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Well, We Saved the Polar Bears...

Discussions that involve climate change, deforestation, and environmental issues tend to stay focused on solutions such as water and natural resource conservation. It is rare that the media will publicize anything more than criticism on the White House's new policies or Tesla's latest invention. Organizations like PETA and activist events like the 2017 "Science March" push for change in ways that surround the upper middle class, white perspective, saying that things like pollution are bad because they hurt "the animals", hurt the ozone, or hurt the future, never admitting to or realizing that in many communities across America, *people* are facing similar injustices *today*. Oxford dictionary defines environmental racism as, "Racial discrimination in the development and implementation of environmental policy, especially as manifested in the concentration of hazardous waste disposal sites in or near areas with a relatively large ethnic minority population." Solutions concerning environmental degradation need to better address the harsh realities of Corporate America's negative impact on air, water, and public health within communities of color.

Something as simple as the air one breathes is often compromised for people of color. In San Diego, this is prominent. An example of this is in the predominantly Mexican community known as, "Barrio Logan", a place notorious for its activist spirit and rejection of the many toxic

particle producers surrounding it. Not large in size, but heavily overcrowded, the community is polluted by three waste disposal lots, a large naval ship repair facility known as NASSCO, and a bustling freeway built right through the heart of its residential area. This does not go without consequence, but unfortunately the consequence is faced by its locals, and not those responsible. According to the California Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment (OEHHA) and a non-profit San Diego news organization, “inewsourc”, “Asthma-related hospital visits in the 92113 ZIP code fell within the highest 10th percentile in the state” Additionally, the Environmental Health Coalition has found that “asthma hospitalization rates in Barrio Logan are 2.5 times the nation’s average.” Thus, a population accounting for nearly 40% of Logan’s residents, children, are at risk. This is not the only issue that air pollution has caused for Barrio Logan. The OEHHA found that, “Barrio Logan has higher amounts of diesel particulate matter than 80 percent of California cities.” Diesel particulate matter is a known carcinogen, meaning that the community is breathing in cancer causing chemicals on a daily basis. This is not solely a concern in San Diego, Southern California, or even California in general. In the late 80s, a famous report in the world of Environmental Justice was released under the name, “Toxic Wastes and Race”. 20 year later, in 2007, the data was revisited and updated. Not much had changed. According to this study, “more than half of the people who live within 1.86 miles of toxic waste facilities in the United States are people of color.” Another report done by the Center for effective government showed that, “people of color are nearly twice as likely as white residents to live within a fenceline zone of an industrial facility.” Yet, San Diego and the wider US government *still* neglect to provide new zoning laws in order to protect communities of color like

Barrio Logan. Instead, they often sways in favor of more, “development” and allow for toxic industry to move in on these neighborhoods more and more each day.

Recently, more attention has been brought to the issue of environmental racism in light of recent political debate over water quality in Flint Michigan. In Flint, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) found, “dangerous levels of lead in the water at residents' homes”. Many of the residents, however, already knew this due to the murky colored fluid that came from their faucets. A common wondering about environmental injustice in terms of water quality is the process by which it occurs. There are many factors that lead to having clean drinking water in a community. Author James Vanderslice, Ph.D, of the American Journal of Public Health simplified them as, “(1) available water sources, (2) the physical infrastructure (e.g., treatment facilities, transmission, and storage), (3) operational/managerial capacity, and (4) government policies and agencies that regulate, assist, and financially support system operators.” If any of the factors stated are not carried out correctly or efficiently, it could lead to changes in the “quality, reliability, or cost” of the water. What ends up happening in many communities of color is that the last of them is neglected, therefore making the rest ineffective. When a government does not give a neighborhood the proper monitoring of infrastructure, contamination levels, or the fiscal resources to maintain drinking level quality, situations like that in Flint Michigan arise. In more extreme cases, like the Colonias in Texas or certain Native American reservations, entire populaces can end up with no piped water whatsoever. When studied in 2007, it was found that for Navajos, “30% were without piped water; more than 70% of water sources used for domestic purposes were positive for total coliforms, 21% were positive for

Escherichia coli, 12% had arsenic concentrations above the maximum contaminant level (MCL), and 5% had uranium concentration above the MCL” Many migrant farmworker communities are also found to have water with high levels of pesticides or nitrates, poor overall sanitation, and “grossly inadequate” water systems. Even in more populated regions, these problems persist, affecting Latinos disproportionately. The California Environmental Justice Coalition for Water found that areas with the highest amount of water violations were 42% Latino. Race played more of a factor even than socioeconomic status where poverty only accounted for 17%. However, as the aforementioned cases show, the worst results come when the two are combined. These are yet another case of environmental racism not being addressed by our government, and although there was immense outrage over what is happening in Flint, the scope of water injustice goes largely unaddressed.

