Policy Review

Warren County, NC, and the Emergence of the Environmental Justice Movement: Unlikely Coalitions and Shared Meanings in Local Collective Action

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Warren County, North Carolina, is heralded as a watershed event of contemporary environmentalism, as the birthplace of the environmental justice movement. This article identifies four requirements for the emergence of a social movement (cultural frames, social networks, disruptive action, and political opportunities) and argues that all four were met in the Warren County situation. The article then illustrates how the master frame of environmental justice emerged out of the specific collective action in Warren County. Lastly, the article shows how criteria for waste management decisions have shifted as a result and how these decision processes have become more participatory.

Keywords environmental justice, environmental movement, environmental racism, hazardous waste management

In the autumn of 1982, in a small rural community in Warren County, North Carolina, a group of nearly 500 people participated in a 6-week protest against the construction of a hazardous waste landfill. Despite the extensive efforts of the protesters, the landfill was completed and all the contaminated soil designated for disposal at the site was delivered. This story could be seen as just another local protest, unsuccessful in its goal, grounded in the not-in-my-backyard (NIMBY) mentality. However, Warren County is heralded as a transformative event of contemporary environmentalism, the birthplace of the environmental justice movement:

The protests marked the first time African Americans had mobilized a national broad-based group to oppose what they defined as environmental racism. (Bullard 1994, 5–6)

Warren County is important because activities there set off the national environmental justice movement. (Chavis 1993, 3).

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The 1982 demonstration against the siting of a . . . PCB landfill in Warren County, North Carolina was a watershed event in the environmental equity movement (U.S. EPA 1992, 6).

The Warren County events were not the first time the issues of inequitable distribution of environmental risk emerged onto the environmental policy scene (McGurty 1997), nor the only important event shaping the environmental justice movement and the resulting policy changes. However, the legacy of the events in Warren County and the meanings that are derived from these events are central to understanding the contemporary environmental justice policy discussion. This article uses recent developments in social movement theory to examine the emergence of the environmental justice movement through an in-depth analysis of the “watershed event” in Warren County. The article then demonstrates how Warren County shaped new developments in waste-related policy discussions.

Social Movement Theory

Social movement theory has two schools: resource mobilization and identity-based theories. Resource mobilization focuses on how to garner resources for social movement organizations, and how to mobilize individuals to participate in activities of these organizations (Jenkins 1983; McAdam, et al., 1988). One limitation of resource mobilization is the assumption that grievances and goals are fixed and uncontested. The identity-based theories offer a much needed corrective by focusing on informational and symbolic systems (Melucci 1985; Touraine 1984). In the identity-based theories, the meanings of grievances and goals are constantly negotiated by the members of the movement. Environmental justice scholarship grounded in resource mobilization focuses on organizational structures of environmental justice activism (Bullard 1990, 1993; Hurley 1995; Mohai 1990; Hofrichter 1993). Environmental justice scholarship using identity-based theories suggests that contested meanings about environmental identity are at the heart of environmental justice activism (Pulido 1996; Gottlieb 1993).

If we understand the central task of movements as “coordinating, sustaining and giving meaning to collective action” (Tarrow 1994, 16), then a theoretical bridge must be built between resource mobilization and identity-based theories. Tarrow (1994) synthesizes the two schools with his four requirements for the development of a movement: cultural frames, social networks, repertoires of action, and political opportunities.

1. Cultural frames: In movements, symbols are strategically chosen from the existing cultural beliefs and manipulated into new modes of thinking through collective action. This process has been identified as “framing” and has two major components (Snow et al. 1986; Snow and Benford 1988, 1992). A collective action frame shapes meaning for a specific action, and a master frame signifies meanings for an entire movement. Success demands that frames diagnose problems, attribute blame, and construct solutions. Master frames must, additionally, be flexible, easily elaborated, and resonant with potential participants.

2. Social networks: The challenge to movements is to develop organizations that are flexible, informal, and emerge out of associations of everyday life. As reforms are attained, these mobilizing structures can retreat back to their “organic associations,” ready to form again into organizational structures of a movement if a renewed opportunity emerges.
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3. Disruptive action: Disruptive action “obstructs the routine activities of opponents, bystanders or authorities” (Tarrow 1994, 108) and must be fixed in tactics known and understood by potential constituents. The task of collective action organizers is to create innovations on the recognized forms of action. In this way, potential participants are familiar with the action to make participation more likely, but the threat of disorder and uncertainty still prevail (Tilly 1986; Tarrow 1994).

