We, representatives of the poor and the marginalized of the world . . . resolve to actively build a movement from the communities that will address the issue of climate change from a human rights, social justice and labour perspective.

—Delhi Climate Justice Declaration
(November 1, 2002)

On the margins of urban areas, in Appalachian valleys, in the polluted corridor in Louisiana called Cancer Alley, on Native American reservations, and in villages in poor nations, grassroots voices have been speaking against environmental racism and demanding environmental justice and climate justice.

Chapter Preview

The first section of this chapter examines the challenges to a dominant discourse that views environment as a place apart from the places where people live and work. In this section, I describe:

1. The voices that called the disproportionate hazards in low-income neighborhoods and communities of color a form of environmental racism, and
2. The emergence of a new movement and a discourse of environmental justice and some of its successes.

(Continued)
Nowhere are efforts to redefine the meaning of *environment* more striking than the grassroots, multiracial struggles for social justice as well as environmental protection. As used by community activists and scholars studying the movement, the term *environmental justice* refers to (a) calls to recognize and halt the disproportionate burdens imposed on poor and minority communities by environmentally harmful conditions, (b) more inclusive opportunities for those who are most affected to be heard in the decisions affecting their communities, and (c) a vision of environmentally healthy and economically sustainable communities. As we’ll see later in this chapter, a climate justice movement has also arisen, borrowing from the discourse of this symbolically potent movement.

My hope is that when you have finished reading the chapter, you’ll sense a more robust meaning of *environment*, one that includes places where people live, work, and play. You’ll also understand some of the barriers that citizens from poor and minority communities often face when they call attention to environmental hazards, and you will understand why, in the end, the movements for environmental justice and climate justice are also movements for a more democratically inclusive world.

### Environmental Justice: Challenging a Place Apart

The environmental movement in the United States—historically associated with white Euro-Americans—had been concerned with wild places and the natural world. The 1960s, however, saw a widening focus of the movement to include human health and environmental quality. Nevertheless, the movement continued to offer “disjointed and at times contradictory” accounts of humans’ place in nature, accounts that assumed a “long-standing separation of the social from the ecological” (Gottlieb, 2002, p. 5).

Partly in response, by the 1980s, activists in minority and low-income communities had opened a new antagonism by challenging society’s view of nature as a place
apart from the places where people live. (In Chapter 2, I defined *antagonism* as the recognition of the limits of an idea or prevailing viewpoint; recognizing a limit creates an opening for alternative voices to redefine a condition or state of affairs.) This opening for new voices also fueled efforts to ensure that processes for environmental decision making are more inclusive, democratic, and just.

**The Toxic Sea Around Us**

By the 1960s, concerns had begun to emerge in the United States about the health and effects related to new developments in large-scale chemical manufacturing and disposal of toxic wastes. Some scientists and citizens were skeptical of public institutions’ ability to safeguard citizens’ health in this new petrochemical society. Rachel Carson’s (1962) best-selling book *Silent Spring* became the most influential questioning of the use of powerful chemicals, such as dichloro-diphenyl-trichloroethane (DDT), by agricultural businesses and public health agencies. Her book set off a national debate over the pesticide industry. Two decades later, the small, upstate New York community of Love Canal became a metaphor for the nation’s consciousness of the hazards of its chemical culture.²

Increasingly, citizens had begun to feel themselves surrounded by what environmental historian Samuel Hays (1987) termed *the toxic “sea around us”* (p. 171).³ Many feared that the new synthetic chemicals were having devastating health effects—cancer, birth defects, respiratory illness, and neurological disorders—adding to the public’s fears of “an environmental threat that was out of control” (p. 200). It also became clear that certain communities—largely low-income and minority communities—were most affected by toxic pollutants and the resulting health and social problems.

**Questioning the Discourse of Environmentalism**

Some attempts to call attention to the specific impacts of these environmental hazards occurred before a movement for environmental justice arose. In the late 1960s and 1970s, a few civil rights groups, churches, and environmental leaders tried to call attention to the particular problems of urban communities and the workplace. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., went to Memphis, Tennessee, in 1968 to join with African-American sanitation workers who were striking for wages and better work conditions—an event that sociologist and environmental justice scholar Robert Bullard (1993) called one of the earliest efforts to link civil rights and environmental health concerns. Also addressing the workplace environment was Congress’s passage of the federal Occupational Safety and Health Act (OSHA) in 1970. This landmark law helped “stimulate the budding workplace environmental movements . . . as well as community-based organizations of activists and professionals” (Gottlieb, 1993, pp. 283, 285).

Other early efforts included the 1971 Urban Environment Conference (UEC), one of the early successful efforts to link environmental and social justice concerns.
A coalition of labor, environmental, and civil rights groups, the UEC tried “to help broaden the way the public defined environmental issues and to focus on the particular environmental problems of urban minorities” (Kazis & Grossman, 1991, p. 247).

Despite these early attempts to bring environmental, labor, and civil rights leaders together to explore common interests, national environmental groups in the 1960s and 1970s largely failed to recognize and address the problems of urban residents or poor and minority communities.

Part of the difficulty lay in the discourse of environmentalism itself. Some community activists—particularly women of color—complained of obstacles when they tried to speak with traditional environmental groups. For example, in her account of efforts to stop the construction of a 1,600-ton-per-day solid waste incinerator in a south central Los Angeles neighborhood in the mid-1980s, Giovanna Di Chiro (1996) reported, “These issues were not deemed adequately ‘environmental’ by local environmental groups such as the Sierra Club or the Environmental Defense Fund” (p. 299). Di Chiro explained that, when residents of the predominantly African-American and low-income community approached these groups, “they were informed that the poisoning of an urban community by an incineration facility was a ‘community health issue,’ not an environmental one” (p. 299). Activists in other parts of the country similarly complained that “the mainstream environmental community [was] reluctant to address issues of equity and social justice, within the context of the environment” (Alston, 1990, p. 23).

By the early 1980s, residents and activists in some low-income neighborhoods and communities of color, faced with indifference on the part of the established groups, started to take matters into their own hands. In doing so, they worked to redefine the meaning of environment to include the places “where we live, where we work, where we play, and where we learn” (Cole & Foster, 2001, p. 16).

**Toxic Waste and the Birth of a Movement**

A key event, and new voices speaking for their environment, occurred in the protests against a PCB (polychlorinated biphenyl) toxic landfill by residents in rural Warren County, North Carolina, in 1982. Earlier, the state discovered that PCB chemicals had been illegally dumped along miles of highways. To dispose of the toxic-laced soil, officials decided to bury it in a landfill in the predominantly poor and African-American Warren County. Rather than accept this, local residents and supporters from national civil rights groups tried to halt the state’s plan by placing their bodies in the middle of the roads leading to the landfill to block 6,000 trucks carrying the PCB-contaminated soil. More than 500 arrests occurred in what sociologists Robert Bullard and Beverly Henderson Wright (1987) called “the first national attempt by Blacks to link environmental issues (hazardous waste and pollution) to the mainstream civil rights agenda” (p. 32). (For background on the Warren County protests as the symbolic birth of the environmental justice movement, see Pezzullo, 2001.)

Prompted by protests in Warren County and elsewhere, in the 1980s and 1990s federal agencies and scholars began to confirm patterns of disproportionate exposure
to environmental hazards experienced by low-income populations and communities of color. For example, the U.S. General Accounting Office (1983) found that African-Americans constituted the majority of populations living near hazardous landfills. In a follow-up study, *Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States*, the United Church of Christ’s Commission for Racial Justice discovered a similar pattern (Chavis & Lee, 1987). Among its key findings were these:

- Race proved to be the most significant among variables tested in association with the location of commercial waste facilities. . . . Although socioeconomic status appeared to play an important role in the location of [these] facilities, race still proved to be more significant. (p. xiii)
- Three out of every five Black and Hispanic Americans lived in communities with uncontrolled toxic waste sites. . . . (p. iv)
- Approximately half of all Asian/Pacific Islanders and American Indians lived in communities with uncontrolled toxic waste sites. (p. xiv)

A follow-up report, *Toxic Wastes and Race at Twenty, 1987–2007*, revealed that “racial disparities in the distribution of hazardous wastes are greater than previously reported” in the original 1987 study (Bullard, Mohai, Saha, & Wright, 2007, p. x).

Other research on the racial and income characteristics of communities near environmental hazards quickly followed. White (1998) reported that 87% of studies of the distribution of environmental hazards revealed racial disparities (p. 63). These studies concluded that minority and low-income populations not only are more likely to live near such hazards but also are “more severely exposed to potentially deadly and destructive levels of toxins from environmental hazards than others” (p. 63).

