



The State of Environmental Justice

Bard Graduate Programs
in Sustainability

People, planet, and prosperity.

These are the three pillars of sustainability, the key reference points that help distinguish a step in the right direction from a step in the wrong direction. How can we find solutions that serve people, planet, and shared prosperity?

More and more people are waking up to the reality of our suffering **planet**. According to [one poll conducted by the Washington Post and the Kaiser Family Foundation in 2019](#), 8 in 10 Americans think that human activity is contributing to the climate crisis and roughly 5 in 10 Americans believe we need to take action in the next decade to prevent catastrophe.

We also see more and more business leaders and corporations connecting **prosperity** with sustainability. Just last year, 200 CEOs from the Business Roundtable [issued a new statement](#) about the nature and purpose of the corporation. No longer is the sole purpose of a corporation to increase the wealth of its stakeholders, it is also to provide value to the customer, treat its suppliers with respect, and to protect the environment and the communities in which it operates.

The biggest gap in public knowledge and awareness is when it comes to how sustainability affects **people**. Overwhelming evidence suggests that [low-income communities and communities of color](#) are the most impacted by the public health dangers related to environmental abuse. Pollution, exposure to chemicals, toxic drinking water, all of these disproportionately impact the life and health of communities of color.

Environmental justice is about the people side of sustainability, identifying the real people and communities who are suffering because of poor environmental practices and taking steps to address this kind of racism and discrimination.

Let's explore the state of environmental justice in 2021 and beyond.

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What Is Environmental Justice?



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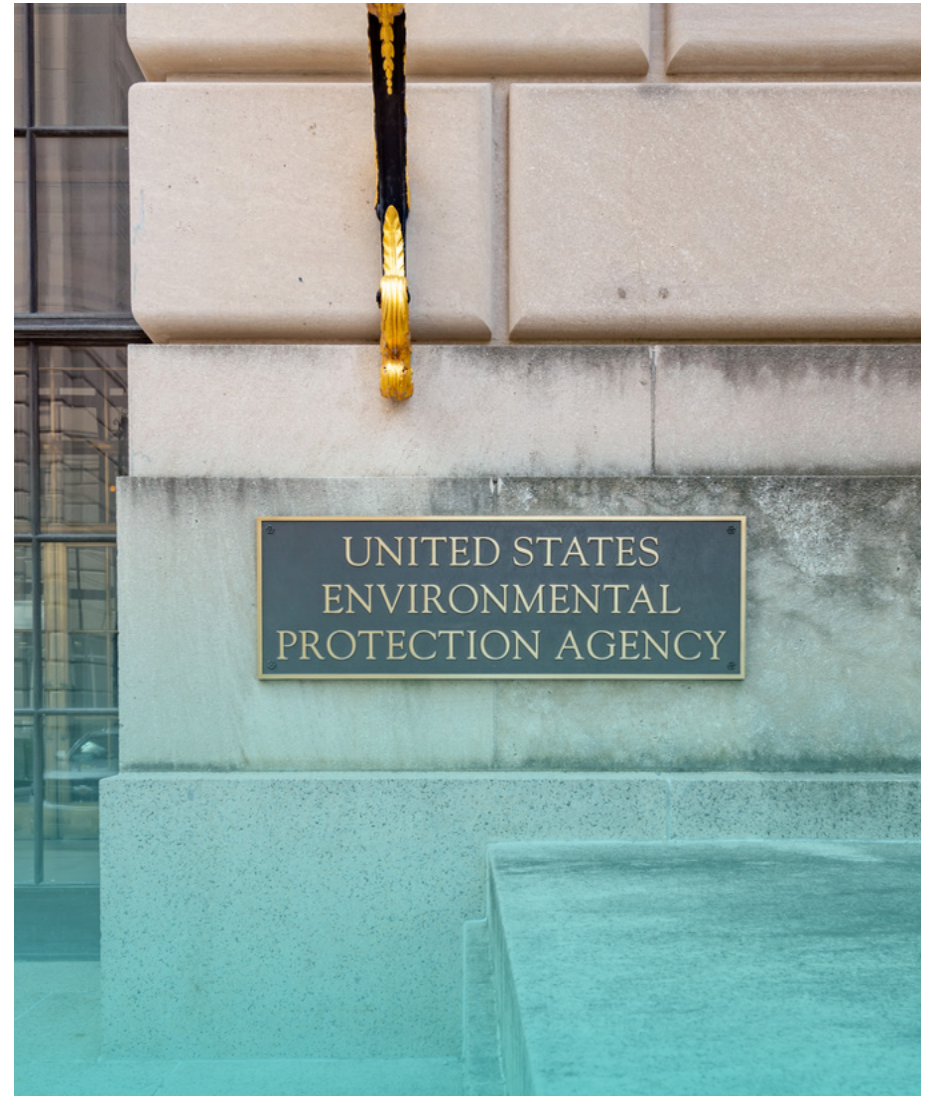
Environmental justice focuses on ensuring shared well-being—of ALL people—on a healthy planet.

