

Connecting Environmental Justice & Immigration

I'm Rowan Van Ness, and I'm the Environmental Justice Program Associate, through a partnership between the UU Ministry for Earth and the UUA. For the past two years, I've been supporting congregations in environmental justice programs and advocacy around issues like climate change, mountaintop removal coal mining, and green jobs. These are issues that more adversely impact historically marginalized groups of people. "[Green jobs] ensure that public investments in infrastructure and renewable energy help lift people out of poverty, reduce racial disparities and contribute to healthier communities for all of us."
(HIRE Minnesota)

I organized resources for UU congregations around 350.org's international climate days in 2009 and 2010. I also coordinated Earth Day resources on Ethical Eating and Sacred Waters for 2010 and 2011, and 100-150 congregations participated in each of these events.

The General Assembly of 2010 selected immigration as the congregational study/action issue. The UU Ministry for Earth has been working on environmental issues for decades, and it seemed natural to take this opportunity to explore the intersections of immigration and environmental justice. It seemed obvious to me that environmental issues and access to natural resources like food and water cause much of the migration in our world. I could see how immigrants are impacted by environmental injustices in their homes and workplaces in the US.

What I was most surprised to learn about was the anti-immigrant movement based in environmentalism. I Googled "immigration" and "environment," and every page listed on the search screen stated that immigration is a major cause of environmental destruction. Arizona's egregious bill, SB1070, was co-founded by FAIR (Federation for American Immigration Reform), one of the Tanton Network's organizations. John Tanton is an environmentalist concerned about population growth who founded or is connected to more than 15 organizations to deny rights from immigrants and to prevent immigration to the US.

Some anti-immigrant advocates claim that population growth is bad for people and the environment, and that immigrants harm the environment by contributing to urban sprawl, congestion, pollution, waste generation, water consumption, land conversion and loss of biodiversity. Instead of tackling the systemic causes of climate change, like high fossil fuel consumption, Neo-Malthusians focus on unfounded connections between population, immigration, and damage to nature.

The impacts of environmental issues on the health of immigrants are disproportionate and unjust.

Immigrants and other people of color in the US are more likely to live in areas that do not meet the federal government's safe air quality standards. Immigration status contributes to a nearly doubled likelihood of living in close proximity to a toxic release facility. Migrant farmworkers and their families are regularly exposed to harmful pesticides in both the air and water.

Chronic exposure leads to shorter life spans and a greater likelihood to die from asthma, along with increased risks of cancer, birth defects, and neurological damage. On top of this, undocumented immigrants are less likely to be insured or to have adequate access to health care. What this means is that they stand a high chance of getting sick from pollution and being unable to afford treatment.

In a fiscal climate that forces government to cut spending they are choosing to keep subsidies for the fossil fuel industry and tax breaks for the rich, but slash measures that protect their constituents from polluted air and water.

Immigrants by and large contribute less to climate change than most Americans and are amongst those most impacted by it.

When many of us think of climate change, we most often think of the framing that has dominated mainstream environmental discourse: polar bears and parts per million.

By focusing instead on the way climate change affects communities and their health, is embedded in social justice, and is intertwined with wasteful, fossil-fuel-based transportation, energy, and industrial facilities, we can look at the connections between the abuse of the environment and oppression of groups of people with the least power. As the environment is changed, we can focus on green jobs, cooperatives, and alternatives to traditional means of economic support.

Immigrants typically pollute less than other Americans. Wealth is the most comprehensive indicator of fossil fuel consumption, and the subsequent carbon footprint as people tend to consume more goods, fossil fuel products, and products made with high carbon emissions, as they have the money to do so. The median income level of people born abroad is $\frac{3}{4}$ of the national median. Furthermore, cities with large immigrant populations have some of the lowest per capita emission rates.

Immigrants are also particularly vulnerable to the environmental changes caused by global warming. As the climate changes, weather emergencies, like severe hurricanes, and droughts, will increase in frequency and severity. Industries dependent on natural resources will fair the worst, which won't bode well for the immigrants that make up 40% of the farming, fishing, and forestry industries in the US. Furthermore, low-income families are less likely to be financially prepared for a hit to their industry or to their homes. As this kind of devastation increases around the world, migration will intensify.

Policies that target immigrants as environmental hazards are targeting low- and medium-income families instead of the consumerism that contributes to greenhouse gas emissions.

We need to move beyond the idea that we can buy our way out of climate change, that technical solutions to reducing greenhouse gas emissions are enough, and that only the elite can participate in the solution. People who are fighting the negative manifestations of the fossil fuel economy in their communities are rarely featured as being part of the climate change movement, much less portrayed as leaders. Let's partner with them and follow their lead!

The climate justice movement is not just about future severe weather events, but recognizes that the same systems that contribute to climate change are oppressing people right now, and we don't want to wait to change this system.

Anti-immigration agents are active today and are continuing to seed their agenda throughout the environmental movement. One of the basic tenets of immigration restriction is the idea that some people belong and others don't. This means that some people have a right to access natural resources like water, and others don't. What about the inherent worth and dignity of all people? What if we turned to those who already consume small amounts of fossil fuels to see if they might have ideas about a path toward a lower-emitting society?

Many of us here in the room today, and in our congregations, are in a position to shine a spotlight on some of these issues and to work toward changing the system.

We are called to strive for a world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all, and to uphold the inherent worth and dignity of every human. To respect the interdependent web of all existence. Let us also look at and respect the interdependence of these issues.

Hundreds of UU congregations across the country are engaged with immigration and with environmental issues.

Since the last GA, a UU Climate Change and Environmental Justice Action Coalition formed, including representatives from the UU Ministry for Earth, the UUA, UU State Advocacy Networks, the UU Service Committee, and the UU United Nations Office, working together to align actions to prevent climate change. Congregations across Virginia, Kentucky, North Carolina, and West Virginia, are working to end mountaintop removal coal mining, a particularly devastating method of extracting coal that employs fewer people and causes devastating impacts for the environment.

What power might we gain as a movement if we saw the deep connections between immigration and environmental issues?

The environmental movement can't afford to be silent on this issue. Immigration is profoundly impacted by environmental issues. We must work together.

Sources

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Presented at General Assembly 2011
Program # 2088, Thursday, June 23, 2011