, and language vulnerability increased at the county level, the average number of formal enforcement actions increased yet violations remained uncorrected despite enforcement actions.”

The disproportionate impacts on low-income and communities of color have been caused by a long history of [intentionally targeting underserved](#) communities for placement of industrial and waste sites, and a history of divestment in maintaining or improving water infrastructure. The impacts of these failures in our system to provide clean water to all communities have been vast, and range from limited access to water and soaring utility prices to serious health conditions caused by exposure to toxins and disease. [Specific health risks](#) of contaminated drinking water include blue baby syndrome, neurological delays in children, disrupted reproductive systems, gastrointestinal disease, and cancer.



It is clear that access to clean water is not universal across the United States, and that sociodemographic factors play a significant role in whether or not communities have access to safe water. This has resulted in many community wide crises that have garnered national attention, and many more that have not received appropriate coverage. These concerning trends also persist with other health related environmental conditions, such as air pollution, urban heat exposure, access to green space, and more.



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Environmental degradation and injustices toward underserved communities both have a long and complex history within the United States. While the two issues are deeply connected, so can be the solutions. As environmental programs aim to repair and prevent degradation, they can also aim to uplift communities that have been most deeply impacted.

HOW CAN SAVE OUR STREAMS HELP?

Environmental degradation, especially regarding industrial waste and sewage pollution in our waterways, was the catalyst for 54 sportsmen to found the Izaak Walton League of America in 1922. Since then, the League has been at the forefront of every major clean water battle in the United States. Today, the League and its network of over 40,000 members across the U.S. use hands-on conservation projects, community science initiatives, and legislative advocacy to protect our waterways. The Save Our Streams program is one program that the League deploys to identify, track, and address water quality concerns across the country.

Save Our Streams (SOS) is a nationwide volunteer water monitoring program founded in 1969 based on the idea that all Americans have the right to know whether or not streams are safe for swimming, fishing, playing, and drinking. State and federal agencies are only able to assess the health of roughly 30% of the streams in the U.S, leaving the health of 70% of streams and waterways unknown. SOS volunteer monitors are trained and equipped to collect high quality data that is sent to partner organizations, shared with state and regional agencies, and made publicly accessible in the "[Clean Water Hub](#)." This allows for data gaps to be filled and for community members to be made aware of the threats to water quality in their communities. Data sent to agencies can also be used to target areas for further monitoring or intervention.



The SOS program can serve as an avenue to increase understanding and awareness of water quality issues in underserved communities around the country. In order to combat environmental injustices, we must identify them, raise awareness, and organize advocacy efforts to successfully secure remediation. Historically, volunteer water quality monitoring has been inaccessible to many communities due to lengthy time commitments and high equipment costs. Save Our Streams works to combat this trend by providing free, flexible training schedules as well as reimbursing equipment costs for certified monitors in Virginia and providing equipment loan stations in Iowa.

Since 1969, the League has launched additional community science initiatives to help track and raise awareness of specific pollutants in our waterways and taps. Salt Watch and Nitrate Watch both provide free kits all over the country to track chloride and nitrate pollution hot spots. Both pollutants can cause serious health problems, and by crowdsourcing the data collection we can help identify and support communities at the highest risk.

Our country's long standing history of environmental injustice has left many communities without access to safe drinking water and without access to clean waterways for fishing and swimming. Through these monitoring opportunities, all communities can be given the tools to identify and record water quality concerns that can be used to catalyze necessary change.

Because the Save Our Streams monitor network is already composed of passionate individuals who care deeply about the state of our environment, they have great potential to become engaged in environmental justice initiatives. Monitors are equipped with tools to help identify areas of concern and resources to advocate for changes at every level!

As a Save Our Streams monitor, you have the power to make an impact!

TAKING ACTION

Steps *YOU* Can Take in Your Community and Beyond

These steps were adapted from the Yale Office of Sustainability.

1. Practice Self-Education

By reading through this packet you have just participated in one step towards combating environmental injustices! We encourage you to read more about issues that might be occurring in your community, locality, and state that you could get involved in.

For Save Our Streams, this could look like doing outreach and research to identify water quality issues in your area. Can you find areas near landfills or locations experiencing leaching of toxic chemicals into rivers that likely have poor water quality?

2. Elevate the Voices of Impacted Communities

It is important to elevate and listen to the voices of people who are being impacted by environmental racism and injustices. If there are individuals, groups, or organizations who are shedding light on how they think these issues should be addressed, then it is best to listen, uplift what they have to say (spread the information with your friends/family/co-workers/ community/etc) and volunteer your time, if you can.



For Save Our Streams, this could look like identifying leaders in your community or nearby communities who are affected and/or represent affected groups. Then, hear what they have to say. How can you spread the word on the issue they have discussed? Is it possible to get involved, and if so, how?

