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## Equity in Sustainable Communities: Exploring Tools for Environmental Justice and Political Ecology

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# Equity in Sustainable Communities: Exploring Tools from Environmental Justice and Political Ecology

## ABSTRACT

*Ecovillages are a growing trend in the effort to find social and environmentally sustainable ways to live. Focused on preserving land and creating a sense of community, their design aims to offer middle-class households a way to connect with each other and the natural environment. Yet missing from this concept is an effort to address equity and environmental injustice concerns. This article examines an ecovillage in upstate New York and some of the opportunities and challenges of including equity and justice in this new socially and environmentally sustainable way to live. It concludes that if ecovillages hope to be more than a greener version of sprawl, they will need to expand their commitment to sustainability by incorporating equity and justice issues, including environmental justice struggles.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

This year, the Global Ecovillage Network, an online clearinghouse for ecovillages and environmentally minded community groups, reported 102 ecovillages in the United States and 347 in countries around the world.<sup>1</sup> These new, environmentally focused neighborhoods aim to connect two concepts: a sense of community and environmental sustainability. The concept emerged as a response to the growing sense of the breakdown of community in the United States<sup>2</sup> and the burgeoning data on environmental degradation and its social consequences. However, these housing models do not address racial and class inequities and injustices that also relate to social or environmental degradation. In fact, ecovillages have been criticized for being socially exclusive in their quest

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1. Global Ecovillage Network, <http://gen.ecovillage.org/> (last visited Apr. 4, 2010).

2. See ROBERT PUTNAM, *BOWLING ALONE: THE COLLAPSE AND REVIVAL OF AMERICAN COMMUNITY* (2000) (discussing this breakdown); see also ANDREW ROSS, *THE CELEBRATION CHRONICLES: LIFE, LIBERTY, AND THE PURSUIT OF PROPERTY VALUE IN DISNEY'S NEW TOWN* (1999) (describing the creation of Celebration, Florida, a community designed by the Walt Disney Corporation that responds to social degradation).

to find solutions to a lost sense of community in twenty-first-century neighborhoods.<sup>3</sup>

At the same time, environmental justice activists and scholars have successfully raised concerns that race and class are significant factors in determining where toxics and polluting industries—so called environmental “bads”—are located. Substantial evidence documents the ways in which low-income communities and neighborhoods of color are disproportionately burdened with toxic wastes.<sup>4</sup> Tragedies, like Hurricane Katrina, which devastated the lives of poor people of color in the Ninth Ward neighborhood of New Orleans, highlight the relationship between the natural environment, poverty, and structural racism that keeps these groups marginalized in our society.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, environmental justice scholars rightly point out that environmental “goods,” such as parks and access to nature, are often absent from the places where people of color and low income families live.<sup>6</sup> Considerable scholarship has produced numerous case studies that demonstrate inequitable distributions of healthful and harmful environments, creating what some call an “American apartheid.”<sup>7</sup> Thus, while ecovillages offer suggestions on more sustainable communities, they have not yet addressed the unequal access these communities present.

The ecovillage movement, with its focus on creating neighborhoods that bring people closer to each other and to nature, is made up primarily by those from the upper middle-class and is reminiscent of the 1970s environmental movement. Because environmental justice ad-

3. Residents inside ecovillages have raised concerns about the lack of ethnic and class diversity. Often, discussions on diversity in cohousing focus on religious, gender, and sexual orientation as representing various forms of diversity, conspicuously excluding race and ethnicity. See, e.g., Jennifer Hattam, *Can ‘Eco-Villages’ Be Sustainable Without Being Exclusive?*, TREEHUGGER, Feb. 2, 2010, <http://www.alternet.org/story/145419>; Ellen Orleans, *Do We Really Value “Diversity”?*, 124 COMMUNITIES MAG.17, 17–20 (2004).

4. See, e.g., ROBERT BULLARD, *DUMPING IN DIXIE: RACE, CLASS, AND ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY* (1990).

5. For a discussion on the social consequences of Hurricane Katrina, see MICHAEL ERIC DYSON, *COME HELL OR HIGH WATER: HURRICANE KATRINA AND THE COLOR OF DISASTER* (2006).

6. See ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE AND ENVIRONMENTALISM: THE SOCIAL JUSTICE CHALLENGE TO THE ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENT (Ronald Sandler & Phaedra C. Pezzullo eds., 2007) [hereinafter Sandler & Pezzullo].

7. See, e.g., Melissa Checker, *Eco-Apartheid and Global Greenwaves: African Diasporic Environmental Justice Movements*, 10 SOULS: CRITICAL J. BLACK POL., CULTURE, & SOC’Y 390–408 (2008). A variety of studies within the environmental justice field document how people of color are disproportionately exposed to hazardous living conditions, including exposure to toxic chemicals in employment such as farm workers. See ANGUS WRIGHT, *Rethinking the Circle of Poison: The Politics of Pesticide Poisoning Among Mexican Farm Workers*, 13 LATIN AM. PERSP. 26–59 (1986).

dresses the plight of low-end communities, fertile ground exists to critically examine the principles of ecovillage sustainability as it relates to race and class in this country. Specifically, looking at the two in tandem involves the interconnectedness of inequality that have foundations in political economy, social marginalization, and differential access and control of natural resources. Since the mid 1970s, political ecologists have examined these concerns for ecology and political economy “with particular attention to the role of marginalized peasants.”<sup>8</sup> Thus, political ecology is a useful lens to use in examining the struggles for equity in the ecovillage movement.