Here's how the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) defines environmental justice:

"Environmental justice is the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income, with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies. This goal will be achieved when everyone enjoys:

- *the same degree of protection from environmental and health hazards, and*
- *equal access to the decision-making process to have a healthy environment in which to live, learn, and work."*

Environmental justice sheds light on the realities of racism and income discrimination today. Vulnerable people and communities are treated as if their lives have less value, and this is clearly evident in how corporations and governments exploit and abuse their neighborhoods for the smelly, messy, dangerous, or toxic work of operating production or waste facilities.





The Birth of the Environmental Justice Movement

[Dr. Robert Bullard](#) was one of the first people to identify how environmentalism and the Civil Rights Movement are intrinsically linked.

Bullard, often referred to as the “father of environmental justice,” first noticed patterns of racism in land use decisions in Houston in the mid-70s. A sociologist by training, Bullard [observed](#) that “100 percent of all the city-owned landfills in Houston were in black neighborhoods, though blacks made up only 25 percent of the population.”

In an [interview with Grist](#), Bullard explains that he became obsessed with connecting the dots and observing the data in cities all over the country. Consistently, the people on city boards or committees who make zoning and development decisions are not the people who live in the communities affected.

“From coast to coast, you see this happening. It’s not just the landfill, it’s not just the incinerator, it’s not just the garbage dump, it’s not just the crisscrossing freeway and highway, and the bus barns that dump all that stuff in these neighborhoods—it’s all that combined. Even if each particular facility is in compliance, there are no regulations that take into account this saturation. It may be legal, but it is immoral. Just like slavery was legal, but slavery has always been immoral.”

The Environmental Justice Movement Grows

The environmental justice movement did not materialize fully until the 1980s. It was born from the criticism of mainstream environmentalism and the modern environmental laws it spawned, packaged and pushed forward in the 1970's: NEPA and the Clean Air Act in '70; the Clean Water Act in '72; the Endangered Species Act in '73, among others.

Critics felt—and still feel—that mainstream environmentalism is too elite, too white, and too often focused on picturesque scenery. The environmental statutes of the 1970s seemed to prove that.

The early environmental legislation did not speak to how environmental harms and benefits were distributed. By the 1980s, communities began to push back in widely publicized protests. And civil rights activists and environmental activists began to join their efforts. [A series of studies](#) published in the '80s confirmed what activists were saying: that “race was the single most important factor in determining where toxic waste facilities were sited in the United States.”

Helping to pass those pieces of legislation were advocacy organizations like the National Resources Defense Council (NRDC), the Environmental Defense Fund, and the Sierra Club. These organizations defined the field, growing into their own in lock-step with the environmentalism movement. These organizations garnered criticism, too.

Because mainstream environmentalism places a high-value on elite forms of advocacy, like litigation and lobbying, there was sometimes little room for popular engagement. The advocacy organizations can act like gatekeepers. Regular people were sidelined to make room for experts and professionals—lawyers, ecologists, economists—people who rarely interact with, and do little to empower, those who live with the most severe environmental issues.

Critics also began challenging the mainstream understanding of environmental problems. Early environmentalism often had a narrow definition of environmental issues—one with a clear anti-urban bias and a fixation on viewsheds, conservation, and other issues mostly championed by wealthier white people. Mainstream environmentalists often focused on protecting the “beautiful outdoors,” rather than, as a pair of environmental justice scholar-activists wrote, “the places where we live, work, learn, and play.” Natural or man-made, the environments in which we live need to be just as clean and safe as places that feel more “ecological.”

In 1994, President Bill Clinton signed Executive Order 12898—Federal Actions to Address Environmental Justice in Minority Populations and Low-Income Populations. This [executive order](#) directs federal agencies to implement strategies for environmental justice and to ensure that their actions do not have a disproportionate impact on the human or environmental health of low-income and minority populations.

In the last 25 years, awareness of the need for environmental justice has grown, but not enough progress has been made to address problem areas. An [EPA study released in 2018](#) found that minority communities continue to bear higher health burdens than the average population.

[According to The Hill](#), “African-Americans faced the highest impact, with the community facing a 54 percent higher health burden compared to the overall population, the study found. Non-white communities overall had a 28 percent higher health burden and those living under the poverty line had a 35 percent higher burden.”

Already shouldering higher health burdens compared to the overall population, BIPOC and low-income communities were dealt another blow with the COVID-19 pandemic. Black, brown, and indigenous people began to catch COVID-19 at a far higher rate than the proportion of the population they make up. Almost immediately thereafter, they started to die at higher rates, too.

Adjusted for age, other racial groups are this many times more likely to have died of COVID-19 than White Americans

Reflects cumulative mortality rates calculated through March 2, 2021

Data from <https://www.apmresearchlab.org/covid/deaths-by-race>.



