

'They chose us because we were rural and poor': when environmental racism and climate change collide

The environmental movement has a long history in America's south – yet people of color and impoverished communities continue to face dangerous pollution

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'It was an [awakening](#), showing the country that race and class play a part in who has to live near toxic waste.' Illustration: Eiko Ojala

It doesn't surprise me that the environmental justice movement began in the south, a place where, historically, the pressure of injustice builds until it explodes into organized resistance.

The Warren, North Carolina, protests of 1982 are considered one of the earliest examples of the environmental justice movement. A manufacturer of electrical transformers dumped tons of cancer-causing PCB waste along 240 miles of North Carolina's highways. When it came time for the clean up, the North Carolina government chose Warren – a

small, predominantly African American town – for the toxic waste facility.

There were weeks of protests and over 500 arrests. It was an [awakening](#), showing the country that race and class play a part in who has to live near toxic waste.

I spoke with Almena Myles, one of the protesters. Even 30 years later, the incident has left a mark. "I learned why we were targeted. They chose us because we were rural and poor and they thought we couldn't fight it," she told me. "They thought we wouldn't understand. It was a crash course in advocacy. We felt we had stepped back in time, like it was the 1960s all

over again and we had to fight for our rights as if it was the civil rights movement.”

These are, unfortunately, not just corporate practices of the past. Today, Louisiana’s impoverished river communities are polluted by big oil and companies, creating the so-called “[Cancer Alley](#)”. Pahokee, Florida, a town whose population is 56% African-American and 29% Hispanic, has had to confront the sugar industry, which polluted nearby Lake Okeechobee, endangering drinking water, fish safety, and property values. Paper mills have polluted Africatown, Alabama. Burlington Industries dumped cancer-causing PCBs in Cheraw, South Carolina. There’s toxic coal ash in Uniontown, Alabama. The list goes on and on.



The Rev Ben Chavis, right, raises his fist as fellow protesters are taken to jail at the Warren County PCB landfill near Afton, North Carolina, in September 1982. Photograph: Greg Gibson/AP

In January, I travelled to Mississippi to meet Heather McTeer Toney, an Obama appointee to the Environmental Protection Agency and the first black mayor of Greenville, Mississippi. On her mind were the minority communities on the frontlines of climate change disasters in the south.

“Immediate action is required, and we can’t just have the conversations in Washington,” she said. “Citizens need to step into roles to protect themselves from what’s coming. The government isn’t agile enough.”

An [estimated](#) 70% of the country’s contaminated waste sites are located near low-income housing, and an Associated Press [analysis](#) suggests 2 million people live within a mile of one of the 327 Superfund sites vulnerable to climate change-related flooding,

most of them in low-income communities and communities of color.

The south-east, [particularly](#) North Carolina and Virginia, is notorious for its coal ash deposits, spills, and anti-regulation mentality. People of color have [outsized exposure](#) to coal ash pollution, which contains carcinogens like mercury, lead, and arsenic. The EPA estimates that 1.5 million people of color live in areas vulnerable to contamination.

I decided to visit Virginia to learn more and arrived in February, Black History Month. Governor Ralph Northam was on a listening tour following his [blackface photo scandal](#), and a bill allowing local governments to determine the future of Confederate monuments had just been easily defeated, 6-2. I wondered: if Virginia is still fighting culture battles, how can it address the imminent threats of climate change effectively and protect *all* its citizens?

Norfolk, Virginia, is one of the most flood-prone cities on the east coast. Through a [grant](#) from the US Department of Housing and Urban Development, the city is piloting advanced resilience measures like micro-grids, oyster reef restoration, green stormwater management, and a “People First Initiative” that sets aside money to help the displaced.

However, some of the actions meant to help low-income residents – like moving people out of flood-prone housing – raise questions of gentrification. For example, a public housing neighborhood called Tidewater Gardens will soon be razed to make way for a mixed-use project. The Norfolk city councilman Paul Riddick [feels](#) that the initiative is yet another example of urban gentrification that excludes non-white contractors, and of the generational transfer of wealth.