**We Speak for Ourselves: Naming Environmental Racism**

With the concentration of hazardous facilities in low-income communities and communities of color, new voices and narratives of environmental harm began to arise. In many cases, such stories spoke of frustration in dealing with local officials and the search for words to express anger and suffering. Residents began to invent new words—or adapt old words—to explain their situations and to express these grievances. Many charged they were suffering from a form of environmental discrimination. This critical rhetoric (Chapter 8) spoke of communities there were being poisoned and targeted as sacrifice zones, which ignored people and welcomed polluting industries. Bullard (1993) coined the term *sacrifice zones* to describe characteristics shared by these communities: “(1) They already have more than their share of environmental problems and polluting industries, and (2) they are still attracting new polluters” (p. 12).

One powerful phrase seized upon by activists to describe their communities’ plights was *environmental racism*. At a 1991 summit of activists from the environmental justice movement, Benjamin Chavis of the United Church of Christ’s Commission for Racial Justice spoke of his attempt to describe what was going on in the persistent
pattern of locating toxics in poor and minority neighborhoods. He said, “It came to me—environmental racism. That’s when I coined the term” (quoted in Bullard, 1994, p. 278). Chavis described environmental racism as

racial discrimination in environmental policy-making and the enforcement of regulations and laws, the deliberate targeting of people of color communities 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 environmental movement. (quoted in Di Chiro, 1996, p. 304)

While Chavis highlighted the “deliberate” targeting of people of color communities, others pointed out that discrimination also resulted from the disparate impact of environmental hazards on minority communities. The 1964 Civil Rights Act used the term disparate impact to recognize discrimination in the form of the disproportionate burdens that some groups experience, regardless of the conscious intention of others in their decisions or behaviors. In other words, racial (or environmental) discrimination results from the accumulated impacts of unfair treatment, which may include more than intentional discrimination or deliberate targeting.

Naming the problem as environmental racism was important. Residents in communities that suffered from environmental hazards often search for language to name their experiences. Rose Marie Augustine’s experience in Tucson, Arizona, was typical. After trying unsuccessfully to get local officials to recognize the problems of polluted well water and illness in her neighborhood, Augustine attended a workshop for community activists in the Southwest. She said that, for the first time, “I heard words like ‘economic blackmail,’ ‘environmental racism.’ Somebody put words, names, on what our community was experiencing” (Augustine, 1993). In other cases, activists themselves began to call the conditions imposed on low-income communities a form of economic blackmail. For example, Bullard (1993) explained, “You can get a job, but only if you are willing to do work that will harm you, your families, and your neighbors” (p. 23).

As protests mounted against such patterns and the failure of the mainstream environmental movement to address the problems, activists began to insist that people in affected communities be able to “speak for ourselves” (Alston, 1990). Social justice activist Dana Alston (1990) argued, in her book We Speak for Ourselves, that environmental justice “calls for a total redefinition of terms and language to describe the conditions that people are facing” (quoted in Di Chiro, 1998, p. 105; emphasis added). Indeed, what some found distinctive about the critical rhetoric of the new movement was the way in which it transformed “the possibilities for fundamental social and environmental change through processes of redefinition, reinvention, and construction of innovative political and cultural discourses” (Di Chiro, 1996, p. 303). Environmental attorney Deehon Ferris put it more bluntly when she said, “We’re shifting the terms of the debate” (Ferris, 1993).
One important shift in the terms of debate occurred in 1990 when the SouthWest Organizing Project (SWOP) publicly criticized the nation’s largest environmental groups, specifically those who belonged to the Group of Ten. Called “the single most stirring challenge to traditional environmentalism” (Schwab, 1994, p. 388), the letter ultimately was signed by more than one hundred civil rights and community leaders. The letter accused the mainstream groups of racism in their hiring and policies. A particularly stinging passage stated the signers’ grievance:

> For centuries, people of color in our region have been subjected to racist and genocidal practices including the theft of lands and water, the murder of innocent people, and the degradation of our environment. . . . Although environmental organizations calling themselves the “Group of Ten” often claim to represent our interests . . . your organizations play an equal role in the disruption of our communities. There is a clear lack of accountability by the Group of Ten environmental organizations towards Third World communities in the Southwest, in the United States as a whole, and internationally. (SouthWest Organizing Project, 1990, p. 1)

Coverage of the letter in the New York Times and other newspapers “initiated a media firestorm” and generated calls for “an emergency summit of environmental, civil rights, and community groups” (Cole & Foster, 2001, p. 31).
Building the Movement for Environmental Justice

The First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit

Such an emergency summit came when delegates from local communities and national leaders from social justice, religious, environmental, and civil rights groups met in Washington, DC, for the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in October 1991. The summit is generally considered to be important for three reasons. First, it was a “watershed moment” in the history of the nascent environmental justice movement (Di Chiro, 1998, p. 113). For three days, activists from local communities shared stories of grievances and attempted to compose a collective critique of the narrow vision of the environment and the exclusion of people of color from decisions that affected their communities. Second, summit participants agreed upon the Principles of Environmental Justice that would powerfully shape the vision of the emerging movement. Finally, many viewed the meeting as a declaration of independence from the traditional environment movement. One participant declared, “I don’t care to join the environmental movement, I belong to a movement already” (quoted in Cole & Foster, 2001, p. 31).

For the first time, different strands of an emerging movement for environmental justice joined together to challenge traditional definitions of environmentalism and compose a new discourse of environmental justice, borrowing from powerful rhetorics of both social justice and environmental protection. In doing so, the summit participants were able to insert their experiences of toxic poisoning into earlier narratives of the U.S. civil rights movement. Running a video on a monitor during the summit was a moving example of such critical rhetoric.

The video showed images of industrial pipes disgorging pollution into the air and water, along with scenes of African-American residents of Reveilletown, Louisiana, a community established by freed slaves after the Civil War. The community had become so badly polluted by wastes from a nearby chemical factory that it had to be abandoned in the 1980s. Janice Dickerson, an African-American activist working with similar communities, provided a running narration as the video showed documentary film images of the Ku Klux Klan burning crosses in the 1960s:

> From the perspective of the African American, it’s a civil rights matter; it’s interwoven. Civil rights and the environment movement are both interwoven. Because, again, we are the most victimized. . . . There’s no difference in a petro-chemical industry locating two, three hundred feet from my house and killing me off than there is when the Klan was on the rampage, just running into black neighborhoods, hanging black people at will. (Greenpeace, 1990)

By drawing on the “morally charged terrain” of the civil rights movement, the summit participants dramatically shifted the terms of public debate about the environment (Harvey, 1996, p. 387). By placing concerns about toxic wastes and other environmental dangers into a civil rights frame, they were able to “characterize the distribution of environmental hazards as part of a broader pattern of social injustice,
one that contradicts the fundamental beliefs of fairness and equity” (Sandweiss, 1998, p. 51). In so doing, they believed they could contest or redefine the meaning of *environment* itself.

Many of the speakers at the summit also urged participants to demand political representation and to speak forcefully to public officials, corporations, and the traditional environmental movement. At the summit, Chavis explained, “This is our opportunity to define and redefine for ourselves. . . . What is at issue here is our ability, our capacity to speak clearly to ourselves, to our peoples, and forthrightly to all those forces out there that have caused us to be in this situation” (Proceedings, 1991, p. 59). On the last day, participants did so in a dramatic way by adopting 17 **Principles of Environmental Justice**, an expansive vision for their communities and the right to participate directly in decisions about their environment.

The principles began with the deeply ethical statement, “Environmental justice affirms the sacredness of Mother Earth, ecological unity and the interdependence of all species, and the right to be free from ecological destruction” (Proceedings, 1991, p. viii). The principles developed an enlarged sense of the environment to include places where people lived, worked, and played and enumerated a series of rights, including “the fundamental right to political, economic, cultural, and environmental self-determination of all peoples” (p. viii).

The inclusion of the right of self-determination in the summit’s Principles of Environmental Justice was especially important to the emerging movement. Many of the summit’s participants had criticized the officially sanctioned decision making in their communities for failing to provide meaningful participation “for those most burdened by environmental decisions” (Cole & Foster, 2001, p. 16). In adopting the principles, they insisted that *environmental justice* not only referred to the right of all people to be free of environmental poisons but that at its core is the inclusion of all in the decisions that affect their health and the well-being of their communities. One delegate remarked that the Principles of Environmental Justice represented “how people of color define environmental issues for ourselves, as social and economic justice” (Proceedings, 1991, p. 54).

Following the summit, the Southern Organizing Conference for Social and Economic Justice applauded the “new definition of the term ‘environment’”; the group invited community activists “to build a new movement” using the Principles of Environmental Justice adopted at the summit (personal letter, June 2, 1992). Indeed, many community activists and others from civil rights and social justice groups left the 1991 summit to continue building the communication tools and networks that would be required to change practices in their communities and in government agencies.