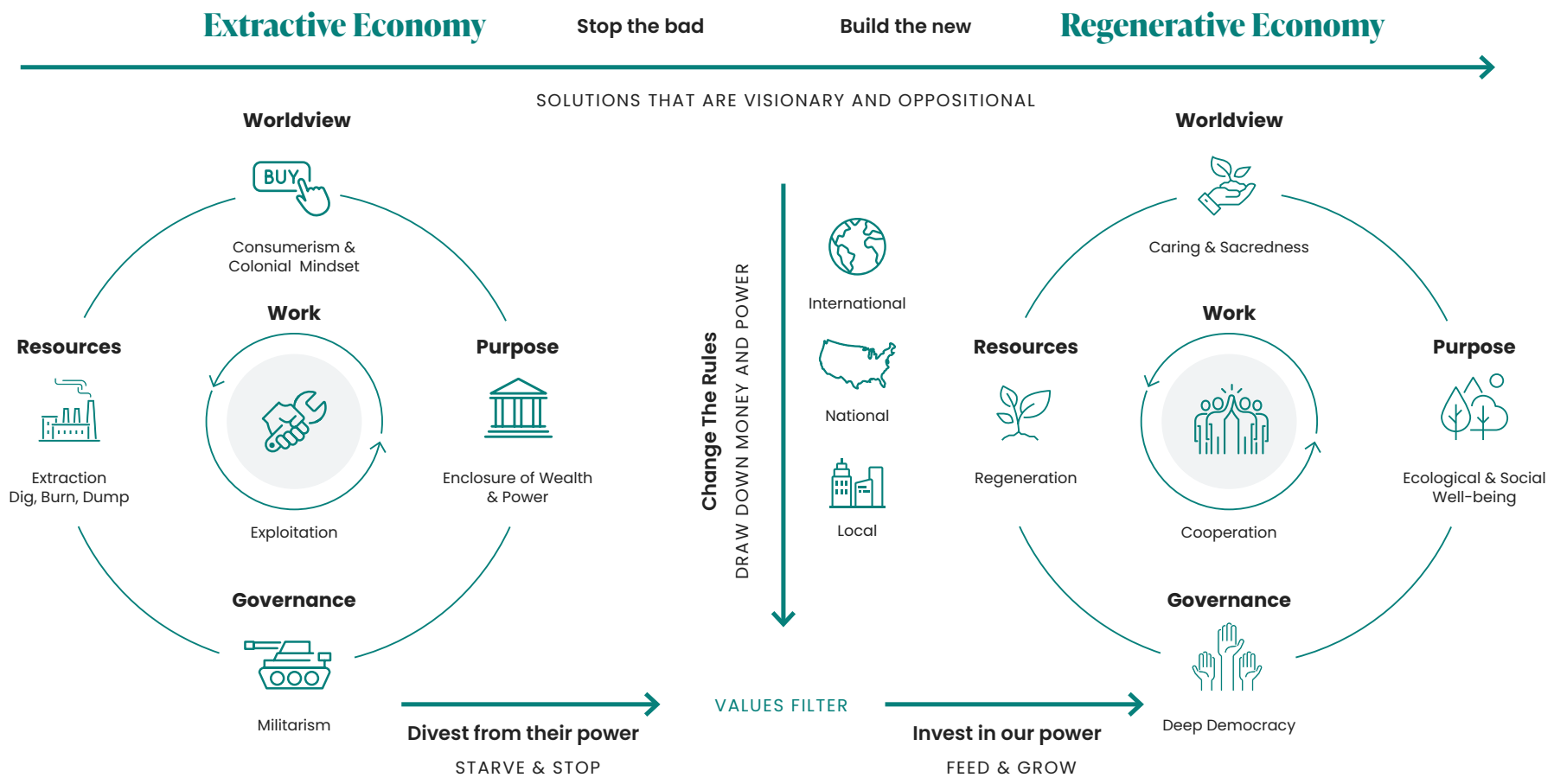
Some have a difficult time connecting the dots between environmental justice and COVID-19, but they are there. You have to step back to see the whole picture.

White, higher-income communities have political power, because of their economic power. Contrast that with communities of color and low-income communities that do not have a strong political voice. They are not able to “Not in My Backyard” as effectively to stop a landfill, an incinerator, a refinery, or a highway from being built. The pollution from these dumping grounds negatively impacts the health of those living in that community. And we know that COVID-19 is more dangerous for those who have underlying *health conditions*.

In an interview with *Yale Environment 360*, environmental health scientist, Sacoby Wilson, talks about how COVID-19 has cast a spotlight on the unnoticed, largely forgotten segments of society: “Nursing home populations. The meatpacking industry. Prisons. Communities impacted by environmental justice. These are communities that we’ve thrown away. We’ve made them invisible, but COVID-19 has made them visible.”



That these communities are in the spotlight is key to how environmental justice has evolved over the years: from being reactive to proactive; from what was done to what will happen. This evolution culminated in grassroots organizations rallying behind a [Just Transition](#)—a set of principles, processes, and practices that will help transition us from an extractive economy to a regenerative economy.