4. Political opportunities: In order for a social movement to develop, favorable political shifts that improve the chances of success and lower the cost of organizing action are needed. The shifts include implementation of reforms, accessibility of institutions, and availability of allies (McAdam 1982; Tarrow 1994).

In Warren County all of these requirements were met and the development of a new social movement was possible. First, environmental racism was the collective action frame with its unique diagnosis, attribution of blame, and proposed solutions. Second, informal associations, connected to the civil rights movement, had receded into daily life and were now ready to emerge with this new opportunity. Third, the disruptive action in Warren County followed closely the repertoire established by civil rights activism several decades earlier and was well known by participants, bystanders, and authorities. The organizers were also able to modify it slightly to create significant disorder. Lastly, political opportunities were ripe: Hazardous waste reforms created an atmosphere for extensive environmental reforms; changes in environmental legislation had enabled citizens to influence environmental decision making; shifts in African–American electoral politics also opened the field for action.

In the wake of Warren County, environmental racism shifted into a broader, more elaborative and resonant environmental justice master frame. As a result of this innovative interpretive scheme of potential environmental harm, criteria for management decision-making shifted. Moreover, the introduction of a social dimension to waste management decisions shows the subjectivity inherent in scientifically based decisions and the necessity to keep environmental management decisions transparent and participatory.

Warren County and the Emergence of Environmental Justice

The situation began in the summer of 1978 when Robert Burns and his two sons drove liquid tanker trucks along state roads in rural North Carolina and opened the bottom valve of the tankers, discharging polychlorinated biphenyl (PCB)-contaminated liquid, removed from the Ward Transformer company in Raleigh, onto the soil along the road shoulders. This violation of the Toxic Substance Control Act continued for nearly 2 weeks until 240 miles of road shoulders were contaminated. In the face of a possible public health disaster and a political debacle, the state was determined to find a final resting place as quickly as possible. A farmer in the small rural community of Afton in Warren County, facing foreclosure and bankruptcy, sold his property to the state and, although the site did not meet all the requirements for building a hazardous waste landfill, the state was convinced that the site could be engineered to safely contain the PCB-contaminated soil in perpetuity.

The announcement of the siting sparked an intense NIMBY resistance from the county, and led to 3 years of unsuccessful legal battles. In the summer of 1982, the
state was permitted to begin construction of the landfill and locals changed their oppositional strategy to disruptive direct action. Warren County Citizens Concerned about PCB (Concerned Citizens), the group leading the initial opposition, were mostly white landowners who had no experience or know-how in direct action. The choice for direct action necessitated building a coalition with local civil rights leaders. This collaboration, while unsuccessful in its immediate goal to stop the construction of the landfill, has had a lasting impact on the environmental movement and environmental policy.

**Environmental Racism as Collective Action Frame**

Prior to the disruptive collective action, the opposition was shaped by a NIMBY frame. However, the change in tactics also led to the development of an innovative collective action frame, environmental racism, with a new diagnosis of the problem, attribution of blame, and proposed solutions. Under the environmental racism frame, groundwater and local economy issues were overshadowed by a claim that Warren County was chosen because the residents were primarily poor and African-American. The frame constructed a new understanding of environmental harm as integrally related to political powerlessness. Warren County was composed of 65% African-Americans and was the 97th poorest county in the state out of 100 counties. Under the environmental racism frame, these characteristics created a greater risk to residents from environmental hazards.

Under the previous NIMBY frame, threats to groundwater and local economy were the main worries for the residents. Blame was placed directly in the decision-making system that had enabled the siting choice to be made, and the proposed solution was simply to present a reasoned argument for siting the landfill elsewhere. At the initial public hearing, many Warren County residents advocated for other sites in North Carolina:

> We think that the site chosen for the PCBs should be safe beyond any reasonable doubt whatsoever. In as much as there appear to be sites elsewhere in the State of North Carolina that can handle PCBs, we feel that it is only reasonable that the state would look to those sites and reject the Pope site. (Meyer, in U.S. EPA 1979, 154)

Better yet, according to citizens, why not truck the contaminated soil to the chemical waste landfill in Emelle, Alabama? The site had been approved by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), was constructed, and had been operating successfully, as far as they knew. While this option would cost considerably more money, how could the state put a price tag on the value of lives in Warren County? Shipment to Alabama, no matter what the cost, was the official position of Concerned Citizens. As articulated by its dynamic and tenacious leader:

> PCB on the road shoulders and PCB in temporary storage should be sent to Alabama, one of the three legal national dumping sites where I understand every precaution has been taken, unlike the situation here in Warren County. (K. Ferruccio, in U.S. EPA 1979, 100)

The initial introduction of the environmental racism frame was through the court system after all other suits had been dismissed. The local chapter of the
NAACP filed for an injunction arguing that the high percentage of minority residents was one factor influencing the decision to site the landfill in Warren County. The ruling against the plaintiff's claimed:

Throughout all the hearings conducted by the state and federal offices, it was never suggested that race may have been a motivating factor in the location of the site for the landfill. (*NAACP et al. v. Gorsuch et al.* 1982, 6).

However, the issue had been raised before the final hour in a slightly different and more vague form. The local chapter of the NAACP spoke frequently of the stigma of the landfill hampering efforts and economic development in the county, and many residents, black and white, spoke of the relative poverty in the county as placing them in a position of political powerlessness. (U.S. EPA 1979; Howard 1979; *Warren Record* 1979). No one on either side of the controversy was willing to delve into the potential implications. Once the opponents had chosen the strategy of the courts, they were obliged to engage in the legal language where, heretofore, there was no room to address environmental racism. The new frame had to be introduced through more unofficial channels of collective action.

The attribution of blame under the environmental racism frame became much broader than with the NIMBY frame. The direct decision makers in this one situation were expanded to include the history of racial discrimination throughout the South. Moreover, the scope of the problem burgeoned under the new collective action frame. There were many Warren Counties out there, and perhaps, many of these poor, predominately black communities had been host to hazardous waste facilities. Hazardous waste issues were new territory for civil rights activists, but they soon realized that Warren County might not be a unique situation. As Golden Frinks (1995), an experienced civil rights activist involved in the Warren County protests, articulated:

I did not know anything about it, so I did a little research. I called Atlanta and told Albert [Love] what I was involved in and wanted him to put it in the ear of Lowery [the president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference]. That I thought it was a good movement and thought he should become involved. I also wanted him to find out if there were other toxic waste dumps in black communities. They found it in South Carolina.

The most important implication of the new problem definition was that shipment of the contaminated soil to Emelle, AL, was no longer a viable option for the activists who had advocated this solution within the NIMBY frame of the opposition. As it turned out, Emelle, AL, host to the largest hazardous waste facility in the nation, was also a poor town with a majority African–American population and with extensive compliance and regulatory problems (Baily et al. 1993).

The production of a new collective action frame must be born out of already existing interpretive schema (Snow and Benford 1988). The NIMBY frame and civil rights frame had a conceptual link that enabled the emergence of environmental racism. As a typical opposition to a waste-related locally unwanted land use, anger about the loss of local control over land use decisions was a powerful mobilizing factor (Freudenberg 1984; Greenberg and Anderson 1984; Portney 1991; Popper 1987). Civil rights, as well, had an analysis of distrust for government decisions. This discursive link, then, became the key to transforming the Warren County case to a defining moment for the environmental justice movement.
When it became clear that direct action was needed, it seemed unlikely that Concerned Citizens, comprised mostly of local white residents, would actively seek to build a collaboration with civil rights activists. The leaders had no direct ties to black leaders, so they drew on their association through Concerned Citizens with the pastor of the black Baptist Church located 1\(\frac{1}{2}\) miles from the proposed site. Reverend Luther Brown of Coley Springs Baptist Church had connected briefly with the group because some of his church members lived adjacent to the site. Brown united Concerned Citizens with the United Church of Christ (UCC) Commission for Racial Justice, led by a UCC pastor, Leon White, a seasoned civil rights activist whose church was on the outskirts of Warren County (Ferrucio 1994; White 1994; Brown 1994). This initial connection was all the group needed to link into a significant network of formal civil rights organizations and informal associations, ready to form into collective action organizing groups.

