



ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

DEFENDING PEOPLE'S RIGHT TO A HEALTHY ENVIRONMENT





INDUSTRIAL FACILITIES ARE FREQUENTLY BUILT IN
LOW-INCOME NEIGHBORHOODS, LEAVING CHILDREN
TO PLAY NEAR POWER PLANTS, GARBAGE DUMPS,
AND TOXIC WASTE SITES. NRDC WORKS WITH
COMMUNITIES TO DEFEND PEOPLE'S RIGHT TO A
SAFE AND HEALTHY ENVIRONMENT.

NRDC'S ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE INITIATIVE

People of color and low-income families live next door to more polluters than anyone else in our country. Industrial facilities are frequently built in low-income neighborhoods, leaving children to play near power plants, garbage dumps, and toxic waste sites. As a result, these communities often suffer from higher rates of illness in comparison with middle-class suburbs and affluent communities. Tired of watching industry make a profit at the expense of their families' health, a racially and culturally diverse, grassroots environmental justice movement is fighting back.

The Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) has played a role in some of these battles. NRDC is a national, non-profit environmental organization with a 31-year record of successfully defending the environment and public health.

NRDC's environmental justice work seeks, among other things, to address the needs of the community groups that approach us. We team up with local organizations and work to achieve their objectives through litigation, general advocacy, and scientific research.



LITIGATION

A decade of precedent-setting lawsuits:

CREATING URBAN PARKS

Urban neighborhoods are often in dire need of open space. When two of the largest parcels of vacant land in Los Angeles were slated for industrial complexes, Environmental Defense, Latino Urban Forum, Friends of the LA River, NRDC, and others sued. In 2001, historic agreements provided for public acquisition of the parcels for state parks.

PROTECTING FARM WORKER FAMILIES

Children and farm workers are particularly vulnerable to pesticides. NRDC helped pass the Food Quality Protection Act of 1996, requiring US EPA to evaluate the health threats confronting these populations. When EPA failed to act, the United Farm Workers, Breast Cancer Fund, NRDC, and others sued. A 2001 settlement forces EPA to fulfill these duties.

REDUCING HARMFUL DIESEL EXHAUST

For some Californians, living next to grocery distribution centers meant breathing in carcinogenic diesel exhaust from delivery trucks. NRDC, the Coalition for Clean Air, and the Environmental Law Foundation sued the state's largest grocery chains. A landmark settlement reached in 2000 compels these companies to reduce emissions from their fleets.

RIDDING COMMUNITIES OF TOXICS

In an African-American community in South Central Los Angeles, families lived, played, went to school, and attended church within yards of a poorly run hazardous waste facility. In response to litigation by the Community Coalition for Change and NRDC, regulators shut down the polluting facility in 1999.

HOLDING POLLUTERS ACCOUNTABLE

After a state-run incinerator contaminated the soils in Albany neighborhoods, Arbor Hill Concerned Citizens Neighborhood Association and NRDC sued New York State. In 1995, the case settled, creating a \$1.3 million fund for environmental health projects selected by local residents.



Incinerator protest, Brooklyn, New York

PRESERVING HISTORIC NEIGHBORHOODS

Residents of Martineztown, New Mexico, knew that a proposed federal courthouse would destroy their cherished way of life by increasing traffic, raising housing prices without bringing jobs, and destroying the neighborhood's physical character. The Southwest Organizing Project and NRDC prepared to sue, leading to the demise of the project in 1994.

IMPROVING SEWAGE TREATMENT PLANTS

For years, West Harlem lived with the stench of sewage generated by a citywide treatment plant. West Harlem Environmental Action and NRDC sued the City of New York and, in 1993, reached a settlement that included capital improvements at the plant and a \$1.1 million fund for environmental health projects.

TESTING CHILDREN FOR LEAD POISONING

While lead poisoning causes nerve damage, learning disabilities, and other health problems in children, California failed to test children of low-income families. The ACLU, NAACP Legal Defense Fund, and NRDC sued the state and, in 1992, obtained a settlement that funds testing of 500,000 children every year.

PROTECTING VIBRANT COMMUNITIES

When California planned its first large-scale commercial toxic waste facility, officials targeted a Latino community. In partnership with the Mothers of East LA, NRDC sued to block the plans and prevent a likely rash of similar projects. In response, the developers abandoned the project in 1991.

ADVOCACY

NRDC has also worked with our community partners outside of the courts to secure important environmental and quality of life gains:

PARKS AND POWER PLANTS

California's Baldwin Hills Park came under attack when land set aside for building the park was slated for a power plant. Concerned about noise and air pollution that would threaten nearby African-American and Latino neighborhoods, Concerned Citizens of South Central Los Angeles, Center for Law in the Public Interest–The City Project, NRDC, and others mobilized in opposition. In response to mounting pressure, the utility company abandoned its proposal in June 2001.