As was shown with air pollution in Barrio Logan, the worst effects of environmental injustice are its impact on public health. In many Black communities throughout the US, lead poisoning is anything but uncommon. In fact, in Chicago, a city that is 33.8% African American and 22.8% Latino, “approximately 17.3% of children tested were found to have an elevated blood lead level.” This is a plight dealt with by more than 400,000 of the nations children, their desperate families not included. As stated by the Chicago Department of Public Health in, *Lead Safe Chicago: A Plan to Eliminate Childhood Lead Poisoning In Chicago by 2010*, lead poisoning, “damages the central nervous system resulting in reduced intelligence, shortened attention span and behavior problems, including aggression.” It also leads to learning disabilities, language processing disorders, lower reading scores, and there has been research that

shows a connection between exposure to lead and children in juvenile detention. The physical responses to the toxin are, “kidney damage, severe anemia, impaired hearing and stunted growth.” or even seizures or death. The most common way that children are exposed to lead is through, “deteriorated lead based paint” In Chicago 2004, 92% of home lead inspections were still ending up positive. Who is most at risk? “African American children are 12 times more likely and Hispanic children are 5 times more likely than white children to have elevated blood lead levels.” 50% of children with levels above that which could cause psychological issues are also on medicaid. Even more specifically, the most at risk age is toddlerhood, from ingesting the material on their hands after crawling on the floor. This report *is* an example of a government attempt to

When talking about environmental racism, some assume that much of the data compiled has more to do with coincidence or cheap land than actual racism. This would be a comfortable explanation, however it is far from the truth. Stated clearly in an article published by the University of Dayton, “Agency penalties for violation of the hazardous waste laws are **500%** higher in predominantly White communities than in communities with a high percentage of people of color.” This would not happen if there weren’t a general apathy toward the health and safety of minority neighborhoods. In a study done between 1965 and 1995, researchers discovered, “a consistent pattern over a 30-year period of placing hazardous waste facilities in neighborhoods where poor people and people of color live.” As put by the University of Michigan, the study concluded that “Racial discrimination in zoning and the housing market, along with siting decisions based on following the path of least resistance, may best explain

present-day inequities.” This is something replicated, once again, in Barrio Logan. In February of 1967, the city of San Diego decided to begin construction on a bridge that would connect residents on the mainland to a peninsula beach community called Coronado. Clearly seen when observing the architecture of this bridge, and widely known through oral history, the project displaced a large portion of the community as it was built directly in “the path of least resistance.” Without government representation and widespread apathy from those in charge, the bridge became the eyesore, and later cause of the aforementioned public health issues, of Barrio Logan. However, in Coronado, a rare for South San Diego 75% white community, the bridge nicely cascades into an uninterrupted golf course, touching little but the southeastern corner of the island. This in itself is a metaphor for the greater issue. The respect given to white communities comes at the cost of black and brown communities. In the American Journal of Public Health’s 1997 publication, an article titled *Environmental Racism and Public Health* came toward its final remarks with this quote, “To discount racism as a potential contributor to disparities in health by race and ethnicity is to ignore well-established social history, not to mention the experience of many afflicted persons. Denial serves to perpetuate inequity. It also forecloses studies of racism focusing specifically on ill health and premature mortality.” Racism in our society is what allows for “cheap land” to be worth more than the health and longevity of communities of color. Institutionally, a corporation has more power than the people that they will be impacting.

“Going green” in the United States often means, “buy expensive new technology”, an inaccessible and non inclusive solution that almost defines the phrase, “bandaid on a bullet

wound”. In an article by Front and Centered, a quote by U.S. Rep. Keith Ellison is referenced, ““We [people of color] carry the environmental burden even though we don’t create it. I don’t know any African Americans that own coal plants but we suck in all the lead and mercury. We bear a disproportionate environmental burden but we don’t contribute nearly as much to the problem.”” What needs to be realized about our environment is that it’s destruction does not happen at an equal rate. Communities of color have *been* witness to the hardships of industrialization since the beginning, while our society is only now coming to understand its implications for the *future*. Instead of targeting citizens with ideas that involve buying overpriced organic produce or using less water bottles (even though they may not have access to other drinking water), policy, activism, and media should be targeting the corporations that are doing the most damage. The restoration of our planet should not be something that is solely dependent the individual, but on the companies that profit off of the crumbling Earth beneath their feet.

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