The group first was able to engage Ben Chavis, a renowned and well-respected activist in North Carolina and a member of the local UCC. The connection with the UCC also enabled opponents to receive support of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the organization associated with Martin Luther King. Floyd McKissick, a member of the Congress for Racial Equality (CORE) and active in the civil rights movement, was a nearby resident with business interests in the area. He decided, after Leon White had engaged the UCC in the cause, to join the efforts, in hopes of protecting his business projects in the area. He also enlisted the help of his long-time colleague and friend Golden Frinks, who lived a few counties away, for help with the daily strategizing. Frinks had worked closely with SCLC and contacted the then president, Joseph Lowery, who immediately left Atlanta, GA, for Warren County. Lowery then connected with a SCLC board member, Walter Fauntroy, who was a congressional representative for the District of Columbia (Frinks 1995; White 1994; Fauntroy 1994). Due to the significant social networks available to the opponents, these powerful African-American leaders were available to the group and helped to legitimize and empower the opposition.

The social networks also tapped into the residents of Warren County through associations already established for everyday life. Once the civil rights leaders were involved, many residents who had worked with them in the 1960s were back into the fold, offering hospitality for those traveling and phoning friends and family to spread the latest information (Burwell 1994; M. G. Harris 1994). The two churches, Coley Springs Baptist Church and United Church of Christ, provided excellent outlets for information to their members. In addition, these churches were linked to a whole network of other churches, with both black and white memberships, and solicited support from them (Brown 1994; Ferrucio 1994; White 1994). Since the voter registration campaigns were in full force in the fall, this was also an opportunity for meeting with fellow residents of the county and talking about the issues of real importance to the county (Burwell 1994; Somerville 1994).

Disruptive Collective Action

With the assistance of experienced civil rights organizers, a direct action campaign against the landfill was waged from September 15 through October 12, 1982 (State Highway Patrol 1982; *Warren Record* 1982). Protest events ranged from a handful of participants to several hundred, with an average of 75, and successfully disrupted the orderly and efficient completion of the landfill. The power of the protests came
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from the repertoire of actions honed by the civil rights activists two decades earlier (Morris 1984). The similarities were immediately apparent and comforting to many potential participants:

The whole thing was a revival of the whole civil rights stuff— the tone, the look, the chants, the point. It was more like a civil rights protest than any NIMBY opposition. (Hart 1995)

Participants were familiar with the pattern for activism and could easily fall into its rhythm. Although not all whites in the county were willing to join, the actions of the civil rights movement were familiar to blacks and whites and could mobilize both races. Meetings at Coley Springs, the high visibility of well-known African-American activists, the incorporation of prayer into all the protests, and the long-distance march—from Warrenton to Raleigh— all were part of an established repertoire of civil rights activism familiar to county residents as well as activists from other places who joined the locals.

The church was the focal point of the organizing. The physical site provided the space, and the authority of church-related individuals provided the legitimacy. Several hundred people attended the “mass meetings” held daily. Some of the attendees participated in the protests; others were only willing to attend the meetings. The church meetings were “motivational” with well-respected speakers, including famous civil rights leaders as well as several antitoxic activists. The meetings also provided a place to “pass the basket” and to inform participants of the plan that had been decided by the organizers.

The style of marches up the road from the church to the landfill entrance also mimicked the earlier civil rights marches. The group used similar chants and songs, as well as inventing new words for old melodies. Also, prayer was an integral component of each march, as it had been at the mass meetings in the church. One march, in particular, was reminiscent of the old civil rights days, duplicating the infamous Selma to Montgomery march. Over a several-day period in early October, the group walked a sixty mile route from Warren County to Raleigh, where they presented their cause to the state capital and the U.S. EPA offices in Research Triangle Park just outside Raleigh (Warren Record 1982; Bright 1994; Burwell 1994; Brown 1994; Ferruccio 1994; Frinks 1995; White 1994). In addition to following the established repertoire from the civil rights movement, the landfill situation presented an opportunity for innovative, dramatic action. When the trucks brought the contaminated soil from the road shoulders to the landfill, the protesters lay down on the road in front of the oncoming trucks. This tactic of symbolically blocking the source of the contamination delayed the project and raised visibility of the events.

When the protesters confronted the state troopers on the road, it was like the early 60s marches all over again. It was frightening to be on the scene. (Griffin 1995)

Political Opportunities for Collective Action

The historical moment of Warren County was ripe with political opportunities. Hazardous waste, the silent killer, became renowned for its vast and uncertain potential for destruction. The fear of contamination was fueled by the timing of the
North Carolina incident: The dumping of the PCB-contaminated liquid occurred exactly at the same time when hazardous waste became a household word with the Love Canal catastrophe in August 1978 (*Television News Abstracts and Index* 1978). The infusion of the hazardous waste issue into public discourse through the Love Canal news coverage had two impacts. The toxic threat was always lurking in the background; no one had immunity, not whites, not blacks, not wealthy, not poor. Also, the government was implicated in the victimization of citizens by toxic materials (Szasz 1994). The strong connection between the two cases of contamination was further strengthened when PCBs were identified as part of the contamination in Love Canal.