A Just Transition Must:

- Shift economic control to communities
- Democratize wealth and the workplace
- Advance ecological restoration
- Drive racial justice and social equity
- Relocalize most production and consumption
- Retain and restore cultures and traditions

Environmental Justice Crises in 2020 and Beyond



PLASTIC
OVER ABUSE

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On May 25, 2020, the world witnessed the murder of George Floyd, which sparked Black Lives Matter protests to erupt across the U.S. and the world to decry police brutality and white supremacy. More names came into the public consciousness. Breonna Taylor. Ahmaud Arbery. Tony McDade. They joined the names of the ones who had come before. Sandra Bland. Trayvon Martin. Eric Garner. Michael Brown.

Another period of racial reckoning in the U.S. began.

It was not just #blacklivesmatter. It was companies putting out statements and advertising campaigns that explicitly said *Black Lives Matter*. Books about race topped the best-seller lists. It was white allies listening and doing research, learning that it is not enough to just not be racist—you have to be actively anti-racist.

On social media, it was black boxes and the promotion of black-owned businesses. An influx of podcasts. It was streaming platforms featuring Black-themed content and pulling the problematic stuff down. It was actors apologizing for their past use of blackface. Country music trios changing their names.

There was the Capitol Hill Autonomous Zone. There were 5 months of protests in Portland. Confederate monuments came down. It was people learning how ingrained white supremacy is integral to our oldest institutions, and then challenging those institutions and their very existence.

The reckoning came for environmentalism, too—as was well overdue. American environmentalism has intellectual roots intertwined with racism, roots that have influenced conservation practices globally.





In July 2020, one of the oldest and largest U.S. conservation organizations, The Sierra Club, acknowledged the racist views held by its founder, John Muir. That same year, the National Audubon Society removed John James Audubon’s biography from their website and condemned “the role [he] played in enslaving Black people and perpetuating white supremacist culture.” Audubon’s research benefited mightily from enslaved Black men and Indigenous people, who collected specimens, but received no recognition.

A focus on land conservation—protecting forests and wilderness—was foundational to 20th century American environmentalism. However that storyline often paid little thought to the indigenous and other people, often poor, who had relied on these lands for centuries or millennia. The racial reckoning of 2020 forced environmental activists to examine the role that the white savior complex played in conservation ideology —the idea that land needed to be protected from inefficient use by indigenous people, and that has justified land theft since colonial times.

This kind of awareness around the intersectionality of environmental and racial justice issues is crucial to finding effective solutions. Recognizing this will benefit the environmental justice movement as it grows across the coming decade. To see how deep these connections run, we will look at four case studies.

Air Pollution and COVID-19

There are many specific stories to share about environmental crises, like the stories of Flint, Michigan, Cancer Alley, and the impact of fracking.

However, there are also environmental crises like the crisis of air pollution that impact all of us, but where the greatest impact, again, falls on vulnerable populations and communities.

The evidence on the dangers of air pollutants is well-documented. [A World Health Organization \(WHO\) study from 2014](#) links 7 million premature deaths world-wide to air pollution and names air pollution as the single largest environmental health risk, affecting 9 out of 10 people worldwide. [According to the WHO](#), “air pollution is a critical risk factor for noncommunicable diseases (NCDs), causing an estimated one-quarter (24%) of all adult deaths from heart disease, 25% from stroke, 43% from chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and 29% from lung cancer.”

[Physicians for Social Responsibility](#) has stated that “air pollution exposure can trigger new cases of asthma, exacerbate (worsen) a previously-existing respiratory illness, and provoke development or progression of chronic illnesses including lung cancer, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, and emphysema. Air pollutants also negatively and significantly harm lung development, creating an additional risk factor for developing lung diseases later in life.”



According to the Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, [more than 25 million](#) people in the United States suffer from asthma, and [approximately 14.8 million adults](#) have been diagnosed with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) while millions more remain undiagnosed.

With the devastation of COVID-19, the adverse health effects of air pollutants have become more immediate. In the beginning of the pandemic, [Yang et al](#) found that patients with severe COVID-19 infections were two times as likely to have had pre-existing diseases, especially heart disease, strokes, chronic lung diseases and diabetes—all of which are made worse by air pollution.

Meanwhile in the U.S., [report](#) after [report](#) after [report](#) confirmed the link between hazardous air pollutants and increases in COVID-19 mortality.

According to an [EPA study from 2018](#), minority communities, particularly Black communities, are disproportionately impacted by the presence of pollutants. During a pandemic, it follows that minority and low-income communities are disproportionately contracting COVID-19 and disproportionately dying from it.





Flint, Michigan

Remember Flint, Michigan?

When reports about the ongoing water crisis in Flint began to hit national news in 2016, the nation was shocked by what they heard. Foul-smelling, dirty-looking water with toxic levels of lead was being piped into the homes of 90,000+ residents. Local children showed elevated levels of lead exposure, an exposure that can harm a child's health and development for life.

Over time, it became clear that the predominantly low-income, minority population of Flint residents had been complaining for years about problems with their water supply, but local officials either ignored or misled the people they were supposed to serve.

The Flint, Michigan story continues to play out, but for many people, this news story opened their eyes to the [reality of environmental injustice](#) and the concrete, long-term harm it does to vulnerable groups. It also made clear that old-fashioned toxic water pollution is not a thing of the past. It should have been addressed by the Clean Water Act of 1970, but it persists when communities lack the power to fight back.