3. Hold Your Representatives Accountable

Examining the roles your local and state representatives are playing in environmental injustices is important because (if you're over 18) you have voting power and can influence elections based on who you believe will do the best job of protecting your fellow citizens from environmental racism. Further, you can use your voice and uplift those of affected parties when you feel your local or state government is doing something unjust. For example, issues pertaining to land use plans, policy design and enforcement, and grant awards that relate to the environment.

For Save Our Streams, this could look like identifying your local and state representatives and researching their stances on environmental justice. Then, if you identify an issue, try to make it clear that you do not support your representative's plan. Additionally, you can look into politicians' viewpoints on environmental injustices before elections and help influence your voting decisions.



DEFINING KEY CONCEPTS

Environmental Racism

Reverend Dr. Benjamin Chavis

In the words of Benjamin Chavis, who coined the term “environmental racism” in 1982, environmental racism can be described as “racial discrimination in environmental policy-making, the enforcement of regulations and laws, and the deliberate targeting of communities of color 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 color from leadership in the ecology movements.”

Photo Courtesy of DrBenjaminChavisJr.wixsite.com



Dr. Robert Bullard

Robert Bullard, the “father of environmental justice,” says that environmental racism occurs when there is a “policy, practice, or directive that differentially affects or disadvantages (where intended or unintended) individuals, groups, or communities based on race.”

Photo Courtesy of DrRobertBullard.com

Green Action's Definition

Green Action for Health and Environmental Justice works to mobilize people to win victories that change government and corporate practices to promote environmental, social, economic, and climate justice. They define environmental racism as “the institutional rules, regulations, policies or government and/or corporate decisions that deliberately target certain communities for locally undesirable land uses and lax enforcement of zoning and environmental laws, resulting in communities being disproportionately exposed to toxic and hazardous waste based upon race.”

Learn More



[Let's talk environmental racism](#)



[The complicated history of environmental racism](#)



[What is Environmental Racism](#)

Environmental Justice

Dr. Robert Bullard

Robert Bullard defines environmental justice as the “principle that people have the right to a clean, healthy, sustainable environment without regard to race, color, or national origin.”

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency

The EPA defines environmental justice as “the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, ethnicity, income, national origin, or educational level with respect to the development, implementation and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations and policies. Fair treatment means that no population, due to policy or economic disempowerment, is forced to bear a disproportionate burden of the negative human health or environmental impacts of pollution or other environmental consequences resulting from industrial, municipal, and commercial operations or the execution of federal, state, local, and tribal programs and policies.”



Principles of Environmental Justice

The First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit occurred in Washington, DC in 1991. Over 1,000 attendees from all 50 states, Canada, Central America, and the Marshall Islands came together at what is now considered the “defining moment of the emerging movement for environmental justice.” The event established [17 Principles of Environmental Justice](#) that would unify and guide the movement. [Subsequent meetings](#) would also produce the Principles of Working Together, Principles for Alliance with Green Groups, Principles of the Youth Environmental Justice Movement and Principles of Climate Justice.

Learn More



[Dr. Robert Bullard: Father of Environmental Justice](#)



[U.S. EPA on Environmental Justice](#)



[Environmental Justice Net](#)

Intersectionality

Dr. Kimberlé Crenshaw

Intersectionality describes “the complex, cumulative ways in which the effects of multiple forms of discrimination (such as racism, sexism, and classism) combine, overlap, or intersect especially in the experiences of marginalized individuals or groups” Additionally, Crenshaw has described intersectionality as “a lens through which you can see where power comes and collides, where it interlocks and intersects.”



Photo Courtesy of [Columbia Law School](#)

Center for Intersectional Justice

“The concept of intersectionality describes the ways in which systems of inequality based on gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability, class and other forms of discrimination “intersect” to create unique dynamics and effects.”



National Coalition of Christians and Jews

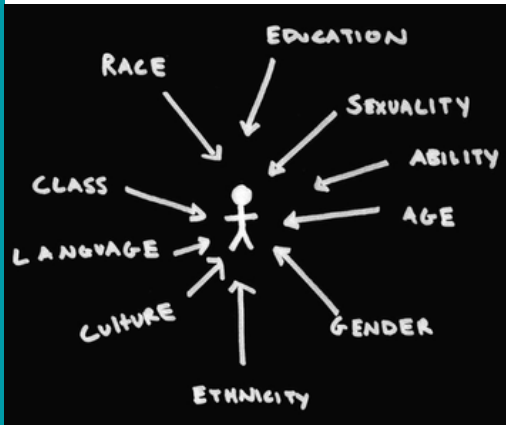


Photo Courtesy of NCCJ.org

NCCJ defines intersectionality as “the interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class, and gender as they apply to a given individual or group...Today, intersectionality is used to address identities beyond race and gender. These identities include but certainly aren’t limited to: class, religion, sexual orientation, age, ability and ethnicity.”