RIVERS AS LIFELINES

When the government of Belize announced plans to construct a hazardous waste and garbage landfill near the Sibun River, the Sibun Watershed Association and other local groups asked NRDC to join them in fighting the project. NRDC's technical evaluation indicated that the facility might pollute the waters used by local villages for drinking, bathing, and fishing. Increasing opposition to the project spurred Belizean officials to abandon the site in April 2001 for a more environmentally sound location.

TREASURED WAYS OF LIFE

In 1995, NRDC joined with the Mexican fishing villages of San Ignacio Lagoon to fight Mitsubishi's plans to build an industrial salt facility that would have destroyed the villages' lobster and abalone fisheries and jeopardized the last undisturbed nursery for the Pacific gray whale. In response to opposition from the Fishing Cooperative of Punta Abreojos, thousands of Mexicans, NRDC, and legions of concerned activists from around the world, the government of Mexico cancelled the project in March 2000.

SAFE DRINKING WATER

Many low-income communities across the country are at high risk for unsafe drinking water but often do not have the financial

resources to buy bottled water or household purifying equipment. Thanks to an NRDC-led coalition of over 300 groups, which advanced passage of the 1996 amendments to the Safe Drinking Water Act, hundreds of millions of dollars in funding to clean up water supplies have been provided to some of these communities.

INDIGENOUS PEOPLE AND THE SACREDNESS OF LAND

Indigenous people often must fight to protect the natural resources that sustain their daily lives and spiritual practices. NRDC's collaboration with Kitasoo and Gitga'at First Nations leaders in British Columbia helped forge a 2001 agreement between industry, environmentalists, and local communities that prohibits logging in parts of the pristine rainforest valley until an ecologically sensitive management plan is developed.

AFFORDABLE AND ENVIRONMENTALLY SOUND HOUSING

Habitat for Humanity's partnership with NRDC has produced affordable, environmentally sound housing in low-income California neighborhoods. NRDC consults on ways to reduce wood use, incorporate environmentally certified lumber, improve energy efficiency, and use other ecologically sound methods and materials.



Gitga'at First Nations Longhouse blocks logging road to rainforest valley, British Columbia

SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH


At the request of various community-based organizations, NRDC has produced scientific reports that document environmental problems and offer sustainable solutions. Here are two examples:

DRAWDOWN: GROUNDWATER MINING ON BLACK MESA

Each year, on the Black Mesa plateau in Arizona, the Peabody Coal Company uses over one billion gallons of pristine water from the Navajo Aquifer to transport coal to a power plant nearly 300 miles away. In 1998, the Black Mesa Trust asked NRDC to conduct a scientific analysis of this water source, used by the Hopi Tribe and Navajo Nation for drinking, farming and religious practices. NRDC's report, *Drawdown*, documented the dramatic decline since Peabody began operations. The report also detailed recommendations to help protect this water source for future generations.

TROUBLE ON THE FARM: GROWING UP WITH PESTICIDES IN AGRICULTURAL COMMUNITIES

The pervasive use of highly toxic pesticides means that people who work on or live near agricultural lands are often surrounded by poisons. Children are especially vulnerable to pesticide exposure, and those at the greatest risk are from poor migrant farm worker families. In 1998, NRDC published *Trouble on the Farm*, a report that explored these threats to children's health and identified the increased risk to farm children.



PEOPLE WHO WORK ON AGRICULTURAL LANDS
ARE OFTEN SURROUNDED BY POISONS. CHILDREN
ARE ESPECIALLY VULNERABLE TO PESTICIDE
EXPOSURE, AND THOSE AT THE GREATEST
RISK ARE FROM POOR MIGRANT FARM WORKER
FAMILIES.



If your community faces an urgent environmental justice concern, contact Michelle Baccay Alvarez, Staff Attorney, Environmental Justice Initiative at ej@nrdc.org or at the address below.

Although NRDC is not able to provide direct services in every case, we are often able to help local activists identify other organizations that might be able to lend assistance.

**NATURAL RESOURCES DEFENSE COUNCIL
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011
212 727-2700 www.nrdc.org**

**Cover Photo: Windsor, Canada overlooking Detroit River, Michigan, © Chris Calwell, Ecos Consulting.
Photo of Gitga'at Longhouse, © Stephen Mills. All other photos, © J. Kirk Condyles.**

Printed on recycled paper.