While ecovillages offer a fresh perspective and an attractive model for a new approach to development, they will need to do more if their ultimate goal is creating sustainable living.<sup>9</sup> More precisely, as sustainable alternatives to the urban space, they cannot continue to ignore the issues raised by environmental justice lest they repeat the problems of the 1970s environmental movement, defined as a white, middle-class experience. In failing to become more inclusive, ecovillages risk merely perpetuating class and race divisions under the banner of sustainability.

Yet, in some ways, environmental justice activists and ecovillages share a common goal—to create healthy communities for people and the planet. This article aims to highlight the value of ecovillages and to make environmental justice a more integral part of environmental discourses. However, long-term sustainability requires the inclusion of all races, classes, and genders. Sustainable communities will fail on any large scale if only one ethnicity or social class can afford them. Without this broader inclusion, ecovillages will only create developments that promote exclusion and injustice, such as green sprawl, green gated communities, and green segregated spaces.<sup>10</sup>

This article also explores the possibility of integrating environmental justice into the ecovillage discourse by making the topic of inequality integral to the notion of sustainability. To begin this process, we

8. Most political ecologists from geography, political science, and anthropology trace the beginnings of political ecology to PAUL BLAIKIE & HAROLD BROOKFIELD, *LAND DEGRADATION AND SOCIETY* (1987). The field of political ecology is diverse; anthropologists look to Eric Wolf, *Ownership and Political Ecology*, 45 *ANTHROPOLOGICAL Q.* 201, 201–05 (1972), as a significant introduction to political ecology.

9. There are a variety of ecovillages around the world. While this paper focuses on an ecovillage in the United States, not all communities fall under this analysis. For example, Ecovillage Farm in Richmond, California, is one community project focused on providing healthful food and urban gardening experiences to low-income households.

10. For a thorough analysis of the social and environmental consequences of sprawl, see THERESA CALDEIRA, *CITY OF WALLS: CRIME, SEGREGATION, AND CITIZENSHIP IN SÃO PAULO* (2000) and ROBERT BULLARD, ET AL., *SPRAWL CITY: RACE, POLITICS, AND PLANNING IN ATLANTA* (2000).

need to consider what it means to be sustainable. For some, social and environmental sustainability means being able to grow your own food, increasingly out of necessity,<sup>11</sup> or living in a manner consistent with the Brundtland Report's definition of sustainability: to "meet[ ] the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."<sup>12</sup> In the search for social and environmental sustainability, ecovillages have brought to light the daunting task that faces those living comfortably in the United States—addressing both the local and global crises of hunger, violence, and environmental degradation while maintaining a comfortable lifestyle, a lifestyle that is also responsible for a disproportionate consumption of the world's resources.<sup>13</sup>

One solution has been to re-examine the way we live with each other and with the natural environment. Ecovillages do just that. As a planned community, ecovillages focus on reclaiming a lost sense of community while emphasizing the benefits of growing food and preserving land.<sup>14</sup> The movement is attractive for people critical of the destruction of open space that results from sprawl and the social isolation experienced by the layout of suburban homes and neighborhoods. Yet, ecovillage residents have difficulty addressing issues of inequity and injustice in regard to their communities. While residents push for sustainability in the design of their communities, these neighborhoods still occur within a culture of consumption—the same culture that is blamed for contributing to the many environmental problems we face. Furthermore, these communities emerge in the context of a society in which environmental degradation disproportionately affects people of color and the poor.<sup>15</sup> Thus, for ecovillages to be a realistic and viable model for addressing environmental and social degradation, they also need to address environmental inequity. This article examines how equity could be included in the ecovillage movement in order to create just, sustainable communi-

11. People's Grocery is a community-based organization in West Oakland, California. Its mission aims to "build a local food system that improves the health and economy of the West Oakland community." People's Grocery, <http://www.peoplesgrocery.org> (last visited Mar. 16, 2010).

12. WORLD COMMISSION ON ENVIRONMENT AND DEVELOPMENT, UNITED NATIONS, *OUR COMMON FUTURE* 41 (1987) [hereinafter BRUNDTLAND REPORT].

13. See RAMACHANDRA GUHA, *HOW MUCH SHOULD A PERSON CONSUME?: ENVIRONMENTALISM IN INDIA AND THE UNITED STATES* (2006).

14. The basic definition of an ecovillage comes from the Global Ecovillage Network, stating: "Ecovillages are urban or rural communities of people, who strive to integrate a supportive social environment with a low-impact way of life. To achieve this, they integrate various aspects of ecological design, permaculture, ecological building, green production, alternative energy, community building practices, and much more." Global Ecovillage Network, <http://gen.ecovillage.org/> (last visited Mar. 19, 2010).

