

An overview of
**Youth Leadership in the
Environmental Justice Movement**

From the Second National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit
Washington, DC, October 26, 2002

As drafted by the youth of the Second National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit here stands a statement on youth leadership in the environmental justice movement. This document is the product of several days of discussion amongst a group of 150 youth and does not assume to represent the entire youth environmental justice movement, particularly the perspectives of Native and rural youth.

Issues that youth are facing

As youth we feel society has a negative perception of us. Society places stereotypes on us based on our race, class, gender, sexuality and age. Our voices and concerns are often not heard by decision makers that affect our society. We believe that we have unique and diverse perspectives that can enhance the environmental justice movement.

We want to learn from our elders, their experiences, stories and knowledge. We believe that through being mentored by our elders and by being involved in decision making processes, we can build a powerful movement ensuring environmental justice for all. The following are issues facing youth:

Urban and rural problems

- Lack of green space (parks, urban gardens)
- Gentrification – the process by which low-income communities of color are pushed out of where we live
- Lack of affordable housing
- Poor air quality
- Limited access to resources
- Maintaining unique cultural identity
- Lack of job opportunities (economic justice)
- Worker health and safety
- Healthy lifestyle (access to organic foods, facilities)
- Lack of awareness between racial/ethnic communities (cultural and political)
- Lack of awareness of environmental justice issues
- Homelessness
- Lack of transportation choices
- The siting of freeways near low-income communities and communities of color

Educational problems

- Lack of courses in ethnic studies
- High drop-out rates
- Lack of cultural understanding by teachers, cultural insensitivity, mono-culturalism
- Lack of parent and community involvement because of language barriers and the lack of understanding that the community has power
- Lack of culturally-appropriate mentors in educational systems (career/college counselors)
- Biased/racist curriculum, eurocentric curriculum
- Standardized testing that discriminates against low-income youth of color (e.g., STAR tests, exit exams, high stakes testing, SATs, ACTs)
- Students being criminalized more than protected by police in schools
- Lack of funds, unequal distribution of funds
- Overcrowded classrooms and poor school facilities (e.g., dirty bathrooms, no windows, etc.)
- Unhealthy food served in our schools

Common problems youth face

- Police brutality
- Language barriers (e.g., English-only laws)
- Ageism and negative stereotypes of youth (e.g., how we dress, talk and act)
- Racial profiling
- Teen pregnancy
- High drop-out rates
- Unhealthy spirituality
- Destruction of social fabric
- High suicide rates
- Drug, alcohol and tobacco use and distribution
- Sexually transmitted diseases
- Negative body images of women and men
- Lack of jobs and programs for youth
- Peer pressures and pressures from adults
- Domestic miscommunication between parents, family, communities and their children (generation gap)
- Pursuit of individualistic and materialistic lifestyles, resulting in the loss of cultural identity, values and morals
- Ism's (e.g., heterosexism, transphobia, racism, xenophobia, classism, sexism, ageism, ableism)
- Lack of cultural and youth centers
- Sexual harassment at schools
- Lack of youth employment programs or formal job training

Environmental racism

- Siting of toxic incinerators and nuclear waste facilities in communities where low-income, indigenous and/or people of color live
- Poor air quality
- Polluted water
- Breaking trust and responsibilities
- Loss of traditional knowledge
- Designating indigenous lands as energy colonies for the rest of the nation
- Deliberately violating environmental policies
- Lack of economic and political leverage
- Lack of access to congressional bodies
- Racist federal Indian policies
- Desecration and destruction of sacred sites
- Loss of cultural diversity and sustainable ways of living for Native peoples
- Red lining, inability to get loans based on discrimination and poverty
- Lack of emergency warning systems and/or effective, multilingual warning systems

Root Causes of Youth Environmental Justice Issues

The two main causes of oppression are greed and ignorance. Greed makes people want more things for themselves so they take things from others. Ignorance is the result of the lack of education, communication between people and respect for life. Current economic and political systems encourage greed and ignorance. The environmental justice movement needs to push for alternative economic and political systems.