Learn More



[Kimberlé Crenshaw Video on Intersectionality](#)



[What is Intersectionality?](#)



[History of Intersectionality](#)

Intersectional Environmentalism

Leah Thomas

In her book *The Intersectional Environmentalist*, Leah Thomas defines intersectional environmentalism as “an inclusive version of environmentalism that advocates for both the protection of people and the planet. It identifies the ways in which injustices happening to marginalized communities and the earth are interconnected. It brings injustices done to the most vulnerable communities, and the earth, to the forefront and does not minimize or silence social inequity. Intersectional environmentalism advocates for justice for people and the planet.”



Photo Courtesy of [GreenGirlLeah.com](https://www.GreenGirlLeah.com)

Outdoor Journal

"Intersectional Environmentalism is an inclusive version of sustainability that identifies the interconnectedness between the injustices happening to marginalized communities and the earth. It advocates for the protection of people and the planet and provides an opportunity to discover the unique connections which exist between communities and the environment that intersect with social justice."

Medium.com

On intersectional environmentalism: “you cannot separate people from the environment and vice versa. So, in order to achieve Intersectional Environmentalism, you have to take an intersectional approach to examining issues like climate change, environmental degradation, and deforestation among others. These issues are never just about the environment.”

Learn More



[Intersectional Environmentalist](#)



[Bringing Intersectionality to Modern Environmentalism](#)



[A Crash Course on Intersectional Environmentalism](#)

WATER QUALITY & JUSTICE IN THE NEWS

- ['Environmental racism' leaves another majority Black city in Michigan with undrinkable water](#)
- [Five years later: Flint water crisis most egregious example of environmental injustice, U-M researcher says](#)
- [Jackson water crisis: A legacy of environmental racism?](#)
- [A Growing Drinking Water Crisis Threatens American Cities and Towns](#)
- [Baltimore's Sewage Issues Are Rooted in Racial Injustice](#)
- [America's Clean Water Crisis Goes Far Beyond Flint](#)
- [California's drought emergency puts the state's vulnerable communities at risk—again](#)
- [Study: Higher Concentrations Of Arsenic, Uranium In Drinking Water In Black, Latino, Indigenous Communities](#)
- [Researchers find high levels of nitrates in Lower Eastern Shore drinking water](#)
- [When it comes to access to clean water, 'race is still strongest determinant,' report says](#)
- [Op-ed: Public lands are not neutral. We must grapple with their racist roots](#)
- [Op-ed: Water Pollution in Iowa Is Environmental Injustice](#)
- ['I don't think \[we\] deserve to live like this': For South Side residents, the fight for environmental justice is far from over](#)

MORE RESOURCES

- [Saint John's University: Racial and Environmental Justice Resources](#)
- [Why Race Matters When We Talk About the Environment](#)
- [Unequal Impact: The Deep Links Between Racism and Climate Change](#)
- [George Washington University: Equity vs. Equality: What's the Difference?](#)
- [National Resource Defense Council: The Environmental Justice Movement](#)
- [EJScreen: Environmental Justice Screening and Mapping Tool](#)
- [Pollution Is a Racial Justice Issue. Let's Fight it that way](#)
- [Watered Down Justice Report](#)
- [U.S. EPA Environmental Justice Timeline](#)



NATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

Check out these organizations that are working to combat environmental injustice and improve diversity, equity, and inclusion in the outdoors. Be sure to also explore organizations that are working locally near you!

1. [Indigenous Environment Network](#)
2. [Black Millennials for Flint](#)
3. [Center on Race, Poverty, and the Environment](#)
4. [Labor Network for Sustainability](#)
5. [Earthjustice](#)
6. [Hip Hop Caucus](#)
7. [Latino Outdoors](#)
8. [Climate Justice Alliance](#)
9. [Environmental Justice Foundation](#)
10. [National Black Environmental Justice Network](#)
11. [Honor the Earth](#)
12. [Intersectional Environmentalist](#)
13. [Outdoor Afro](#)
14. [Greenaction for Health and Environmental Justice](#)
15. [Center for Diversity and the Environment](#)
16. [Energy Justice Network](#)
17. [Deep South Center for Environmental Justice](#)
18. [Environmental Ministries – United Church of Christ](#)
19. [NAACP | Environmental & Climate Justice](#)
20. [University of Michigan School for Environment and Sustainability](#)
21. [WE ACT for Environmental Justice](#)
22. [Center for Intersectional Justice](#)
23. [Community, Engagement, Environmental Justice, & Health](#)
24. [Clean Water Action](#)
25. [Socially Responsible Agriculture Project](#)



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