15. BUNYAN BRYANT, *ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE: ISSUES, POLICIES, AND SOLUTIONS* (1995).

ties for everyone. The concept of just sustainability aims to “ensure a better quality of life for all, now, and into the future, in a just and equitable manner, whilst living within the limits of supporting ecosystems.”<sup>16</sup> In fact, ecovillages are well positioned to begin tackling this topic and bring it into the folds of the sustainability discussion.

Ecovillages are currently envisioned to promote sustainability: By design, they reduce excessive consumption of nonrenewable resources, reduce dependence on private transportation, produce food for the community, and enhance relationships between neighbors in order to facilitate sharing. These principles are compatible with the needs of low-income communities. For example, cohousing use shared laundry facilities, so that, instead of one washing machine for each residence, the community provides three or four for everyone, similar to any urban Laundromat often used by those who cannot afford their own machines at home. The goal is to include practical and cost-effective ways to rethink our everyday experiences, from reducing dependence on fossil fuels through shared transportation to growing food and eating locally. One method of doing this is to revisit the notion of getting to know one’s neighbor, both to create safe spaces and to facilitate the sharing of seldom-used items, like lawnmowers. These goals should not be limited only to the middle-class white population. As environmental justice advocates fight to improve the living environment of low-income communities and communities of color, these issues could also be an integral part of the ecovillage movement. Although in their current incarnation, ecovillages do not have a formal mechanism to address issues of justice, such as cleaning up polluted environments, and members of the ecovillage movement have expressed discomfort with the lack of equity and justice.<sup>17</sup> Instead, ecovillages focus on creating a lifestyle change for people who want to move out of a seemingly unsustainable environment—the suburbs or the city—and move into spaces that are closer to nature and intentionally designed with energy-efficient commodities and architectural features that promote social interaction, such as windows that face into the neighborhood.<sup>18</sup> Environmental justice concepts, including

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16. JULIAN AGYEMAN, ET AL., *JUST SUSTAINABILITIES: DEVELOPMENT IN AN UNEQUAL WORLD* 5 (2003).

17. LIZ WALKER, *ECO VILLAGE AT ITHACA: PIONEERING A SUSTAINABLE CULTURE* (2005).

18. See TENDAI CHITWERE, *CONSTRUCTING A GREEN LIFESTYLE: CONSUMPTION AND ENVIRONMENTALISM IN AN ECOVILLAGE* (2006) [hereinafter CHITWERE, *GREEN LIFESTYLE*]; TENDAI CHITWERE & DORCETA E. TAYLOR, *Sustainable Living and Community Building in EcoVillage at Ithaca: The Challenges of Incorporating Social Justice Concerns into the Practices of an Ecological Cohousing Community*, in 18 *ENVIRONMENT AND SOCIAL JUSTICE: AN INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE*, RESEARCH IN SOCIAL PROBLEMS AND PUBLIC POLICY 141–76 (Dorceta E. Taylor ed., 2010) (providing examples of personal choices that residents make, such as,

environmental racism,<sup>19</sup> continue to be marginal in the discussion of social and environmental sustainability.<sup>20</sup> Ecovillages can become part of the solution to make equity matter, by opening these communities to the task of including social and environmental justice as part of their movement.

In order to explore this possibility, this article is divided into several sections. First, a brief history of two parallel movements, the ecovillage movement and the environmental justice movement, are provided. Next, the tools of political ecology and just sustainability are examined, which could be used to bridge the gap between ecovillages and environmental justice work. Finally, a case study of the EcoVillage at Ithaca project is presented, followed by an exploration of possible solutions for including equity in the ecovillage movement, specifically by suggesting that ecovillages broaden the scope of their work to be more inclusive.

Although ecovillage advocates have argued that the movement is not designed to be a social justice project,<sup>21</sup> this argument can be countered with the suggestion that sometimes, issues are relevant to our work whether we intend them to be there or not. Environmental justice is like that: Whether or not ecovillages specifically intend to address issues of environmental injustice, these principles are nonetheless important, especially in the context of neighborhood design and environmental degradation. If ecovillages truly want to be a model for social and environmental sustainability, then they must find a way to make equity a part of the movement.

## II. ECOVILLAGES

Ecovillages are a form of a planned community that are usually designed and built with the input of future residents. Based on a Danish

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designing their homes to be close together or choosing consumer products that are LEED-certified or locally produced).

19. A definition of environmental racism, a key concept in the environmental justice movement, is presented in the next section.

20. Sandler & Pezzullo, *supra* note 6, includes a variety of essays that document the challenges to negotiate the environmental movement that ecovillages occupy, and the environmental justice movement. One of the few exceptions is "Green for All," an effort to include people of color in the growing green movement by providing technical training in solar insulation, and in preparing people of color to compete for green jobs. See VAN JONES, *THE GREEN COLLAR ECONOMY: HOW ONE SOLUTION CAN FIX OUR TWO BIGGEST PROBLEMS* (2008).