<p>Greed/Money (love of being on top)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Power• Individualism• Racism• Ageism (discrimination based on age)• Classism (discrimination based on social class)• Apathy – people don't care• Imperialism• Colonialism• Political corruption	<p>Ignorance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Lack of education• Propaganda targeting youth• Corporate media• Lack of communication between people• Parental pressures• Cultural genocide• Lack of respect for life• Taking things for granted
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Definition of A Leader

A leader

- Facilitates
- Acts as a role model
- Is accountable to the community
- Listens to the people
- Is open minded
- Takes initiative
- Contributes and participates
- Represents the voices of the people
- Serves the people
- Is culturally sensitive to the differences of people and doesn't push her/his ways onto others
- Is organized and wants to organize
- Takes responsibility for his/her actions
- Is honest
- "Practices what s/he preaches"

What does youth leadership development look like?

Definition of Leadership Development: The process through which youth become leaders, get leadership skills and gain knowledge about communities and issues.

Youth

- Outreach to the community
- Work with other groups
- Work with other adults and youth of color in grassroots organizations
- Educate constituents on oppression issues such as racism, xenophobia, sexism, ageism, classism, heterosexism and transphobia
- Act as facilitators
- Develop workshops and trainings
- Present workshops for other youth
- Lead and run organizations, clubs and programs
- Organize the community through research, organizing press conferences, actions, etc.
- Arrange meetings and forums to voice community concerns
- Have internship opportunities in grassroots organizations
- Identify their own issues and concerns
- Work on campaigns
- Learn from each other
- Network
- Share issues and the common roots of those issues with other youth
- Have meaningful involvement, empowerment and engagement in all aspects of an organization
- Are not tokenized/trophies
- Voice opinions in a respectful manner

Youth Leadership in the Environmental Justice Movement

Examples of things that need to happen for youth leadership to flourish in the environmental justice movement:

- In Organizing
- Youth talk about their issues with other youth, as well as adults
- Youth find similar issues amongst each other
- Youth facilitate
- Youth recruit and organize others to join
- Youth plan meetings
- Youth work together
- Youth make sure other youth fulfill their responsibilities and hold one another accountable

At an EJ Movement Event

- Facilitators communicate from a youth perspective (e.g., interactive and not boring)
- Translation is provided for everyone
- Food is provided for everyone
- Lodging is provided for everyone
- There are workshops about environmental justice issues youth want to talk about
- The audience is youth
- Things are scheduled so people can gain as much as possible
- Everyone gets to speak
- Youth learn from and respect elders
- People are appreciative of what people have been through and what they've done
- Space is provided for youth meetings and workshops
- Supplies are provided for meetings and workshops
- Youth are doing the outreach
- Meetings of youth are convened to create goals and outlines for the action/event
- Youth are involved in decision-making
- Youth create the tasks for the action/event
- Youth network with each other
- People collaborate intergenerationally

The Environmental Justice Movement in 10 Years

- More youth are involved in the movement
- Increased youth and adult representation (e.g., as speakers, at events) from different ethnic communities
- Youth are more aware of environmental justice issues
- Popular education (education based on the experiences of people) is incorporated in organizations
- Youth are transitioning into leadership positions in organizations
- Development of youth programs focused on youth issues
- Youth are facilitating more workshops, panels and events
- Youth are working more closely with elders (mentoring)
- Stronger national connection between grassroots EJ groups (more communication, better organized)
- More funding opportunities for youth programs in the environmental justice movement
- Better understanding of interconnectedness, relatedness (with land and roots)
- Cultural understanding between ethnic groups
- International youth representation/involvement
- Executive youth council
- Retreat centers for youth

This and other environmental justice documents can be downloaded from:
www.ejnet.org/ej/