**Opening the Floodgates**

In the following decades, the environmental justice movement saw clear gains. Deehon Ferris (1993) of the Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights in Washington, DC, observed that “as a result of on-the-ground struggles and hell-raising, ‘environmental
justice’ [emerged as] a hot issue. . . . Floodgates [opened] in the media.” Urban planning scholar Jim Schwab (1994) observed that “the new movement had won a place at the table. The Deep South, the nation, would never discuss environmental issues in the same way again” (p. 393). Ferris called the early 1990s “a watershed,” and the National Law Journal reported that the movement—often led by women—had gained “critical mass” (Lavelle & Coyle, 1992, p. 5). A subsequent gathering—the Second National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit—was held in Washington, DC, from October 23 to 26, 2002. Highlighting women’s roles as leaders in the movement, the second event was even larger, attracting more than 1,400 participants.

The critical mass of the movement began to make an impression—media stories about the pollution of minority communities, new coalitions with environmental groups, training for grassroots and community groups, a presidential Executive Order on Environmental Justice, and the beginnings of awareness by state and federal agencies. Let’s look at a few of these developments.

In 1993, the movement persuaded the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to set up a National Environmental Justice Advisory Committee (NEJAC) to ensure a voice in the EPA’s policy making for environmental justice groups. The committee was chartered to provide advice from the environmental justice community and recommendations to the EPA administrator. For example, NEJAC produced advisory reports on the cleanup of brown fields (polluted urban areas), mercury contamination of fish, and new guidelines for ensuring participation of low-income and minority residents in decisions about permits for industries wanting to locate in their communities.

The movement also achieved an important political goal when President Clinton issued Executive Order 12898, Federal Actions to Address Environmental Justice in Minority Populations and Low-Income Populations, in 1994. The Executive Order on Environmental Justice instructed each federal agency “to make achieving environmental justice part of its mission by identifying and addressing . . . disproportionately high and adverse human health or environmental effects of its programs, policies, and activities on minority populations and low-income populations in the United States” (Clinton, 1994, p. 7629). (Although the Clinton administration began a plan to implement the Executive Order, the succeeding administration of President George W. Bush allowed it to lay dormant for eight years [Office of the Inspector General, 2004].)

Under the Obama administration, the Executive Order on Environmental Justice received new life. The EPA’s new administrator, Lisa Jackson, hosted a White Forum on environmental justice and launched community meetings across the country. “Now, it’s time to take it to the next level,” Jackson said, adding that the Obama administration would focus on the creation of “green jobs” in disadvantaged communities (quoted in “Obama revives panel on environmental justice,” 2010, p. 2A). (See later section in this chapter on “Green Jobs.”)

Finally, the mainstream U.S. environmental movement itself underwent changes as a result of the critique of an environmentalism that stood apart from the places where people lived. Pezzullo and Sandler (2007), for example, observed that “much
has changed within . . . and happened around” the mainstream and environmental justice movements (p. 12). Vigorous dialogue between leaders of the mainstream green groups and the environmental justice community led in some cases to collaborations between these groups with poor and minority communities. Greenpeace, Sierra Club, Earth Island Institute, and Earth Justice (a legal advocacy group) have been particularly active in their support of environmental justice concerns.

But, the movement for environmental justice also would confront new obstacles and a need to identify new ways to communicate to pursue the vision put forward in the Principles of Environmental Justice. The next section describes some of these challenges and one way—toxic tours—that some local communities are attempting to bring attention to their concerns.

### Indecorous Voices and Toxic Tours

An important theme in the discourse of environmental justice is the right of individuals in at-risk communities to participate in decisions affecting their lives. In Chapter 5, I introduced Senecah’s (2004) Trinity of Voices (TOV) model to describe some of the elements that must be present for citizens to be heard or participate effectively in such decision making. One element was a person’s interpersonal standing—not in the legal sense as a plaintiff in court but “the civic legitimacy, the respect, the esteem, and the consideration that all stakeholders’ perspectives should be given” (p. 24). In this section, I describe a barrier to such respect, esteem, or moral standing that arises when agency officials or experts view the residents of poor or minority communities as indecorous or inappropriate when they attempt to speak of their concerns in technical forums.

#### Dismissing the “Indecorous” Voice

Let me begin by illustrating what I mean by the construction of an indecorous voice. By this, I mean the symbolic framing by some public officials of the voices of others as inappropriate or unqualified for speaking in official forums and their belief that ordinary people may be too emotional or ignorant to testify about chemical pollution or other environmental issues. Believing, for example, that a resident of a low-income community has violated such norms of knowledge or objectivity is one way of dismissing the public as unqualified to speak about technical matters. Rose Marie Augustine’s story is typical of such dismissal by public officials.

**Rose Marie Augustine’s Story: “Hysterical, Hispanic Housewives”**

On the south side of Tucson, Arizona, where Latin Americans and Native Americans are the main residents, chemicals from several industrial plants had seeped into the groundwater table. This contaminated the wells from which some 47,000 residents
drew their drinking water. One of the residents, Rose Marie Augustine, described her own and her neighbors’ fears: “We didn't know anything about what had happened to us. . . . We were never informed about what happens to people who become contaminated by drinking contaminated water. . . . We were suffering lots of cancers, and we thought, you know, my God, what's happening?” (Augustine, 1991). EPA officials later confirmed the severity of the toxic chemicals that had been leaching from nearby Tucson industrial plants into their well water and listed this site as one the nation's priority Superfund sites for cleanup (Augustine, 1993).

Prior to the area's listing as a Superfund site, residents from the south side had tried to get local officials to listen to their concerns. Augustine (1993) reported that, when residents met with officials, they refused to respond to questions about the health effects of drinking well water. She said that, when residents persisted, one county supervisor told them that “the people in the south side were obese, lazy, and had poor eating habits, that it was our lifestyle and not the TC [toxic chemicals] in the water that caused our health problems.” Augustine said that one official “called us 'hysterical Hispanic housewives' when we appealed to him for help.”

Dismissal by public officials of community residents’ complaints about environmental illness has occurred in other cases. For example, Roberts and Toffolon-Weiss (2001) reported that local officials in Louisiana’s Cancer Alley dismissed complaints about illness from pollution as due to lifestyle or to eating high-fat food (p. 117). Earlier, Hays (1987) found that, when community members offered bodily evidence of illness, they were often “belittled as the complaints of ‘housewives’” (p. 200). As we saw in Chapter 1, such notions of the public sphere mistakenly assume a rational or technical mode of communication as the only permissible form of discourse in public forums.

Decorum and the Norms of Public Forums

The Tucson official’s dismissal of Rose Marie Augustine’s complaints suggests that Augustine had violated a norm or appropriateness in speaking with government officials. This may appear strange at first as it is the official’s rudeness to her that surprises us. But, environmental justice advocates insist, poor and minority residents are often treated less seriously due to implicit norms for what counts as appropriate or reasonable in matters of environmental health and regulatory responsibilities. It is precisely this subtle barrier that some face as they work to build more inclusive and healthier communities.

In some ways, the unstated rules that operate in many forums addressing environmental problems reflect something similar to the ancient principle of decorum. **Decorum** was a virtue of style in the classical Greek and Latin handbooks on rhetoric and is usually translated as *propriety* or *that which is fitting* for the particular audience and occasion. The Roman rhetorician Cicero, for example, wrote that a wise speaker is one who is “able to speak in any way which the case requires” or in ways that are most “appropriate”; he proposed, “let us call [this quality] decorum or ‘propriety’” (Cicero, 1962, XX.69).
Within the context of those in poor and minority communities who try to speak about technical matters, however, the idea of decorum has taken on a much more constraining, even demeaning, role. The norms for what is and is not appropriate in regulatory forums often construct the lay public’s ways of speaking as indecorous because ordinary citizens often violate norms of speaking and the level of knowledge demanded by health and government agencies. Although the members of an environmentally harmed community may speak at public hearings, their standing, or the respect afforded them, may be constrained informally by the rules and expectations of agency procedures and norms for knowledge claims.

At this point, it might be useful to describe some of the norms and expectations that public officials may assume in public hearings or technical forums and the violations that encourage them to view members of low-income communities as indecorous.

“The Evidence Is in My Body!” Challenging Agency Norms

Agency Norms for Speaking

With exposure to chemical contamination and official denial or resistance, affected residents often become frustrated, disillusioned with authority, and angry. Ironically, such responses can be prompted by interaction with the very agencies whose official mandate is to help those who feel themselves to be at risk—for example, state health departments or the EPA. The individuals who become involved with these agencies often find themselves in a baffling environment of overlapping institutional jurisdictions, technical forums, and a language of risk assessment that speaks of parts per million of toxic substances. These are unfamiliar contexts for most of us, not simply for the residents of low-income communities. Environmental sociologist Michael Edelstein (1988) explained, “What is lost [for residents in these communities] is their ability to participate directly in understanding and determining courses of action important to their lives” (p. 118). They are, in a sense “captured by [the] agencies upon which they become dependent for clarification and assistance” (p. 118).