21. See WALKER, *supra* note 17; Diana Fischetti, *Building Resistance From Home: EcoVillage at Ithaca as a Model of Sustainable Living*, (2008) (unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Oregon); Andy Kirby, *Redefining Social and Environmental Relations at Ecovillage at Ithaca*, 23 J. ENVTL. PSYCHOL. 323, 323-32 (2003).

model of *bolleffesskabers*, or living communities, the concept of cohousing was brought to the United States from Denmark in the 1980s by architects Katherine McCamant and Charles Durrett. The cohousing model emphasizes six principles: (1) participation by residents in the functioning of the neighborhood; (2) design of the neighborhood by future residents; (3) shared common spaces and resources; (4) management of the neighborhood by residents; (5) nonhierarchical decision making; and (6) no shared economy.<sup>22</sup> Most ecovillages adopt these characteristics: the communities consist of 20 to 30 homes in tight clusters around a pedestrian-only walkway, while vehicles are located away from the homes to provide a safe place for children to play and members to congregate. The architecture focuses the windows and doors inward to provide neighbors with ample opportunities to engage in spontaneous conversation.<sup>23</sup> In addition to a sense of community, ecovillages emphasize environmental sustainability as part of their mission.

According to the Global Ecovillage Network, an online clearing house for ecovillages around the world, there are approximately 449 ecovillages in 68 countries in the world. In the United States, 102 of these ecovillages are spread out across the country, with most of them concentrated along the east and west coasts.<sup>24</sup> The number of ecovillages is growing and new groups are forming regularly. As ecovillages become increasingly popular, so is the need for these communities to consider justice and equity to avoid repeating the follies of the environmental movement in the 1970s—a movement that focused on preserving pristine wilderness while neglecting race and class in its approach to environmental problems.<sup>25</sup>

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22. Explicit in the cohousing model is that residents would not subsidize each other. Like a homeowners association, individual households maintain financial autonomy except for monthly community dues that vary for each community. For a thorough description of cohousing and a history of the movement from Denmark, visit the official website at: Cohousing, [http://www.cohousing.org/what\\_is\\_cohousing](http://www.cohousing.org/what_is_cohousing) (last visited Nov. 29, 2009).

23. KATHERINE MCCAMANT & CHARLES DURRETT, *COHOUSING: A CONTEMPORARY APPROACH TO HOUSING OURSELVES* (1994). See also CHITEWERE, *GREEN LIFESTYLE supra* note 18.

24. The number of ecovillages is constantly changing as new communities form. For an updated list of ecovillages, see Global Ecovillage Network, <http://gen.ecovillage.org/> (last visited Nov. 29, 2009).

25. Criticism of 1970s U.S. environmentalism focused on the minimal concern shown for environmental degradation in urban spaces. Specifically, environmental justice activists emphasize the unequal distributions of environmental degradation and hazards based on race and class, and point to the exclusion of people of color from the mainstream environmental discourse of the 1970s. See, e.g., WILLIAM CRONON, *UNCOMMON GROUND: RETHINKING THE HUMAN PLACE IN NATURE* (1996); William Cronon, *The Trouble with Wilderness, or Getting Back to the Wrong Nature*, 1 ENVTL. HIST. 7, 7 (1996); DONNA HARAWAY, *PRIMATE VISIONS: GENDER, RACE, AND NATURE IN THE WORLD OF MODERN SCIENCE* (1989); Giovanna Di Chiro,



### III. ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

Environmental justice is complex, multifaceted, and evolving. At its most basic form, environmental justice is the merger of environmentalism with social justice.<sup>26</sup> It is also tightly linked to environmental racism, a term coined by Reverend Benjamin F. Chavis, Jr., as

racial discrimination in environmental policymaking. It is racial discrimination in the enforcement of regulations and laws. It is racial discrimination in the deliberate targeting of communities of color for toxic waste disposal in the siting of polluting industries. It is racial discrimination in the official sanctioning of life-threatening presence of poisons and pollutants in communities of color. And, it is racial discrimination in the history of excluding people of color in the mainstream environmental groups, decision-making boards, commissions, and regulatory bodies.<sup>27</sup>

From its beginning, environmental justice had a focus on responding to environmental discrimination based on race. Thus, environmental justice emerges from a deep history of structural racism that, for some, dates as far back as the colonization of the Americas and the displacement of native peoples to marginal lands.<sup>28</sup> For others, environmental justice has its roots in deep-seated racial discrimination and exclusion that fueled the civil rights movement.<sup>29</sup> Some scholars place environmental justice within the civil rights movement because it represents another front from which African Americans and other minorities seek racial

*Nature as Community: The Convergence of Environment and Social Justice*, in UNCOMMON GROUND: RETHINKING THE HUMAN PLACE IN NATURE 298–306 (William Cronon ed., 1996).