At the onset of the Warren County controversy in December 1978, the state and federal infrastructure for managing hazardous waste was rickety. The implementation of the PCB-related policies was constrained by the low priority given to it by the Carter administration. As a result, partial regulations were issued in 1980, 2 years after the statutory deadline. These regulations omitted the technical standards for treatment, storage, and disposal facilities, and permits were easily attained based on interim (and very loose) standards (Epstein et al. 1982; Szasz 1994). By 1982, the regulations had become slightly more firm, but the U.S. EPA was even more vulnerable from the Superfund-related scandals. The problems with hazardous waste policy implementation created a frightening prospect for residents. Technological advances that had held the promise of increased liberty now carried another, darker side, which threatened to subjugate and victimize citizens by reinforcing existing systems of inequality.

Moreover, it was the concept of contamination by synthetic chemicals that enabled the addition of an environmental identity to the civil rights frame. The two issues of the initial opposition were translated into a language that resonated with past experiences of blacks in the county: Blacks had been victims of past transgressions at the hands of whites, causing excessive poverty, physical suffering, and even death. The landfill was the latest manifestation of their experience for the past several centuries. As one participant, a local civil rights activist since the early 1960s, put it:

> They use black people as guinea pigs. Anytime there is something that is going to kill, we'll put it in the black area to find out if it kills and how many. They don’t care. They don’t value a black person’s life. (M. G. Harris 1994)

A need to change discriminatory land use decisions had been part of a civil rights agenda earlier (McGurty 1997); however, the civil rights involvement of the Warren County case added an environmental dimension as well as a social/economic/political dimension to the problem. Moreover, the contamination was thrust upon them from the state and federal government. Since this same government had failed many times in the recent past to protect blacks, it was not difficult to see that another failure was imminent. Civil rights constructed an environmental identity as the true protectors of African-Americans and in opposition to the government agencies who were not protecting all citizens equally.

The changing political stage also altered the conceptualization of civil rights and established a political opening for intensified civil rights activism. The change in political regime in the 1980s pointed to the possibility that many civil rights reforms
could easily be rescinded (Manning 1984). In the face of these challenges, hazardous waste issues pointed to a more subtle and insidious process of marginalization and oppression, indicating that civil rights reforms needed strengthening and certainly not dismantling. This national-scale issue was played out in Warren County and was tied directly to the landfill controversy.

When the county settled the case with the state, enabling the landfill to move forward with a modified landfill design, the 1982 elections were only a few months away. The court settlement gave blacks in the county another reason to vote against the essentially white political establishment. The majority black county had been in a long struggle to gain equal representation in county decision making, beginning with the Voting Rights Act of 1965 when prerequisites for registering and voting were removed (Engstrom 1988). In 1981–1982, as part of the extensive campaign throughout the South to garner congressional support for the extension of the Voting Rights Act, renewed efforts were made at voter registration among African-Americans in the county. The same African-Americans who led the voter registration campaign in the county were key to the direct action protests at the landfill during the autumn of the same year, and the two issues of blacks gaining political power and the landfill opposition were inextricably linked. In the time between the county’s withdrawal of the suit and the general election of 1982 (which took place at the end of the landfill protests) the overall number of voters registered in Warren County increased by 30%; 65% of the overall increase was from nonwhite registrants (County of Warren 1982). Since race still determined the outcome of elections, the huge increase of black registered voters changed the entire political landscape. In November 1982 African-Americans won the majority of positions in the county, including a majority of seats on the county board, the sheriff, the registrar of deeds, and state assembly representative (Durham Herald 1982).

Environmental Racism Transformed to Environmental Justice

In the years immediately following Warren County, two series of activities emerged directly from the action in Warren County that transformed the collective action frame of environmental racism to the master frame of environmental justice. First, Ken Ferruccio of Concerned Citizens and Leon White of the UCC gave talks together in other communities opposing hazardous waste facilities throughout the eastern seaboard and spread the message of the environmental racism frame (Ferruccio 1994; White 1994). While environmental racism was yet to become a widely used and understood term among environmentalists, in the mid 1980s environmental racism was becoming an integral part of the antitoxic movement (Freudenberg and Steinsapir 1991; Szasz 1994).