This capture is enabled by many agency officials’ tendencies to frame the participation of the public within restricted parameters of agency procedures and norms. As we saw in Chapter 1, industry and government officials often try to move the grounding of environmental discussions from the public to the technical sphere, which privileges more “rational” forms of argument. This is also journalist William Greider’s (1992) argument in his book Who Will Tell the People? In it, Greider wrote that technical forums often exclude the lay public by their assumptions about what constitutes legitimate evidence in debates about environment and community health.

The weight of past practices helps to explain why some agencies are reluctant to open technical hearings to the voices of aggrieved communities. Restricting the testimony of lay witnesses allows an agency to feel its decision making won’t be hampered by “an aroused and possibly ignorant public” (Rosenbaum, 1983, quoted in...
Lynn, 1987, p. 359). Under such norms of decorum, for some citizens to speak is therefore to confront a painful dilemma. On the one hand, to enter discussions about toxicology, epidemiology, or the technical aspects of water quality is tacitly to accept the discursive boundaries within which concerns for family health are seen as private or emotional matters. On the other hand, for worried parents to inject such private concerns into these conversations is to transgress powerful boundaries of technical knowledge, reason, and decorum and thus risk not being heard at all.

**Charlotte Keys’s Story: “The Evidence Is in My Body!”**

Charlotte Keys transgressed such a boundary. Keys was a young, African-American woman in the small town of Columbia in southern Mississippi with whom I had worked in my role as president of the Sierra Club in the mid-1990s. Keys and her neighbors lived next to a chemical plant owned by Reichhold Chemical, which had exploded and burned years earlier. The explosion and fire spewed toxic fumes throughout the neighborhood. Residents also suspected some of the barrels of chemicals that had been abandoned by the company had leached into the yards of nearby homes and into tributaries of Columbia’s drinking water sources.

Many of Keys’s neighbors near the abandoned plant also complained of unusual skin rashes, headaches, and illnesses. Officials from EPA and Columbia’s mayor initially dismissed the residents’ complaints as unsubstantiated; no health assessment was ever conducted. Reichhold spokesperson Alec Van Ryan later acknowledged to local news media, “I think everyone from the EPA on down will admit the initial communications with the community were nonexistent” (in Pender, 1993, p. 1).

Ultimately, Charlotte Keys organized her neighbors to speak with local officials and at public meetings. One such meeting occurred with officials from the federal Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR), who traveled to Columbia to propose a health study of the residents. However, the ATSDR officials proposed only to sample the neighbors’ urine and hair and test these for recent, acute exposure to toxins. Keys and other residents objected. They explained their exposure had initially occurred much earlier, when the plant exploded, and had been ongoing since then. Having done their homework, they insisted that the appropriate test was one that sampled blood and fatty tissues for evidence of long-term, chronic exposure. Keys urged the ATSDR officials to adopt this approach because, she said, “The evidence is in my body!” (C. Keys, personal correspondence, September 12, 1995).

The ATSDR officials refused this request, citing budgetary constraints. In turn, the residents felt stymied in their efforts to introduce the important personal evidence of their long-term exposure to chemicals that they believed was evident in their bodies. The meeting degenerated into angry exchanges and ended with an indefinite deferral of the plans to conduct a health study.

Unfortunately, the tension between the ATSDR and the residents of Columbia, Mississippi, is not unusual. Too often, agency officials dismiss the complaints and recommendations of those facing risk of chemical exposure in low-income communities,
believing that such people are emotional, unreliable, and irrational. For example, in an early study of public comments on the EPA’s environmental impact studies, political scientist Lynton Caldwell (1988) found that

public input into the . . . document was not regarded by government officials as particularly useful. . . . The public was generally perceived to be poorly informed on the issues and unsophisticated in considering risks and trade-offs. . . . Public participation was accepted as inevitable, but sometimes with great reluctance. (p. 80)

I have also overheard agency officials complain, after hearing reports of family illness or community members’ fears, “This is very emotional, but where’s the evidence?” “I’ve already heard this story,” or simply, “This is not helpful.”

In short, viewing someone as indecorous—as emotional or ignorant—functions to dismiss the informal standing of ordinary people and their ability to question the claims of public agencies or industries. To be clear, I am not suggesting that the indecorous voice results in a person’s rhetorical incompetence or a failure to find the “right words” to articulate a grievance. Instead, I’m suggesting that the arrangements and procedures of power may undermine the rhetorical standing—the respect accorded to such groups—by narrowly defining the acceptable rhetorical norms of environmental decision making.

The result is that citizens from poor and minority communities often face what environmental sociologist Michael Reich (1991) described as toxic politics. This is the dismissal of a community’s moral and communicative standing or the right of residents to matter within the discursive boundaries in which decisions affecting their fates are deliberated. The phrase toxic politics refers not only to the politics of locating or cleaning up chemical facilities but to the poisonous nature of such politics on occasion.

In the face of such toxic politics, many at-risk communities are inventing new ways to communicate their grievances, bypassing official forums and experts and inviting witnesses to come into their homes and neighbors to see for themselves the hazards there.

**Toxic Tours: Sights, Sounds, and Smells**

One particularly striking form of communication used more and more by environmental justice groups to connect local communities and wider publics is what grassroots activists call toxic tours. Communication scholar Phaedra Pezzullo (2007), in her book _Toxic Tourism Rhetorics of Pollution, Travel, and Environmental Justice_, defines these as “non-commercial expeditions into areas that are polluted by toxins, spaces that Robert D. Bullard (1993) calls ‘human sacrifice zones.’ . . . More and more of these communities have begun to invite outsiders in, providing tours as a means of educating people about and, it is hoped, transforming their situation” (p. 5).

Often, these outsiders are reporters, environmental allies, religious groups, and other supporters who—in personally experiencing the conditions of a community under environmental stress—are likely to share their experiences more widely.
Unlike EPA or other agency inspections of toxic sites, toxic tours highlight “discourses of . . . contamination, of social justice and the need for cultural change” (Pezzullo, 2007, pp. 5–6). Although environmental advocates have taken reporters and others into natural areas such as Yosemite Valley and the Grand Canyon for the past century to build support for their protection, this use of toxic tours is more recent.

Seeing for Ourselves in the Maquiladoras

Some years ago, I had the opportunity to join Dr. Pezzullo and other environmental leaders on a toxic tour outside of Matamoros, Mexico, south of the U.S. border near Brownsville, Texas. This area, which is part of the maquiladora zone or manufacturing area, has large numbers of (largely unregulated) industrial plants. These plants relocated to this area from the U.S. as a result of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Living in nearby colonias (crowded, makeshift housing on unoccupied land), the maquiladora workers and their families are subject to severely contaminated air and water, abysmal sanitation, and unsafe drinking water; many suffer from a number of illnesses. (See Chapter 12 for a discussion of the high rate of anencephalic births in the maquiladora zone.)

Figure 9.2 The Conoco Philips refinery is a stop on the toxic tour of low-income neighborhoods in Los Angeles; the tour is sponsored by an environmental justice group.
Chapter 9  Environmental Justice, Climate Justice, and the Green Jobs Movement  261

The tour through the crowded colonias was organized by the Sierra Club and its Mexican allies to introduce leaders from environmental groups to the threats to human health from pollution and unhealthy living conditions for workers and their families. As we walked through the unpaved streets by the workers’ homes, we felt overpowered by the sights, smells, and feel of an environment under assault. Strong chemical odors filled the air, small children played in visibly polluted streams by their homes, while others, barely older, scavenged in burning heaps of garbage for scraps of material they could sell for a few pesos.

Speaking of such experiences, Pezzullo (2004) later observed that being in a community harmed by such hazards opens visitors’ senses of sight, sound, and smell and that this awareness builds support for the community’s struggle: “Odorous fumes cause residents and their visitors’ eyes to water and throats to tighten . . . a reminder of the physical risk toxics pose” (p. 248). She shared one toxic tour guide’s observation that such tours give visitors “firsthand” evidence of “the environmental insult to residents [of having polluters so close to their homes], as well as the noxious odors that permeate the neighborhood” (p. 248). (For a description of a toxic tour in Louisiana’s infamous Cancer Alley” see Pezzullo, 2003, 2007.)

While my experience with toxic tours was along the U.S.-Mexican border, toxic tours are used to introduce journalists, agency officials, and other outsiders to distressed areas across the United States. Activists with groups such as Communities for a Better Environment (cbecal.org), the Sierra Club’s Delta Chapter in Louisiana (louisian.sierraclub.org), and Texas Environmental Justice Advocacy Services (tejasbarriers.org) lead toxic tours in environmentally stressed areas in Los Angeles, New Orleans, Houston, Oakland, Denver, Detroit, Boston, and other cities. Toxic tours also are increasingly used by local organizing groups to bring state or federal officials into distressed areas to educate officials to conditions on the ground or to put a human face on environmental harms. (See: “FYI: Toxic Tour of Southern California’s Coachella Valley.”)