26. CONFRONTING ENVIRONMENTAL RACISM: VOICES FROM THE GRASSROOTS 7 (Robert D. Bullard ed., 1993).

27. *Id.* at 3 (quoting Reverend Benjamin F. Chavis, Jr.).

28. BULLARD, *supra* note 4.

29. Contributors to environmental justice include the African American civil rights movement, anti-toxics movement, farm workers, academics, Native American rights, labor movement, and traditional environmental movement. See LUKE W. COLE & SHEILA R. FOSTER, FROM THE GROUND UP: ENVIRONMENTAL RACISM AND THE RISE OF THE ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE MOVEMENT (2001); BULLARD, *supra* note 4. For the post-World War II civil rights movement, see ROBERT O. SELF, AMERICAN BABYLON: RACE AND THE STRUGGLE FOR POSTWAR OAKLAND (2003). Historically, other struggles for equality and justice were fought by different labor unions, like the United Farm Workers. Although the struggles were formed primarily around labor issues, they still contained concerns around environmental hazards. The Environmental Defense Fund traces both the civil rights movement and the environmental justice movement in one timeline, see Environmental Defense Fund, <http://www.edf.org/article.cfm?ContentID=2816> (last visited Nov. 29, 2009) (providing full descriptions of both movements).

equality. Over time, however, these race-based perspectives have changed in response to criticisms that suggested environmental injustices were often class based.

Today's environmental justice movement reflects the trend in the conversation of the causes and consequences of environmental injustice, focusing on the rights of people, regardless of their race, class, or social status, to be protected from carrying an unfair burden of environmental pollution and polluting industries. A useful definition for examining environmental justice is "those cultural norms and values, rules, regulations, behaviors, policies, and decisions to support sustainable communities where people can interact with confidence that the environment is safe, nurturing, and productive."<sup>30</sup> Others suggest that environmental justice stretches "beyond racism to include others (regardless of race or ethnicity) who are deprived of their environmental rights, such as women, children and the poor."<sup>31</sup> While these broader definitions widen the circle of what could be considered injustice, other scholars point out that racial discrimination—the historical root of the environmental justice movement—becomes lost in more general definitions.

The beginning of the environmental justice movement in the United States is often traced to Warren County, North Carolina. The Warren County protests in 1982 marked the first time white, black, and Native American residents organized and protested a hazardous waste facility in a community that was already burdened with polluting industries.<sup>32</sup> A significant element of the protest was the fact that Warren County was predominantly African American and was chosen despite better suited sites for this PCB landfill.<sup>33</sup> The event was a watershed moment because it helped unite the environmental movement with the civil rights movement.<sup>34</sup>

Together, the multiracial, multiclass residents and supporters of Warren County organized resistance efforts to stop the landfill and de-

30. BRYANT, *supra* note 15, at 6.

31. Susan Cutter, *Race, Class and Environmental Justice*, 19 *PROGRESS HUM. GEOGRAPHY* 111, 111–22 (1995).

32. By the end of the protest, over 500 black, Native American, and white activists were arrested, including 94 children. Dollie Burwell & Luke Cole, *Environmental Justice Comes Full Circle: Warren County Before and After*, 1 *GOLDEN GATE U. ENVTL. L. J.* 9, 24 (2007).

33. To avoid the cost of properly disposing of PCB waste, several tons were illegally dumped along North Carolina's roadway. Subsequently, the state looked to establish a new landfill to hold the waste.

34. Warren County was preceded by other important justice demands related to the environment. See, e.g., *Bean v. Sw. Waste Mgmt. Corp.*, 482 F. Supp. 673 (S.D. Tex. 1979); see also BULLARD, *supra* note 4; COLE & FOSTER, *supra* note 29; DAVID N. PELLOW, *GARBAGE WARS: THE STRUGGLE FOR ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE IN CHICAGO* (2004); Burwell & Cole, *supra* note 32, at 9–40.

manded representation in the decision-making process. Environmental activists like Lois Gibbs, who had fought against toxic waste dumping at Love Canal, and civil rights activists like Henry Pitchford, president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, came together in support of Warren County residents.<sup>35</sup> During the protests, the term “environmental racism” emphasized the significance of race in the decision to locate the landfill in the predominately African American community.<sup>36</sup> Walter Edward Fauntroy, the delegate from the District of Columbia and chair of the Congressional Black Caucus, was one of the participants arrested and, upon returning to Congress, demanded that a study be conducted by the General Accounting Office (GAO) on the siting of waste facilities in the southeastern United States. The study, completed in 1983, revealed that three out of four hazardous waste landfills were located in communities with predominantly African American residents. This alarming discovery was compounded by the fact that African Americans made up only one-fifth of the population.<sup>37</sup> The Warren County conflict helped to solidify the connection between racism, social injustice, and the environment, and created the environmental justice movement.