Though Northam recently encouraged bipartisan legislation requiring Virginia’s Dominion Power Company to excavate and clean up its ash ponds, citizens will fund the \$5bn cleanup bill, not the company. Furthermore, Dominion is [pursuing](#) a pipeline project that [would place a pollution-generating compressor](#) station in the historic black community of Union Hill.

While in Virginia, I visited Rick Middleton in Charlottesville to learn more about the history of environmental justice in the south.

Middleton is an Alabama-born lawyer and founder of the Southern Environmental Law Center, one of the largest environmental law organizations in the world.

Its work has been instrumental in [coal ash cleanup](#) across the south, and it has sought to help communities of color such as [Union Hill, Virginia](#), and Walnut Tree, North Carolina, challenge industrial pollution.

I asked him why he started the organization.

“I was idealistic,” he said. “And I believe in justice.”

Virginia’s current ethical race-based fumbles are stereotypical of what people *expect* from the south. What outsiders don’t always expect are the intelligent and passionate movements that grow in response to systematic injustice here.

“Why did you come back to the south?” I asked Middleton, wondering why he chose to open the SELC in Charlottesville.

“Yale Law School was my first time in the northeast,” he said. “Because of my Alabama accent, people assumed I was an ignorant southerner, and it made me want to identify even *more* as a southerner.”

He witnessed what he felt was a lack of interest from major environmental groups. “They didn’t know the area or think they could raise money down here,” he said. At the time, air pollution was a serious problem, and there was a clear need for the enforcement of standards. Middleton thought he could help.

“Advocacy is essential,” Middleton continued, “but you cannot succeed at environmental protection without lawyers, especially when you’re up against political power and resources.”

I asked what it was like working against conservative ideology in the south.

“It wasn’t always that way,” Middleton explained. “When we first started, people wanted clean air. The environment wasn’t politicized. We had public opinion behind us.”

In the late 70s and early 80s, Middleton told me, companies weren’t savvy about environmental laws, and winning cases was easier. Eventually, companies began to staff their own environmental lawyers, and then came the Reagan administration, which strengthened the conservative ideology that still persists in the south today: that government is the enemy, and regulation prevents prosperity.

Those ardently opposed to regulation might ask themselves how much they trust corporations to keep their air and drinking water clean. They might [review](#) the sheer number of Superfund sites that sat in the

path of Hurricane Florence, and consider that the burden of cleanup costs often falls on taxpayers instead of the polluting companies.

Combined, the six southern states the SELC represents, Middleton tells me, would be the eighth-largest contributor of greenhouse gases in the world. It isn’t a region environmentalists can afford to ignore.

Despite working against the political grain, the SELC has taken energy cases to the supreme court, resulting in the largest power plant cleanup in history. They’ve cleaned up coal-fired power, resulting in a 29% decrease in CO2 emissions in the region. The organization has protected millions of acres of land, and prevented uranium mining projects that would have endangered the drinking water of 1.1 million people.

I realize that in my 30 years of living in the region, even I took this work for granted. It isn’t fast or glamorous – the SELC sometimes spends 10 to 15 years in litigation.

When Middleton and I walk two blocks from his office to the Charlottesville mall, a city center lined with shops, Middleton points first to an independent bookstore he loves, and second to the place where, a year ago, a white supremacist murdered the protester Heather Heyer with his car.

Environmental advocates, like those at SELC, are working across a divided nation. “I had no idea it would become as partisan as it is today. It has gotten so bad,” Middleton says. “People will tell me, ‘You’re not so bad for an environmentalist.’ Tell me - how did the idea of caring about the environment become leftwing political ideology?”

We both acknowledge that climate change is going to make things worse. “It’s a slow, insidious process,” he says. “America is a crisis society – we don’t pay attention to anything until there’s a real crisis.”

If companies are not held responsible for the pollution they cause, and the government does not act to protect *all* citizens, we may have several crises to choose from.