F Y I  Toxic Tour of Southern California’s Coachella Valley

THERMAL, Calif.—Margarita Gamez stood in the baking heat Friday outside the trailer park where she lives with other farmworker families and begged visiting state lawmakers and environmental regulators to do something about the stench and dust from an abandoned dump across the street. The trailer park was one of five stops on an “environmental justice” tour organized by community activists in Southern California’s eastern Coachella Valley as they fight to clean up abandoned waste dumps, shoddy migrant housing and other hazards that are a fact of life in this poor, unincorporated region.

“We’ve been here for 12 years with this dump next to us and in the morning and in the afternoon we have to suffer through terrible stench,” the 68-year-old Gamez said, speaking to about 30 visitors who clustered in the shade of a single tree after arriving by bus. “We’re asking you to help us.” . . .

(Continued)
As toxic tours show, the environmental justice movement continues to confront real-world, on-the-ground challenges for gaining voices for communities that are often excluded from official decision making. Indeed, the vision of environmental justice has always been more than removal of the disproportionate burden on low-income and minority communities. Beyond this, environmental justice activists insist the movement embodies “a new vision borne of a community-driven process whose essential core is a transformative public discourse over what are truly healthy, sustainable and vital communities” (National Environmental Justice Advisory Council Subcommittee on Waste and Facility Siting, 1996, p. 17).

Important to the nurture of such a transformative discourse is the democratic inclusion of people and communities in decisions affecting their lives. Yet, as we will see in the next section, threats from global climate change are raising new threats to communities and peoples throughout the world. And, with these threats come new challenges to ordinary peoples’ ability to participate in meaningful ways in the geopolitical forums on such global concerns. As a result, a new movement for climate justice has arisen that has begun to articulate demands for environmental justice and human rights in a new context.

The Global Movement for Climate Justice

In recent years, the discourse of environment justice has been embraced by a vibrant and growing movement for climate justice. The largely dispersed, grassroots movement for climate justice views the environmental and human impacts of climate change from the frame of social justice, human rights, and concern for indigenous peoples. In ways similar to the criticism of mainstream environmentalism in the United States, climate justice advocates, indigenous peoples, and the poor in countries throughout Asia, South America, Africa, and the Pacific Island nations argue that
Climate change is not simply an environmental issue. Instead, the movement for climate justice asserts that global warming affects, disproportionately, the most vulnerable regions and peoples of the planet and that these peoples and nations often are excluded from participation in the forums addressing this problem.

In this section, I’ll describe the construction of a new frame of climate justice as well as the efforts of peoples and communities affected by climate change to gain a voice in the international summits where representatives of world governments are negotiating new agreements on climate change.

**Climate Justice: A New Frame**

Climate scientists and advocates for climate justice generally agree that “the greatest brunt of climate change’s effects will be felt (and are being felt) by the world’s poorest people” (Roberts, 2007, p. 295). In its strongest statement to date, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) forecast that “hundreds of millions of people in developing nations will face natural disasters, water shortages and hunger due to the effects of climate change” (Adam, Walker, & Benjamin, 2007, para. 5).

Already, extended droughts, crop failures, and conflict over scarce resources are affecting many vulnerable peoples and nations. As I write in 2011, for example, the Environmental News Service (ENS) is reporting that the worst drought in 60 years is causing a severe food crisis in East Africa, particularly in Somalia and Kenya. In Kenya, the world’s largest refugee camp is overwhelmed “as climate refugees from across the drought-stricken region arrive each week seeking water, food, and shelter” (Millions of African refugees desperate, “ 2011, para. 1; Knafo, 2011). More than 12 million people are facing famine and “are in desperate need of help” (Angley, 2011, para. 1).

**A Cruel Irony: Impacts of Climate Change**

Human rights groups and environmental scholars also charge that the voices of those most affected by climate change are often not part of the conversation about solutions. Dale Jamieson (2007) notes that “seventy million farmers and their families in Bangladesh will lose their livelihoods when their rice paddies are inundated by seawater. Yet despite the vast number of people around the world who will suffer from climate change, most of them are not included when decisions are made” (p. 92). He adds, for this reason, “participatory justice is also important at the global level” (p. 92).

There is also a cruel irony in this exclusion: As former *New Yorker Times* reporter Andrew Revkin (2007) observed, “In almost every instance, the people most at risk from climate change live in countries that have contributed the least to the buildup of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases linked to the recent warming of the planet” (para. 2).

As the effects of climate change—particularly in vulnerable areas of Asia and Africa—began to be experienced by local communities and regions, nongovernmental
organizations (NGOs) from these nations began to build alliances and coordinate with activists in Europe and the United States. One of the most consequential developments of this alliance would be the elaboration of climate justice as a new frame in their construction of messages about global warming and in the mobilizing of others.

Constructing a Climate Justice Frame

The phrase *climate justice* was apparently used first in academic literature by Edith Brown Weiss (1989) in her study *In Fairness to Future Generations: International Law, Common Patrimony, and Intergenerational Equity*. A more movement-oriented demand for climate justice, however, may have been voiced first in the mid-1990s, by Tom Goldtooth, the founder of the Indigenous Environmental Network; it was further developed in a 1999 CorpWatch report and was the basis for a resolution at the Second People of Color Environmental leadership Summit in 2002 (Tokar, 2010, pp. 45–46).

One of the first large-scale gatherings for Climate Justice supporters occurred in 2000 when thousands of grassroots organizations and climate activists met in The Hague, Netherlands, at the Climate Justice Summit. The summit was an alternative forum to a UN meeting on climate change and was intended as a discursive space “to raise the critical issues that are not being addressed by the world’s governments” (Bullard, 2000, para. 5).

In the years following, NGOs, indigenous peoples’ organizations, and other social justice activists came together to organize rallies, conferences, and protests alongside UN meetings on climate change. Two other early, important organizing efforts occurred when local activists and international NGOs met alongside official UN-sponsored sessions on climate change in Bali, Indonesia, in August 2002, and New Delhi, India, in October 2002.

In Bali, a coalition of international NGOs, including the National Alliance of People’s Movements (India), CorpWatch (United States), Greenpeace International, Third World Network (Malaysia), Indigenous Environmental Network (North America), and groundWork (South Africa) crafted one of the first declarations redefining climate change from the perspective of environmental justice and human rights.

Meeting alongside the UN delegates preparing for the Bali session earlier, the coalition developed the **Bali Principles of Climate Justice**. The principles pledged to “build an international movement of all peoples for Climate Justice” (Bali Principles of Climate Justice, 2002, para. 19). The effort would be based on certain principles, echoing the 1991 Principles of Environmental Justice (earlier in this chapter). For example, the Bali Principles similarly began:

1. Affirming the sacredness of Mother Earth, ecological unity and the interdependence of all species,

2. Climate Justice insists that communities have the right to be free from climate change, its related impacts and other forms of ecological destruction.
3. Climate Justice affirms the need to reduce with an aim to eliminate the production of greenhouse gases and associated local pollutants.

4. Climate Justice affirms the rights of indigenous peoples and affected communities to represent and speak for themselves. (para. 20)

One consequence of the Bali Principles, as well as other declarations, was to shift “the discursive framework of climate change from a scientific-technical debate to one about ethics focused on human rights and justice” (Agyeman, Doppelt, & Lynn, 2007, p. 121). An important moment in this shift came on October 28, 2002, when more than 1,500 individuals—farmers, indigenous peoples, the poor, and youth—from more than 20 countries marched for climate justice in New Delhi, India (Roberts, 2007). The occasion was a meeting of a grassroots Climate Justice Summit to begin organizing for climate justice on an international scale. Representatives from affected communities gathered “to provide testimony to the fact that climate change is a reality whose effects are already being felt around the world” (Delhi Climate Justice Declaration, 2002, para. 1).

The culmination of the summit was the Delhi Climate Justice Declaration. The declaration concluded: “We, representatives of the poor and the marginalized of the world, representing fishworkers, farmers, Indigenous Peoples, Dalits, the poor, and the youth, resolve to actively build a movement . . . that will address the issue of climate change from a human-rights, social justice, and labour perspective” (para. 12). The declaration expressed the attendees’ resolve to “build alliances across states and borders to oppose climate change inducing patterns and advocate for and practice sustainable development” (para. 12).