“Cancer Alley”

Another ongoing environmental justice crisis involves a swath of land in Louisiana known as “Cancer Alley.” This [85 mile section of land](#) between Baton Rouge and New Orleans is packed with over 150 fossil fuel and petrochemical facilities, mixed in with suburban communities and small towns. The facilities are concentrated in the poorest communities, most often communities of color.

Residents report horrible smells of pollution, oily water, blackened leaves on trees, and mists of chemicals that fall like raindrops in the evenings. According to a [Business Insider profile](#) of the area, residents in St. John the Baptist, a two-mile community surrounded by petrochemical plants, are 800 times more likely than the average American to get cancer in their lifetime.

The industrial plants enveloping St. John the Baptist collectively release more than 30,000 tons of PM 2.5 emissions *annually*. PM 2.5 is a type of particulate matter that’s just 1/30th the size of a human hair. However, that tiny particulate matter can cause a lot of damage: lodging deep in the lungs and bloodstream, serving as a vehicle for other chemicals. PM 2.5 can lead to respiratory illnesses, like chronic cough, chest illnesses, bronchitis, and pneumonia—all preexisting conditions known to make COVID-19 more deadly.

In April 2020, a nationwide study released by Harvard researchers found that even a small increase in exposure to PM 2.5 leads to a significant increase in the COVID-19 death rate. That same month, as if to prove it, St. John the Baptist Parish had the highest per capita COVID-19 death rate in the entire country.

While local activists are hard at work, organizing protests and events to take on the industry, the [fate of Cancer Alley remains unclear](#). Residents are working to prove the relationship between their high rates of cancer and the pollution from nearby facilities. Meanwhile, construction projects for more plants are already under way.

Radioactivity and Fracking

We often forget just how new and radical some of our energy production practices are and how little we know about their long-term impact.

Take fracking, for example, which uses a highly pressurized water mixture to “fracture” rock and release oil and natural gas. The waste byproducts of fracking can be highly radioactive, exposing workers and communities where the byproducts are dumped to known human carcinogens. A recent expose in Rolling Stone, “[America’s Radioactive Secret](#),” shares story after story of workers and communities around the oil and gas industry who are discovering that they have been repeatedly exposed to hazardous material without their knowledge or consent.

Communities across the country are also dealing with the [environmental fallout](#) of pipeline explosions and oil and gas leaks from fracking pipelines. Indigenous communities, in particular, have to fight what feels like a never-ending bevy of pipeline projects.

During the Trump administration, former Secretary of the Interior, Ryan Zinke, shaved two million acres off national monuments like Bears Ears and Grand Staircase–Escalante. Native lands and all the resources that come with them were suddenly available to lease. For many in business and politics, land that is not being used for extraction is wasted land.



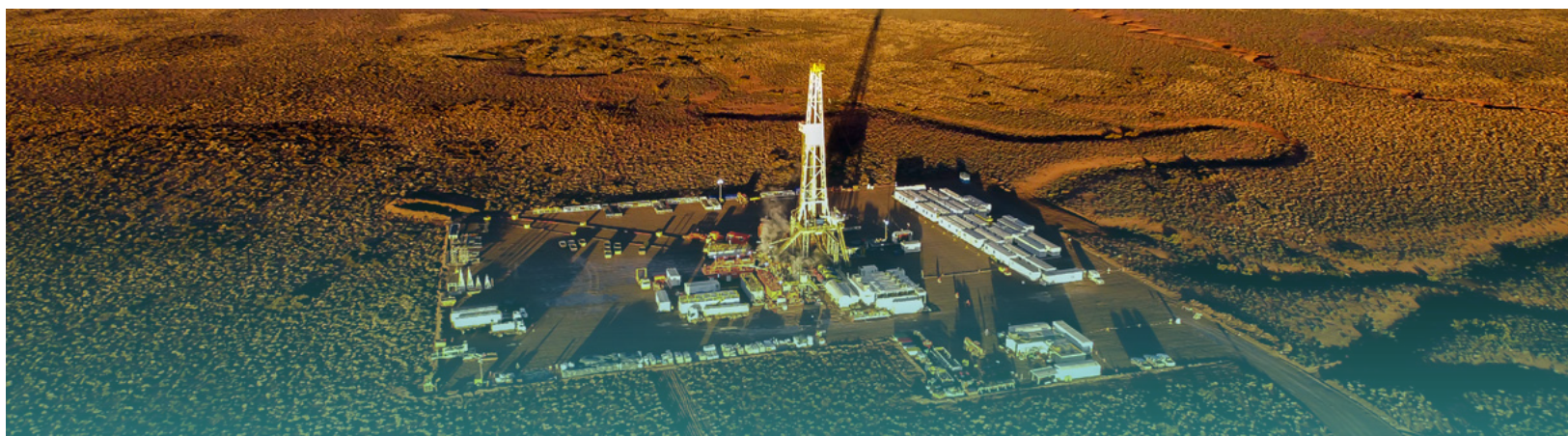
However, land is sacred to Native Americans. Land has an intrinsic spiritual and cultural value; it's the homeland where their ancestors grew up and where future generations will play. And in a more practical sense, many nations rely on their land for their livelihood, too—for fishing, hunting, farming.