The incident at Warren County spawned numerous academic and activist studies on environmental injustices. After the GAO study, the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice published a report that represented the first national study to correlate the placement of toxic waste facilities with African American and Latino neighborhoods.<sup>38</sup> The report showed the ways in which these communities were, and continued to be, targeted with waste disposal and polluting industries, as well as how the communities were neglected by regulators when those toxins produced illness or death.<sup>39</sup>

In the 1990s, the Gulf Coast Tenant Leadership Development Project (GCTLDP) worked to strengthen and solidify the environmental justice movement. The GCTLDP wrote a letter to 10 of the largest national environmental organizations<sup>40</sup> accusing environmental organizations of

35. COLE & FOSTER, *supra* note 29; Burwell & Cole, *supra* note 32, at 9–40.

36. Burwell & Cole, *supra* note 32, at 9–40.

37. U.S. GEN. ACCOUNTING OFFICE, SITING OF HAZARDOUS WASTE LANDFILLS AND THEIR CORRELATION WITH RACIAL AND ECONOMIC STATUS OF SURROUNDING COMMUNITIES (1983).

38. COMM’N ON RACIAL JUSTICE, UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST, TOXIC WASTE AND RACE IN THE UNITED STATES: A NATIONAL REPORT ON THE RACIAL AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC CHARACTERISTICS OF COMMUNITIES WITH HAZARDOUS WASTE SITES (1987).

39. COLE & FOSTER, *supra* note 29.

40. The Group of Ten included the Audubon Society, Environmental Defense Fund, Environmental Policy Institute/Friends of the Earth, Izaak Walton League, National Parks and Conservation Association, National Wildlife Federation, Natural Resources Defense

ignoring the plight of communities of color, and asserting that the organizations were complicit in “the environmental exploitation of [those communities] within the United States and abroad.”<sup>41</sup> The GCTLDP also observed that people of color were missing from the decision-making process of these environmental groups.

The GCTLDP’s demand that people of color be included in all levels of environmental decision-making remains central to the environmental justice movement. The First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit was held in the fall of 1991, and activists from around the United States, Canada, and a few from South American countries attended the summit. The summit clarified the demand for environmental justice, defined the “environment” to include Dana Alston’s phrase, “where we live, work, and play,” and adopted 17 Principles of Environmental Justice. These principles are significant to the ecovillage movement, as they are similar to both movement’s goals. For example, environmental justice principles encourage individuals to participate “as equal partners at every level of decision making,” to “make personal and consumer choices to consume [less of] mother Earth’s resources,” and “to produce as little waste as possible.”<sup>42</sup> At first, the momentum of the environmental justice movement had clout. The major environmental organizations responded by opening their boards to people of color, academics began to document various cases of environmental injustices across the United States, and local grassroots activism picked up as academia produced publications related to environmental justice.

In 1993, President Bill Clinton signed Executive Order 12,898, requiring the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and other federal agencies to “review existing regulations and procedures in order to identify any inequalities.”<sup>43</sup> However, despite some regulatory efforts and significant gains, many people of color and the poor continue to live in unhealthy environments. In fact, a second National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit<sup>44</sup> held 11 years later revealed that people

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Council, Sierra Club, Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund, and The Wilderness Society. For more discussion, see Sandler & Pezzullo, *supra* note 6, at 3–5; Veronica Eady, *Warren County and the Birth of a Movement: The Troubled Marriage Between Environmentalism and Civil Rights* 1 GOLDEN GATE U. ENVTL. L. J. 41 (2007).

41. Sandler & Pezzullo, *supra* note 6, at 4.

42. FIRST NATIONAL PEOPLE OF COLOR ENVIRONMENTAL LEADERSHIP SUMMIT, PRINCIPLES OF ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE (1991), <http://www.ejnet.org/ej/principles.pdf>.

43. Exec. Order No. 12,898, 59 Fed. Reg. 7,629 (Feb. 16, 1994) (amending E.O. 12,250 (Nov. 2, 1980), amended by E.O. 12,948 (Jan. 30, 1995)). For an examination of environmental justice and public policy, see EDUARDO L. RHODES, *ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE IN AMERICA: A NEW PARADIGM* (2005).

44. The People of Color Environmental Summit II was held in Washington, D.C., October 23–26, 2002. Information on the summit can be found at the website of the Environ-

of color continue to be disproportionately affected by environmental “bads.”<sup>45</sup> New efforts in the environmental justice movement continue to be instrumental in mobilizing grassroots activists and raising concerns about race and class in discussions of climate change, workers’ rights, access to national parks and recreation, gender equity, and most recently, opportunities to participate in the green economy.<sup>46</sup>

However, the courts have perhaps dealt the most serious blow to the movement by refusing to recognize an individual’s ability to seek compensation from polluters in their communities. In the past, environmental justice groups used Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964<sup>47</sup>—which bars discrimination based on race—to settle claims of discrimination or to prevent polluters from gaining permits to construct new hazardous facilities in their neighborhoods. In April 2001, environmental justice advocates initially succeeded in acquiring relief in court under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, making headway in the judicial system for the environmental justice movement.<sup>48</sup> Unfortunately, this decision suffered a set back very soon after, when the Supreme Court ruled in *Alexander v. Sandoval* that individuals did not have the legal standing necessary to bring Title VI cases in the courts.<sup>49</sup>

In the last two decades, environmental justice produced a plethora of new case studies showing that people of color and poor communities continue to be disproportionately burdened with environmental

mental Justice Resource Center, <http://www.ejrc.cau.edu/EJSUMMITwelcome.html> (last visited Mar. 30, 2010).