Other international gatherings and declarations have followed, including the Durban Declaration on Carbon Trading (2004), a critique of proposed market schemes for trading greenhouse gas emissions; the People’s Declaration for Climate Justice (Sumberklampok Declaration) (2007), in Bali, Indonesia, an effort to influence the start of negotiations among the world’s nations of a new post-Kyoto treaty; and the large, international mobilizations at the UN climate conferences in Copenhagen (2009) and Cancun (2010).

**Mobilizing for Climate Justice**

As a result of their exclusion from the official forums, climate justice activists have sought to create alternative structures for communication—outside of summits, as we saw earlier, with online networks that coordinate activities and update activists and groups across regions, and on the ground, as local activists organize around businesses or other sites linked to climate change.

**Global Organizing**

At the summits in New Delhi, Bali, and elsewhere, climate activists emphasized the need to create lines of communication across borders and within regions to build a

By the time of the 2007 Bali gathering, the movement had come to “the forefront of global civil society debates [about climate change] . . . and rose in prominence during the lead-up to the much-anticipated 2009 UN climate summit in Copenhagen” (Tokar, 2010, p. 44).

While the movement successfully turned out tens of thousands of supporters for it, the UN Climate Conference in Copenhagen in December 2009 also proved to be a turning point—and a disappointment—for the climate justice movement. In the months preceding the conference, climate justice groups from 21 countries had issued a Call to Action, as part of a mass-mobilization effort. By the time of the conference, thousands of activists had gathered in Copenhagen, holding rallies, mounting colorful displays, conducting workshops, and carrying out peaceful marches and demonstrations.

As the official conference continued, protests outside the Bella Center increased. Clashes with police began as activists felt angry at being left out of the official meetings. Although some NGO representatives and journalists were allowed inside, thousands of others were barred due to a lack of space. As a result, some activists attempted to force their way inside the Center for a “Peoples’ Assembly.” In blocking them, police fired tear gas and pepper spray at more than 1,000 activists; hundreds were arrested (Gray, 2009). Calling it “an affront to democracy,” the executive director of Friends of the Earth complained to journalists that indigenous peoples and civil society groups were being “prevented from speaking up on behalf of communities around the globe within the talks themselves” (Gray, 2009, paras. 9, 10). Many felt that only by hearing directly from such groups could the UN delegates appreciate the urgency and human face of the effects of climate change.

Whether for this or other reasons, the delegates failed to reach a binding agreement at Copenhagen. Although informal agreement reached at the conference recognized the scientific case for keeping temperature rises to no more than 2°C, it “does not contain commitments to emissions reductions to achieve that” (Vidal, Stratton, & Goldenberg, 2009, para. 2). Nor would subsequent UN meetings in Cancun and elsewhere, as I write, come close to achieving a new, international treaty to replace the early Kyoto Accord.

The climate justice movement itself is sustained largely online through social networking sites and LISTSERVs that help to mobilize activists for actions at sites such as the Copenhagen conference. For example, the India Climate Justice Forum is hosted by the India Resource Center, a project of Global Resistance, whose goal is “to strengthen the movement against corporate globalization by supporting and linking local, grassroots struggles against globalization around the world” (indiaresource.org).
On the other hand, the climate justice movement has initiated (and continues to bring online) new social networking sites, blogs, and information sites of its own.

An important network is the London-based Rising Tide Coalition for Climate Justice (risingtide.org.uk), consisting of environmental and social justice groups from around the world, especially in Europe (Roberts, 2007). There is also a Rising Tide North American network (2008, risingtidenorthamerica.org). Rising Tide grew out of the efforts of groups who came together to organize events alongside a UN climate conference in The Hague in 2000.

Other prominent online networks include: Environmental Justice Climate Change Initiative (ejcc.org); It’s Getting Hot in Here (itsgettinghotinhere.org), a community media site involving student and youth activists against climate change; Climate Justice Now! (climatejustice.blogspot.com), an active blog with links to numerous climate justice sites; the Third World Network (twnside.org.sq); and 350.0rg, which has mobilized thousands of climate activists in coordinated, same-day protests around the world.

The number 350 in climate justice discourse refers to 350 parts per million of carbon dioxide as the level in the atmosphere that is safe for the global climate. Like many other online sites, 350.0rg provides daily updates, video uploads from local activists, and analyses of official proposals. The site also has played a prominent role in the past several years, mobilizing climate justice activists ahead of the UN climate conference in Copenhagen, Denmark, and annually since then, in same-day, international displays of concern. In addition, other climate justice groups formed the Mobilization for Climate Justice (actforclimatejustice.org) in 2009 “to link the climate struggle in the U.S. to the growing international climate justice movement” in an attempt to build support for actions at the Copenhagen conference (Tokar, 2010, pp. 48–49).

As a result of its online organizing, the climate justice movement brought together coalitions of students, antinuclear and social justice activists, indigenous peoples, academics, opponents of carbon trading, religious groups, and others.

**Climate Change and Grassroots Energy**

While the climate justice movement is largely made up of “a series of coalitions, which sometimes appear to exist mostly . . . on a website” (Roberts, 2007, p. 297), it clearly has other important strengths. These include, in addition to a “‘master frame’ in which to claim injustice,” substantial cross-border alliances, “some key resources in these networking groups, [and] grassroots energy” (p. 297). Much of this grassroots energy comes from the creative, direct actions of local groups as well as the initiatives of larger organizations.

Much of the local organizing initiative around climate justice comes from younger activists in the United States and Europe as well as from farmers, indigenous peoples, and human rights activists in Asia, Africa, and South America. “An emerging youth climate movement is carrying out creative direct actions, not only
at coal industry sites, but also at corporate headquarters [and] industry conferences” (Tokar, 2010, p. 48). One tactic has been the use of direct action events to publicize the links between global warming and banks that finance the mining of coal, a major source of greenhouse gases. For example, activists blockaded the Bank of America in Asheville, North Carolina, to draw attention to its lending of money for mountaintop mining of coal:

Two activists locked down inside the main lobby and other activists blockaded the entrance to the downtown branch of the Bank of America. The protest included a large, lively group of concerned citizens dressed as canaries and polar bears. Activists carried signs and banners that read: “Bank of America Stop Funding Climate Change,” “Bank of America Stop Mountaintop Removal,” . . . [and] “Bank of America Climate Criminal.” (Climate Convergence, 2007, para. 2)

More recently, climate justice activists in the United States, Canada, Australia, the UK, and New Zealand used the April 20 anniversary of the BP Deepwater Horizon explosion and oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico to call for an international Day of Action Against Extraction. Activists staged “aggressive protests and acts of civil disobedience at the doorstep of fossil fuel extraction, including at corporate and government offices, mountaintop removal mine sites, power plants and gas stations (The Day of Action Against Extraction, 2011, paras. 4, 5).
Even as some activists continue to pursue largely symbolic protests—rallies at summits, civil disobedience at corporate offices, and so on—a debate has begun in the wider climate justice movement about the effectiveness of such tactics. On the one hand, many radical leaders insist that the climate catastrophe “will not be stopped in conference rooms or treaty negotiations”; what is required, they argue, is “mass action in the streets” (Rebick, 2010, pp. 7, 8).

Yet, others have questioned whether the reliance on mass action alone is equal to the scale and complexity of the global economic system that is responsible for climate change: “We really do need a longer term plan,” acknowledged Patrick Bond, the director of the Center for Civil Society in South Africa, a plan that “will make the gains we’ve taken, on the streets and in the communities . . . actually real. How can they be turned into good public policy?” (“Only political activism,” 2010, p. 186). Radical environmentalist Eirik Eiglad (2010) similarly asked, “How can we see beyond the current . . . focus on the major climate summits [like Copenhagen or Cancun], important as they may be?” (p. 10).

While environmental and climate justice groups failed to persuade the U.S. Congress to act on climate change, other environmental groups are pursuing more strategic campaigns outside of the political process to reduce greenhouse gases directly. Perhaps the most successful of these efforts has been the Sierra Club’s Beyond Coal campaign against coal-burning power plants (described in Chapter 8). As a result of the targeting of state utility commissions, banks, and energy companies themselves, the campaign and its supporters have blocked or cancelled more than 150 proposed plants in the past five years. Yet, even as plants are cancelled in the United States, coal-fired power plants continue to be built as other nations pursue their own economic paths to development.

Others, therefore, acknowledge that slowing then reversing climate change will require a basic restructuring of the global economy. What is needed, they argue, are “broad and visionary alliances with people and movements around the world to begin the fundamental transformation of society” (Petermann & Langelle, 2010, p. 187). How to achieve this—and what strategic leverage is required to affect global economies—are challenging questions that are still being debated. (See “Act Locally! How Can You Make a Difference on Global Climate Change?”)