In addition to this ongoing activism, Warren County instigated the surge of research into the issue of distributive justice in waste facility siting, the scientific cornerstone of the environmental justice movement. The initial study into this phenomena (General Accounting Office 1983) came about because Congressman Fauntroy returned to Washington, DC, after his participation in Warren County and solicited the assistance of representatives Jim Florio and Al Gore, two champions of environmental causes, to request an investigation by the General Accounting Office. While the methodology could not be defended, the results influenced the UCC (1987) to launch its own investigation. From this study, also questionable in its methodology, a spate of investigations into location of waste facilities was generated
In order to document the central claim of the environmental racism frame, that waste facilities were disproportionately located in communities of color, investigators had to entertain the idea that other social factors might contribute to location decisions as well, particularly “class”–related factors. In many of the studies, it seemed there was at least an interactive effect of “race” and “class,” if not separate effects. While there still remains a significant debate in the literature about whether race or class has the greater effect in determining location of waste sites, the environmental racism frame was immediately broadened and extended, applicable to a wide array of collective actions (Bullard 1993). These ideas were already inherent in the environmental racism frame as developed in Warren County. The discursive link that enabled the whites and blacks to work together was that the state had misused its power by making a local land use decision without sufficient input from residents who had very little political clout in the state political arena. The notion of political powerlessness for 45% of the residents of Warren County was related directly to poverty issues.

Attempts to characterize the scale and scope of the environmental justice movement belie its magnitude and impact (Sachs 1995). Less than a decade after the Warren County incident, two influential national conferences were organized. The Michigan Conference on the Race and the Incidence of Environmental Hazards concluded its proceedings with a letter to the U.S. EPA petitioning the agency to address the issue seriously and resulted in the first U.S. EPA study of environmental injustices (Bryant and Mohai 1992; U.S. EPA 1992). The First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Conference Summit issued the Principles of Environmental Justice, now recognized as the basic tenets of the movement (Lee 1992). In February 1994, Environmental Justice Executive Order 12250 (the EO) was signed, mandating a significant policy shift at the federal level: “Each Federal agency shall make achieving environmental justice part of its mission.” While the extent of implementation of the EO is still an empirical question, the issue is fully integrated into the policy arena with a U.S. EPA Office of Environmental Justice to oversee the EO as well as an environmental justice advisory group to the U.S. EPA (U.S. EPA 1993, 1995). The EO was the fruition of a decade of work in the movement. The two national conferences, the myriad of environmental justice activism at the local level, the extensive lobbying efforts by regional and national environmental justice organizations, and the spate of media coverage of the issue all contributed to this policy shift. While this one landfill protest event in Warren County did not create the environmental justice movement alone, the organizers and participants in the movement acknowledged Warren County as the central event instigating the contemporary environmental justice movement. The power ascribed to the events in Warren County by activists and policymakers suggests that the nascent meanings about environmental justice formed here are significant shapers of our understanding of environmental justice.

Environmental Justice and Waste Management Policy

Environmental justice, as it emerged from the Warren County collective action, unwittingly transformed waste management policy in three ways. First, the criteria
for determining a sound location for a waste facility have changed significantly. Second, environmental justice brings into question waste management policies that assume the continued increasing production of waste, and third, the potential for disproportionate environmental harm has reinforced and expanded the need for direct citizen participation in policy decisions.

The most basic level of change for waste management is the inclusion of “environmental justice” criteria in location decisions. When the state of North Carolina first was looking at sites for the hazardous waste landfill, there was no formal process for evaluating if the landfill would disproportionately impact the poor or people of color. The entire idea was completely foreign to the waste management agencies (Meyer 1994). However, it is now regular practice of waste agencies to include these demographic factors in their site analysis along with soil type, hydrogeologic features, and fiscal considerations (Vorhees 1997).