Clark Tenakhongva, vice chairman of the Hopi Tribe, explains it this way: “If you desecrate our shrines, our temples, down here, you are destroying our culture, our religion, our lifeline, and our history of how we became part of this nation.”

In 2021, both President Biden and his new Interior secretary, Deb Haaland—the first Native American to serve as a cabinet secretary—are listening to tribal voices. They seem to not only be considering restoring the original borders, but expanding them. That does not happen overnight. And even if the boundaries are restored, it does not mean the fight is over. Corporations are set on extracting natural resources from sacred lands, and fracking is a very lucrative way to do that.

As is the case with most issues of environmental justice, the crisis continues because insufficient and unenforced regulations are not enough to care for vulnerable and disempowered populations. A lack of evidence-based study by corporations or government entities means that the communities affected by fracking practices are left relying on anecdotal evidence or lived experience of impact to make their case.

We need more awareness and outcry about the potential long-term impacts of practices like fracking.





Representation in the Environmental Justice Movement

Another major ongoing challenge for the environmental movement is the continued lack of representation of marginalized voices. Even within circles of informed activists the voices of those most impacted continue to be drowned out or sidelined. Many activists of color [report being treated](#) as the “token” person of color in important conversations and feeling exploited as a symbol of diversity.

The environmental justice movement has a responsibility to deepen and broaden the circle of voices in the fight, giving precedence to those whose communities have been directly or disproportionately impacted by environmental abuses.

The Black Lives Matter movement has already forced the environmental justice activists to be more accountable. And that accountability will not stop. It has never been more important to center marginalized voices. The environmental justice movement needs diversity in its leadership. White leaders need to pass the mic and use their platform to amplify the voices of the people who are most affected by environmental issues.

Environmental activists need to do the work to seek out voices of color, too. Start with social media influencers of color, like [Leah Thomas](#) and [Kristy Drutman](#).

How to Stay Engaged in the Fight for Environmental Justice



There are a couple of ways you can commit to environmental justice in 2021 and beyond.



Explore the stories, projects, and public health information in your local community. Is there a neighborhood or community that is suffering because of environmental factors? Is there a proposed building or zoning plan that has not been given enough public scrutiny? Are there local activist groups you can join?



Lift up marginalized voices. As you explore issues related to environmental justice, stay aware of whose voices are being amplified and work to let those most impacted by a crisis speak for themselves.



Follow along with important environmental justice stories. Set some Google alerts and stay engaged with ongoing legislative efforts or real-time reporting about environmental justice. Check out Vice's environmental justice series, [Tipping Point](#), or read through this look at the [top stories to watch in 2020 from Grist](#). Get curious and stay curious about environmental justice issues and how you can help.



Support the Green New Deal. Call your congressional representatives to voice your support for legislative action. Educate others about the proposal on social media.



Champion a Just Transition and economic recovery. [Sign up for their newsletter, host a gathering to generate support, or donate to the cause.](#) Whatever you do, do not stay silent.

The more aware we all are of the reality of racism and discrimination in the form of environmental injustice, the more likely we are to help change the culture and the policies that allow these forms of discrimination to take place.

Solving Climate by 2030 through Civic Action and Renewable Energy

A large-scale solar farm with rows of solar panels stretching into the distance under a dramatic sunset sky with golden clouds. The panels are arranged in a grid pattern, and the sun is low on the horizon, creating a warm, golden glow across the scene.

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Here at Bard, we are focused on bringing education and science to bear on the current climate and environmental crises. We have confidence that with greater civic action and awareness, through the engagement of marginalized voices, and by capitalizing on scientific and technological advances, we can make great strides toward shared well-being for all on a healthy planet.

Many environmental justice crises are linked to the global climate crisis.



An increasing number of people are in climate despair and can no longer see a way through to stabilizing the climate. Absorbing apocalyptic visions served up daily on our news feeds, it has become easier for many to imagine billions of people homeless and human civilization in ruins than it is a world rewired with clean energy.