45. Growing literature focuses on addressing the slow progress in effecting change. See Robert Bullard & Glenn S. Johnson, *Environmental Justice: Grassroots Activism and Its Impact on Public Policy Decision Making*, 56 J. Soc. ISSUES 555, 555–78 (2000).

46. JONES, *supra* note 20.

47. Civil Rights Act of 1964 §§ 601–05, 42 U.S.C. §§ 2000d to 2000d-4 (2006).

48. See *S. Camden Citizens in Action v. N.J. Dep’t of Env’tl. Prot.*, 145 F. Supp. 2d 446 (D.N.J. 2001). The first ruling on this case was a victory for residents. *Id.* In the district court, South Camden residents argued that their community was unfairly targeted for another polluting industry. *Id.* Already burdened with numerous polluting industries, including a superfund site, plaintiffs argued that the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection permit allowing for a cement manufacturing plant to open in their community was unjust. *Id.* The case highlighted the burdened residents of this low-income community, where approximately 91 percent of the residents were people of color. *Id.* The community already included “two Superfund sites, several contaminated and abandoned industrial sites, and many . . . operating facilities, including chemical companies, waste facilities, food processing companies, automotive shops, and a petroleum coke transfer station.” *S. Camden Citizens in Action v. N.J. Dep’t of Env’tl. Prot.*, 274 F.3d 771, 775 (3d Cir. 2001).

49. See *Alexander v. Sandoval*, 532 U.S. 275 (2001) (rejecting the right of individuals to sue based on unintentional acts of discrimination). This in essence, allowed industries to argue that while their pollution or facility siting may produce a disparate result, they cannot be sued if their intention was not explicitly discriminatory.

hazards and risks.<sup>50</sup> That said, even environmental justice as an academic enterprise has been criticized in the literature on a number of grounds. Sympathetic scholars have rightly argued that environmental justice has been inadequately theoretically engaged,<sup>51</sup> and that, as a framework, environmental justice is insufficiently theoretical. They also observe that environmental justice analysis is methodologically case bound, explicitly political, and tends to treat all injustices as equal.<sup>52</sup>

In the context of ecovillages, it is relatively easy to explain why environmental justice is not addressed in the sustainable community: Ecovillages are not designed to address racial and social inequities. Excluding environmental justice from their mission is convenient for practitioners and academics who do not necessarily define themselves or their work as addressing this important topic. Yet, the greater challenge to environmental sustainability is not to ignore environmental injustice but to make equity important in creating a sustainable future.<sup>53</sup>

The challenge to ecovillages is to include environmental justice in their endeavor to build a sustainable community. This effort is especially important as many responses to environmental injustice and pollution have been to move away from polluted spaces and build new communities. This strategy gives the impression of ignoring and neglecting environmental injustices in order to pursue personal gains. Finally, environmental justice tries to raise justice questions in the face of what some consider to be more serious environmental concerns, for example, climate change.

The unflinching willingness of environmental justice to address race is the movement's strength.<sup>54</sup> That advocates and activists are suc-

50. See BRYANT *supra* note 15; BULLARD *supra* note 10; COLE & FOSTER *supra* note 29; PELLOW *supra* note 34; Omar Pomar, *Toxic Racism on a New Jersey Waterfront*, in *THE QUEST FOR ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE: HUMAN RIGHTS AND THE POLITICS OF POLLUTION* 125–41 (Robert Bullard ed., 2003); Sandler & Pezzullo, *supra* note 6.

51. See, e.g., Laura Pulido, *Rethinking Environmental Racism: White Privilege and Urban Development in Southern California*, 90 ANNALS ASS'N. AM. GEOGRAPHY 12 (2000); Dorceta E. Taylor, *The Rise of the Environmental Justice Paradigm: Injustice Framing and the Social Construction of Environmental Discourses*, 43 AM. BEHAV. SCIENTIST 508–80 (2000).

52. CHRISTOPHER H. FOREMAN, *THE PROMISE AND PERIL OF ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE* (1998); RYAN HOLIFIELD, *ACTOR-NETWORK THEORY AS A CRITICAL APPROACH TO ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE: A CASE AGAINST SYNTHESIS WITH URBAN POLITICAL ECOLOGY* (2009).

53. In addition to scholarly work, our personal and academic everyday lives will need to be inclusive of racial and socioeconomic justice, political activism, and environmental consciousness.