### Act Locally!

**How Can You Make a Difference on Global Climate Change?**

“Think globally, act locally” has been a saying in the environmental movement since Earth Day. Its advice is more relevant now than ever. But, how can an individual act locally on a problem like global climate change? Still, many students, families, and concerned individuals are finding ways to do this every day—reducing their individual carbon footprints, attending public hearings to oppose permits for coal-fired power plants, e-mailing public officials in support of renewable energy, and more.

1. Investigate what your college or university is doing to reduce its energy consumption or operate in a more sustainable way. How can you add to these initiatives?

*(Continued)*
As I write, UN delegates meeting in Durban, South Africa, in December 2011, are attempting to find agreement on a post-Kyoto treaty to address climate change. Coming after their failures in Copenhagen (2009) and Cancun, Mexico (2010), they are struggling to find the political will among the major world economies, including the United States, Japan, the European Union, Brazil, and China, to reach a binding agreement. The decisions being made there and in the next two to three years will undoubtedly be consequential for future generations.

The Movement for Green Jobs

While climate justice advocates search for ways to influence upcoming UN negotiations, others in the United States have initiated a closely related movement for green jobs. The green jobs movement champions a new source of employment, particularly for depressed communities and unemployed workers, by funding labor-intensive, clean-energy projects such as weatherproofing buildings, installing solar panels, and building wind turbines, which at the same time, help to reduce U.S. emissions of greenhouse gases. Although the movement’s goals are ambitious, it has already begun to shift the political conversation in the United States by its articulation or linking of jobs, clean energy, and climate change.

Shifting the Political Agenda

Within the last five years, the vision of green jobs, or a clean energy economy, has become commonplace in the media, political circles, and in new hiring by clean energy manufacturers and businesses. By the U.S. presidential campaign in 2008, for example, both Democratic and Republican candidates were promising their support for green jobs, with Barack Obama, for example, promising to spend
$150 billion over 10 years to create 5 million new green-collar jobs, while John McCain assured his campaign audiences that decarbonizing America’s economy will produce “thousands, millions of new jobs in America” (Walsh, 2008, para. 1). Furthermore, the United Nations Environmental Program (2008) reported, for the first time at the global level, “green jobs are being generated in some sectors and economies” (p. vii).

Part of the reason for the apparent appeal of green jobs may be the elasticity of the phrase itself. As Conger (2010) noted, “Here isn’t a broad agreement on what these highly touted jobs are in the first place” (para. 4). The United Nations Environment Program (2008), for example, defines a green job, also called a green-collar job, broadly “as work in agricultural, manufacturing, research and development (R&D), administrative, and service activities that contribute substantially to preserving or restoring environmental quality” (p. 3). Others insist green jobs must be linked explicitly to clean energy or work that contributes to a reduction of greenhouse gas emissions. The divergence in these definitions, as Michelle Melton, a research analyst at Georgetown University’s Center on Education and the Workforce, explains, “is that the (green jobs) movement really didn’t start with economists and statisticians. . . . It came from an advocacy movement” (quoted in Conger, 2010, para. 4).

For some movement policy centers, such as the Apollo Alliance—a coalition of labor and environmental groups—the rationale for green jobs originally grew from the need to address climate change. To curb greenhouse gas emissions, such groups argue, the United States will need to decarbonize the economy, that is, replace fossil-fuel sources of consumption (heating and cooling homes, driving, etc.) with cleaner energy sources. In turn, groups like the Apollo Alliance argue that this work will create millions of new jobs because someone will have to install the solar panels, build wind farms, and so on. Phil Angelides, chair of the Apollo Alliance, explained to a reporter:

> Between now and 2030, 75% of the buildings in the U.S. will either be new or substantially rehabilitated. Our inefficient, dangerously unstable electrical grid will need to be overhauled. The jobs that will go into that kind of work can be green-collar—provided that the government adopts the kind of policies that incentivize environmentally friendly choices.” (quoted in Walsh, 2008, para. 6)

As the connections among climate change, decarbonizing the economy, and jobs became clear, others seized the phrase green jobs to frame this complex linkage and raise support for funding for these initiatives. Prime movers in this communicative work included, along with the Apollo Alliance, the Blue Green Alliance (bluegreenalliance.org), a strategic partnership between labor unions and environmental groups, and leaders like Van Jones, founder of the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights (ellabakercenter.org), a nonprofit group committed to finding alternatives to violence and incarceration in urban neighborhoods. The center, under Jones, would also launch a green-collar jobs campaign that made explicit the linkage between a green economy and uplifting jobs.
Articulating Jobs and Clean Energy

Helping to account for the popularity of green jobs among the public and some political leaders has been a creative articulation or linking of several, basic frames in the American mind—the importance attached to jobs, energy security, and a clean environment. Although green jobs has referred at times to any employment in environmental services, such as waste management or recycling, the movement’s original advocates conceived of green jobs as a solution to both unemployment and, specifically, climate change. Indeed, groups like the Blue Green Alliance, Green for All, and the Apollo Alliance sought to construct an inspiring vision of a new, prosperous economy that renewed communities and people while addressing the world’s biggest challenge.

One of the prime movers of the green jobs movement is Van Jones, former Green Jobs Czar in the Obama administration and founder of Green for All in Oakland, California. In starting Green for All—whose logo is a sun rising over a crowded cityscape—Jones’s goal has been to “broaden the appeal of the environmental movement and, at the same time, bring jobs to poor neighborhoods” (Kolbert, 2009, para. 5).

[T]he best way to fight both global warming and urban poverty is by creating millions of “green jobs”—weatherizing buildings, installing solar panels, and constructing mass-transit systems. A percentage of these jobs—Jones is purposefully vague about how many—should go to the disadvantaged and the chronically unemployed. “The green economy should not be just about reclaiming thrown-away stuff,” he writes. “It should be about reclaiming thrown-away communities.” (Kolbert, 2009, para. 31).

Van Jones’s emphasis upon renewal of communities as well as the environment illustrates one of the functions of what I described in Chapter 8 as *critical rhetoric*, or one form of advocacy. There, I defined critical rhetoric not only as the questioning or denunciation of a behavior, policy, or ideology but also the articulation of an alternate vision or ideology. For Jones, that vision sharply contrasts with the realities of many urban neighborhoods today. In a speech to the Center for American Progress, for example, Jones laid out this competing vision of America:

You have construction workers who are idle, and they’re going to be idle for twelve months, twenty-four months, thirty-six months. . . . We have people coming home from wars, coming home from prisons, coming out of high school with no job prospects whatsoever. Let us connect the people who most need work with the work that most needs to be done. (quoted in Kolbert, 2009, para. 40)

This vision is vividly displayed in Green for All’s communication outreach and website, where videos of depressed neighborhoods, closed businesses, unemployed workers, and children suffering from pollution are contrasted with images of people weathering homes, installing solar panels, and rebuilding communities. The vision is one where millions of new, clean jobs are available for those who have been left out of the “old economy”:

Every day, about 135 million people go to work in the U.S. Imagine what would happen if millions of those jobs—plus new ones created for people who are currently unemployed—were in fields like renewable energy, sustainable agriculture, and green building. Our two crucial concerns about survival—the environment and making a living—would be combined. A person’s commitment to their job would also be their commitment to the planet. (Greenforall.org/green-collar-jobs)

A similar articulation of jobs and clean energy is the theme of an annual summit of employers, labor unions, and environmental groups. This Good Jobs, Green Jobs National Conference is sponsored by the Blue Green Alliance and its allies from Fortune 500 companies, green industry trade associations, labor unions, environmental organizations, and educational institutions. The two-day conference hosts workshops, speeches, and panel displays for workers, business leaders,
and public officials and showcases the frame of a clean energy economy—“an economy that creates green jobs, reduces global warming and preserves America’s economic and environmental security” (from the 2011 conference website, www.greenjobsconference.org).

As I write in late 2011, the movement has gained popular support and some tangible victories. The demand for green jobs has begun a rallying cry for a broad coalition of environmental and antipoverty advocates, labor unions, clean technology businesses, and some political leaders. As early as 2007, the U.S. Congress had passed the Green Jobs Act, authorizing funds for low-income trainees; and more recently, the green jobs section of the 2010 stimulus bill passed by Congress included $5 billion for clean energy initiatives, green construction, and other sources of green employment.

**SUMMARY**

In this chapter, I’ve described some of the communication practices of the grassroots movements for environmental justice, climate justice, and green jobs, as well as their challenges to a discourse of the environment as a place apart from humans. As a consequence, these movements have created a new antagonism (Chapter 2), or a recognition of the limits of existing views or ideas; in turn, this has provided an opening that is allowing other voices and views to be heard.

- In section one, I described the emergence of a critical rhetoric of environmental justice as low-income neighborhoods and communities of color challenged mainstream environmental groups’ discourse about the environment as a place apart from humans. This movement has:
  1. demanded a halt to the inequitable burdens often imposed on poor and minority communities,
  2. called for more opportunities for those who are most affected by environmental injustices to be heard in the decision making of corporations and public agencies, and
  3. articulated a vision of environmentally healthy and economically sustainable communities.