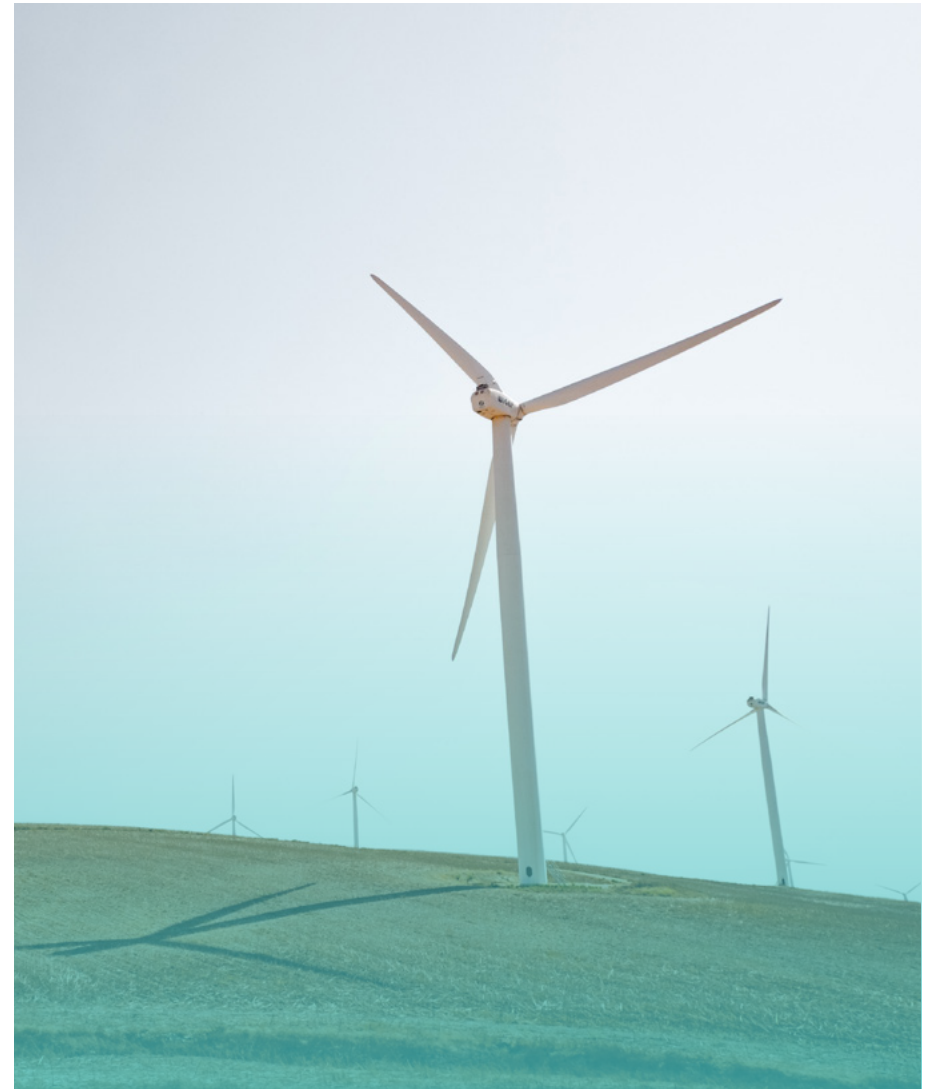
But this response is not grounded in what science tells us about climate change, or what markets are telling us about climate solutions. In contrast to climate despair, watch Greta Thunberg, the then 16-year old talking [terrible truths to the powerful](#). She is already bearing the pain of loss her generation faces, regardless. But above all, she is imagining that victory is possible.

To imagine how we might actually solve climate change by 2030, watch [this video](#) by Dr. Eban Goodstein’s (director of the Bard Graduate Programs in Sustainability), or read his [paper](#) with Bard MBA professor Hunter Lovins, or the [summary here](#). The basic argument is that solar energy and storage plus driverless EV’s will soon be so cheap that they will transform the existing energy and transportation infrastructure. These renewable energy technologies could spread quickly across the earth in the next decade, as smart phones did in the last: from zero to 2.5 billion users, one-third of the world’s population, in 10 years.

But we do not just need a clean energy revolution. We also need justice in the transition. We need to make sure that the millions of green jobs that are created are jobs for all; and that everyone has access to clean, affordable power and mobility. To learn more about energy justice, [watch this video with environmental justice leader Dr. Michael Dorsey](#) in conversation with Bard GPS Director Goodstein.

Perhaps, due to inertia and opposition from utilities and oil companies, this Just Transition to a clean energy future will take 20 years instead of 10. Or 30. The timing, and how much global warming we get—low end or catastrophic—depends critically on the [level of political engagement](#) by people like you with our states, cities and utilities.

Learn more about Bard’s national environmental education initiative at solveclimateby2030.org.



Connect with Bard

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At the [Bard Graduate Programs in Sustainability](#), we are focused on building solutions to the climate crisis and to building solutions in communities that include all voices, especially the voices of the marginalized and those most impacted by environmental abuses.

As Dr. Bullard explained in an interview with Grist, “This whole question of environment, economics, and equity is a three-legged stool. If the third leg of that stool is dealt with as an afterthought, that stool will not stand. The equity components have to be given equal weight.”

Whether we are talking about production and supply chain management in our [MBA program](#) or discussing how policy and science can impact zoning decisions in our environmental master’s programs, the Bard Graduate Programs in Sustainability is committed to advancing the cause of environmental justice and equipping our students with the confidence and knowledge they need to become advocates for the three-legged stool of people, planet, and profits.