The second major waste policy impact is to challenge the underlying assumption guiding all waste management policy: continued expansion of hazardous waste generation and an ever-increasing supply of waste facilities. The master frame of environmental justice, in order to build its network with other activists, had to abandon any vestiges of NIMBY-ism for solutions to the problem of waste management. The process, as we have seen, had already begun in Warren County when the activists defined the problem with the larger scope of the environmental racism frame. The scope is even further expanded with environmental justice, and the solution of “anywhere but here” was totally untenable. Instead, the problem definition under environmental justice frame is “the model of economic and industrial development predicated on waste expansion” (Ferruccio 1993, 2). With this problem definition, the only solution is to resist expansion of waste management facilities. As a result, the environmental justice movement has challenged waste policies under the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act (RCRA) to challenge industry to reduce the waste generated (Szasz 1994). A “pollution prevention” strategy precludes the need for additional sitings as it lowers the possibility of disproportionate environmental harm.

The last area of policy impact relates to meaningful citizen participation in decision making. The environmental justice movement continues to demand this involvement and has, to some extent, been successful in attaining it. In Warren County, assurances from experts that the risk to Warren County residents were minimal did not ease their worries. Further, it became more and more clear as the process developed that these scientific experts were working with a significant amount of uncertainty in their determination of risk. The scientific uncertainty was underscored by the changing EPA regulations for hazardous waste.

New statistics and methods are making [EPA standards] obsolete. Who provides the new statistics? The families of New York, the victims of Virginia who were told that it was safe? . . . . Statistics tell us human error is inevitable. (Bumgardner, in U.S. EPA 1979, 123–124)

The governor of North Carolina, Jim Hunt, even acknowledged this difficulty of scientific uncertainty in a letter he wrote to residents of Warren County:

The state is convinced, on the basis of the best scientific evidence that is available to us, that the landfill is safe and will remain safe in the future. But
you and I have seen that scientists can disagree, and their disagreements concern us. (Hunt 1982)

The scientific uncertainty challenged the predominate notion that the government could safeguard citizens from the hazardous by-products of industrial technology. Moreover, as it became possible that hazardous waste sites could be chosen, at least in part, with nongeophysical criteria, the citizens demanded increasing input into those decisions through more meaningful citizen participation.

Recent developments in Warren County serve to illustrate all three levels of policy changes. In 1993, 10 years after the Warren County landfill was capped, there was evidence of significant contamination from leachate (Howes 1993). In the face of a new public health threat, the citizens in Warren County have successfully made several demands of the state waste management agency. Most important are the procedural demands that a joint task force of citizen representatives and state employees work out the specific details of how to manage the waste crisis. The task force has been established and is a precedent-setting situation in public participation. This is not a “Citizen Advisory Committee” where the state develops plans and a group of citizens responds to them. The task force gives all parties equal voice in the planning process. The citizens also made two substantive requests granted by the state. First and foremost, the citizens want the problem to be handled on site. They know that if the contamination from the landfill is sent elsewhere, another powerless community will be opened to the environmental risk posed. The citizens also requested an independent scientific assessment of the contamination and potential for risk (Ballance 1994; Burwell 1994; Elmore 1994; Ferruccio 1993).

While Warren County residents may, in fact, face a unique situation of unprecedented power with the state due to its notoriety in the environmental movement, this is a drastic shift in procedure for making management decisions that give opportunity for meaningful input from citizens. As these participation processes become more widespread, resource managers and scholars can assess their effectiveness in creating more equitable waste management strategies with decreased emphasis on waste expansion.

Notes

1. It was unlikely due to the history of racial tension in the South. Particularly, in Warren County during the civil rights actions of the early 1960s, many confrontations between local black residents and white residents occurred (Bright 1994; J. Harris 1994). Further, prior to the association with the civil rights groups, Concerned Citizens had reached out to both Ronald Reagan and Jesse Helms. Although the cry for help was ignored by both Reagan and Helms, the willingness of Concerned Citizens to ally themselves with two major opponents of civil rights activism demonstrates that the eventual alliance of whites and blacks was not easily attained.

2. In the interviews there were conflicting reports of whose initiative it was to involve the Commission on Racial Justice in the direct action. There were suggestions from some that the commission had made overtures to become involved prior to the meeting arranged by Brown. Most of these suggestions also included a blaming of “black leaders” for agitation and creating an unnecessary conflict.

3. For example, Dollie Burwell, who won the registrar of deeds position in 1982 and continues in that position today, played a most significant role in this drive. Her efforts were directly tied to the larger agenda of the national civil rights organizations. Burwell’s involvement in voter registration began with her relationship with two key civil rights activists in
North Carolina, Leon White and Ben Chavis, as well as with members of the SCLC (Burwell 1994; Lee 1995; M. G. Harris 1994; Somerville 1994; White 1994).

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