- Section two introduced the concept of *indecorous voices*, a reference to the barriers often faced by residents in at-risk communities when they attempt to speak out against the hazards they face. We looked at two aspects of this:
  1. communication practices that dismiss the voices of some as “inappropriate” or “emotional,” and
  2. the use of toxic tours by low-income neighborhoods and communities of color to call attention to the sights, sounds, and smells of environmental racism.
• In section three, I described the emergence of the global movement for climate justice and the ways in which it has reframed the threat of climate change as a matter of social justice, human rights, and concern for indigenous peoples as well as the environment.

• Finally, in section four, I described the growth of a green jobs movement in the United States.

Although its goals are ambitious, the green jobs movement has already begun to influence the political agenda in the United States by its linking of jobs, clean energy, and climate change. Indeed, the movements for environmental and climate change and a demand for green jobs may offer the best hope in the face of global environmental threats for creating a socially just and ecologically sustainable society.

SUGGESTED RESOURCES

• Climate Refugees, 2010, a documentary film about the human face of climate change at www.climaterefugees.com.


• Green for All, a nationwide, nonprofit organization “working to build an inclusive green economy strong enough to lift people out of poverty,” at www.greenforall.org.

KEY TERMS

Bali Principles of Climate Justice 264
Climate justice 262
Decorum 256
Delhi Climate Justice Declaration 265
Disparate impact 250
Environmental justice 246
Environmental racism 250
Executive Order on Environmental Justice 254

First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit 252
Green jobs movement 270
Indecorous voice 255
National Environmental Justice Advisory Council (NEJAC) 254
Principles of Environmental Justice 253
Sacrifice zones 249
Toxic politics 259
Toxic tours 259
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Should we be willing to accept some risks in order to enjoy the benefits of modern society? If so, who is most likely to receive the benefits? The risks?

2. Environmental historian Robert Gottlieb poses a challenging question: “Can mainstream and alternative groups find a common language, a shared history, a common conceptual and organizational home?” (in Warren, 2003, p. 254). What do you think? Are a common language and shared history needed for environmentalists and activists from poor and minority neighborhoods to work together?

3. Why have the United States and other nations been slow to act on global climate change? To what degree do you believe communication (news reports, blogs, cable TV) plays a role in the public’s view of climate change and its likely causes?

4. What effect has the climate justice movement had to date in influencing action of climate change? How effective is mass action in the street or global, same-day protests like 350.org’s October 24, 2009, International Day of Climate Action?

5. Do you believe a shift from a fossil-fuel economy (coal power plants, oil, etc.) to a renewable energy economy (wind turbines, solar panels, etc.) will create a net increase in jobs that are also green? Who is likely to get these jobs?

NOTES

1. I am indebted to Dr. Phaedra Pezzullo of Indiana University for permission to cite material from our unpublished paper, “Re-Articulating ‘Environment’: Rhetorical Invention, Subaltern Counterpublics, and the Movement for Environmental Justice.”

2. In 1978, residents of Love Canal discovered “that Hooker Chemical Corporation . . . had dumped 200 tons of a toxic, dioxin-laden chemicals and 21,600 tons of various other chemicals into Love Canal. . . . In 1953, Hooker filled in the canal, smoothed out the land, and sold it to the town school board for $1.00 (Gibbs, 1995, p. xvii). For background on Love Canal, see Chapter 1.


4. Other attempts to forge diverse coalitions included the 1972 Conference on Environmental Quality and Social Justice at Woodstock, Illinois; the 1976 United Auto Worker’s Black Lake Conference, Working for Environmental and Economic Justice and Jobs; and the 1979 City Care conference on the urban environment in Detroit, jointly convened by the National Urban League, the Sierra Club, and the Urban Environment Conference.

5. Di Chiro (1996) noted, “Eventually, environmental and social justice organizations such as Greenpeace, the National Health Law Program, the Center for Law in the Public Interest, and Citizens for a Better Environment would join [the] Concerned Citizens’ campaign to stop [the proposed facility]” (p. 527, note 2).

6. Chavis’s claim of having coined the term environmental racism has been disputed; some activists in Warren County insist that they used this phrase first.
Chapter 9  Environmental Justice, Climate Justice, and the Green Jobs Movement  277

7. The Group of Ten were the Environmental Defense Fund, Friends of the Earth, the Izaak Walton League, the National Audubon Society, the National Parks and Conservation Association, the National Wildlife Federation, the Natural Resources Defense Council, the Sierra Club, the Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund (now Earth Justice), and the Wilderness Society.

8. I was fortunate to have the opportunity to attend and participate in the sessions that included leaders of traditional environmental organizations.

9. Portions of this section are derived from a paper I presented at the Fifth Biennial Conference on Communication and the Environment (Cox, 2001).

10. Reichhold Chemical ultimately offered to assist community members by helping to fund a health study and a community advisory panel to assist in decisions about the polluted site.

REFERENCES


The day of action against extraction is one week away! (2011, April 14). BeyondTalk.net. Retrieved February 27, 2012, from www.beyondtalk.net/2011/04/the-day-of-action-against-extraction-is-one-week-away/


Obama revives panel on environmental justice. (2010, September 23). *USA Today*, p. 2A.


Petermann, A., & Langelle, O. (2010). Crisis, challenge, and mass action. In I. Angus,


As a result of a loose regulatory landscape, green product advertising may signal a wide range of meanings—from unsubstantiated claims to accurate information about the qualities of the product or the behavior of the corporation.
CHAPTER 10

Green Marketing and Corporate Campaigns

The deeper you go, the more good things you learn about oil and natural gas, an industry that supports 9.2 million American jobs. . . . From the energy in manufacturing plants to the fertilizer on farms to the building blocks of tomorrow’s medicines, we’re fueling all kinds of jobs.

—American Petroleum Institute TV ad (2011)

The commercial appeared daily on my TV screen: A blond woman in a dark business suit calmly speaks to viewers as she descends in a glass elevator with an oil derrick and drilling shafts in the background. As she speaks of the “good things you learn about oil and natural gas,” a large sign flashes on the screen: “9.2 million JOBS.” The ad was sponsored by the American Petroleum Institute, a trade group that promotes the interests of energy producers like Exxon Mobil and more than 400 other producers, refiners, and ocean transport and services companies.

The TV advertisement for the oil and natural gas industry is one of many forms of environmental communication that corporations routinely use in the public sphere. These communications range from the advertising of “green” products and television and radio ads bolstering a corporation’s image to lobbying campaigns aimed at influencing government agencies or the U.S. Congress.
PART IV  ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENTS AND CAMPAIGNS

Chapter Preview

- In the first section, I will start by describing a free market discourse that underlies much of corporate environmental communication.
- In the second section, I’ll examine corporate “green marketing” and its three major forms: (1) product advertising (sales), (2) image enhancement, and (3) corporate image repair.
- The third section explores two communication practices that take advantage of public support for environmental values:
  1. greenwashing, or the use of deceptive advertising to promote an environmentally responsible image, and
  2. a discourse of “green consumerism,” doing “good” by buying green.
- In the fourth section, I explore the role of corporate advocacy campaigns in the public sphere to influence public opinion and environmental laws.
- Finally, I describe a third, less frequent communication practice, the use of Strategic Litigation Against Public Participation (SLAPP) suits, to discredit or intimidate individuals who criticize industry for harming the environment.

In general, corporate environmental communication may be one of three different types: (1) “green marketing,” or the construction of an environmental identity for corporate products, images, and behaviors; (2) corporate advocacy campaigns that are aimed at affecting public opinion, environmental laws, or agency rules; and (3) more aggressive strategies used to discredit or intimidate environmental critics. In this chapter, I’ll discuss examples of each type of these forms of communication. And, throughout this chapter, I will also describe a skillful and complex dance of identity in corporate communication—the effort by some (but not all) corporations to appear “green,” often while actively opposing environmental protections.

**Free Market Discourse and the Environment**

Before looking more closely at the diverse forms of corporate communication, it’s important to appreciate the ideological premises and sources of persuasion that underlie much of these appeals. Corporate advocacy regarding the environment does not occur in a vacuum. Instead, it often draws upon an ideological discourse (Chapter 3) that circulates a set of meanings about business and the proper role of government. This is a discourse about the nature of economic markets and the role of government and is particularly evident in the opposition of corporations to environmental standards. Behind the discourse of much corporate environmental communication is the belief in a **free market**, a phrase that is usually meant to refer to the absence of governmental restriction of business and commercial activity. As a discourse, this sustains the idea that the private marketplace is self-regulating and ultimately promotes the social good. As a result, a discourse of free markets constructs a powerful