Learn More about the Bard Graduate Programs in Sustainability

THE MBA IN SUSTAINABILITY

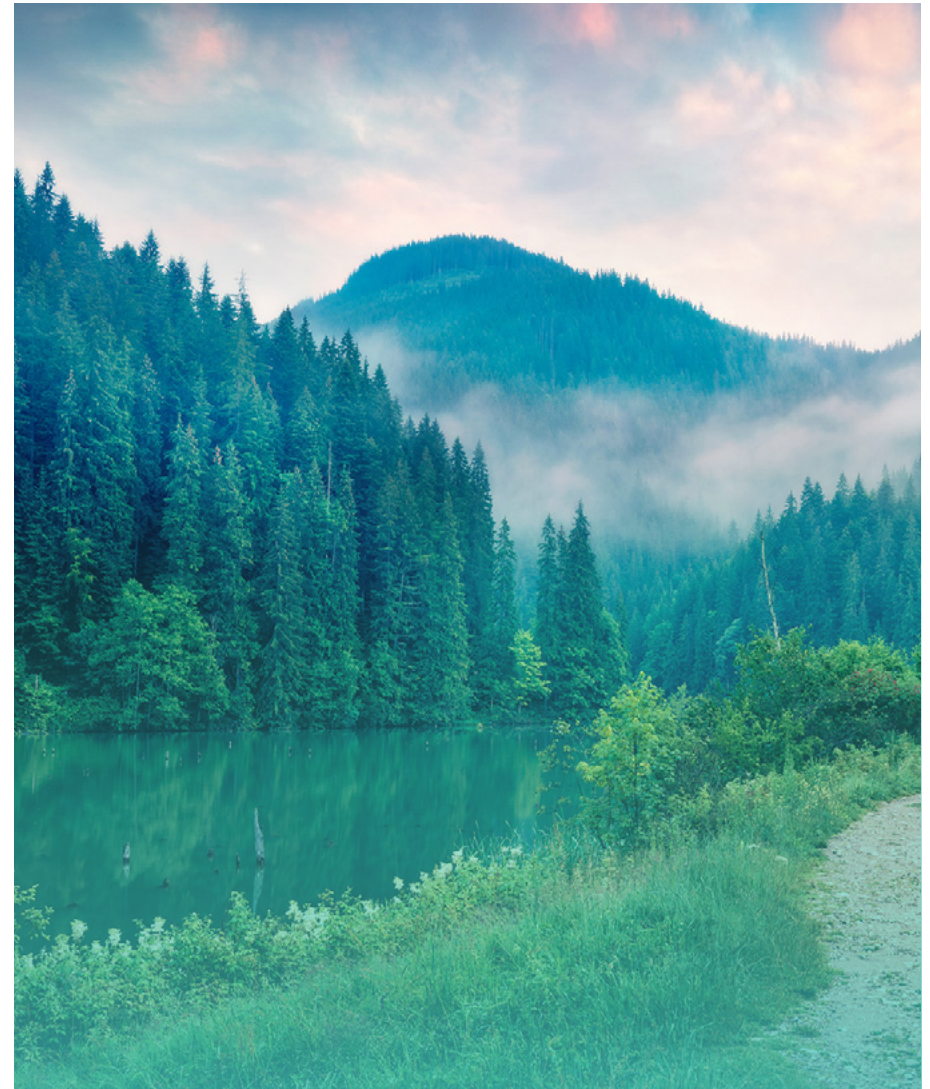
Bard's MBA in Sustainability offers a globally leading business curriculum that integrates sustainability vision, real world consulting engagements, organizational transformation and entrepreneurial training, equipping graduates who are changing the game. The Bard MBA in Sustainability prepares students for leadership positions in a variety of business environments—from innovative start-ups to major corporations—with in-depth knowledge of core business skills through the lens of sustainability.

[Learn more about Bard's MBA in Sustainability](#)

THE MASTER'S IN ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY

Environmental policies are rules or regulations—set by governments, companies, or organizations—that are designed to shape or change how communities impact and interact with the natural environment to promote health, prosperity, equity, and sustainability. This program teaches environmental leaders the art of thinking holistically about complex issues so that Bard graduates can go on to craft realistic, integrated, and comprehensive solutions to environmental problems and challenges.

[Learn more about Bard's Master's in Environmental Policy Program](#)



THE MASTER'S IN CLIMATE SCIENCE AND POLICY

The climate degree covers the interplay between climate systems, ecosystems, and agricultural systems on the one hand and solutions on the other, training future policy leaders to guide efforts in greenhouse gas mitigation and adaptation. The curriculum incorporates science, economics, policy, law, and tools of analysis.

[Learn more about Bard's Master's in Climate Science and Policy Program](#)

THE MASTER'S IN ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION

The Bard Environmental Education program prepares educators to create an informed and engaged citizenry supporting progress towards a just, prosperous, and sustainable future. Through intensive academic training, real world professional experience, and career development opportunities, the program enables graduates to pursue successful, high-impact careers in a wide variety of professional settings.

[Learn more about Bard's Master's in Environmental Education](#)

At Bard, we are passionate and hopeful about our collective future, but we know that we need serious leaders who are committed to crafting new policies for governments and businesses. Do you want to be a part of this movement?

**Connect with us today
to stay in touch and
learn more!**

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