54. After 40 years of the civil rights movement, some think that we talk too much about race within the environmental justice movement, with some activists arguing that changing the name to exclude racism is, in essence, watering down the discourse, making race less relevant in order to make the issue palpable to a race-exhausted public.

cessful in documenting case after case of disproportionate exposure to environmental “bads” and uneven access to environmental “goods” is particularly commendable, since the resistance to environmental justice arguments and analysis is fierce, both inside and outside the court room. These advocates are not afraid to address the thorny issue of race and to bring these arguments to the forefront by demanding access to the decision-making process, holding local and state government accountable, and seeking justice through the courts.

While these efforts have inspired a national and global movement, environmental injustices continue to disproportionately affect people of color and poor communities. Specifically, communities of color and poor communities are still exposed to environmental “bads” as was evident at the Second Summit for Environmental Justice, while access to environmental “goods” is limited. The case of ecovillages presents a challenge that focuses on access to environmental goods. If the true aim of ecovillage living is to respond to social and environmental degradation by creating communities that actively design and construct their neighborhood, make decisions through consensus, emphasize sharing of resources, and actively try to change the way they live with each other and the natural environment, then the ecovillage movement reflects some of the same concerns of the environmental justice movement.

Unfortunately, ecovillages struggle—like previous movements and social institutions—to incorporate social and environmental justice in their search for a sustainable way to live.<sup>55</sup> People of color and the poor are routinely missing from the discussion on the creation of sustainable lifestyles. This separation is particularly obvious at ecovillages. The challenge in creating ecovillages that are equitable requires that we fully integrate justice and equity in the planning and creation of these communities. Because the environment and our communities cannot be seen as outside of the larger social, political, and economic forces that help to shape them, the next section explains how one concept—political ecology—has been active in doing this, particularly in the context of the Third World, and increasingly in the United States.<sup>56</sup>

#### IV. POLITICAL ECOLOGY

Political ecology has been a useful tool for the spatial analysis of inequality and injustice. Emerging in the 1970s and 1980s, it entered into the discourse on environmentalism around the same time as dependency

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55. For a full discussion on the challenges of incorporating social justice concerns in the sustainable communities efforts, see CHITWERE & TAYLOR, *supra* note 18.

56. See, e.g., Gordon Walker & Harriet Bulkeley, *Geographies of Environmental Justice*, 37 GEOFORUM 655, 655–59 (2006).

theorists and world system theorists began to critique the political economy of development.<sup>57</sup> This coincidence, perhaps, reflects the effort of scholars and activists to respond to social and environmental injustices in the United States and abroad. As a theoretical framework, political ecology is interdisciplinary, focusing on the complex relationship between society and the environment.<sup>58</sup> Specifically, political ecology takes a critical view of an apolitical environment, problematizing a view of nature and the environment that excludes human experience.<sup>59</sup>

Political ecology emerged as a critique of often oversimplified explanations of environmental degradation.<sup>60</sup> Popular sentiment in the United States and Europe suggested that various practices in the Third World—such as overpopulation and slash-and-burn agriculture—were responsible for resource depletion and environmental degradation.<sup>61</sup> These views blamed the world's poor for their plight; however, subsequent research and applications of political ecology have revealed that overdevelopment in the First World plays a pivotal role in resource depletion of the Third World.

Although diverse in its theoretical and methodological approaches, political ecology emphasizes the careful analysis of access to and control of natural resources by conducting qualitative research that helps to identify the competing social, political, and economic interests in natural resource management. Political ecologists call for a multi-spatial scale of analysis, recognizing that local, national, and global politics have an impact on each other. These relationships are complex and intertwined, requiring further analysis that takes into consideration gender, race, class, and geography.

The definitions of the environment and nature are relevant to the issues political ecology addresses. What defines nature and an environmental problem? How is the environment degraded? What are the consequences of that degradation? Who is affected by the problems associated with degradation? These questions are important to ask in analyzing the human relationship to nature, especially as it may be romanticized in the context of the Third World, where people are too often seen

57. See generally Wolf, *supra* note 8; IMMANUEL WALLERSTEIN, *THE MODERN WORLD SYSTEM I: CAPITALIST AGRICULTURE AND THE ORIGINS OF THE EUROPEAN WORLD ECONOMY IN THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY* (1974).

58. Recent anthologies demonstrate the interdisciplinary uses of political ecology. See, e.g., *REIMAGINING POLITICAL ECOLOGY* (Aletta Biersack & James B. Greenberg eds., 2006).

59. PAUL ROBBINS, *POLITICAL ECOLOGY: A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION* (2004).

60. These explanations often excluded political and economic forces that produced inequality. See generally BLAIKIE & BROOKFIELD, *supra* note 8.

61. ROBBINS, *supra* note 59, at 12.



as part of nature or living a lifestyle that is more natural or in harmony with nature compared with First World nations.<sup>62</sup>

Critics of political ecology have argued its approach is analytically weak because it focuses too heavily on political economic forces as causes of environmental outcomes, a “politics without ecology” where all environment and resource questions in a region are determined by political forces to the exclusion of environmental realities.<sup>63</sup> Other criticism is reminiscent of environmental justice critiques and posits that political ecology is anthropocentric, leaving little room for ecology-based problem solving.<sup>64</sup> Despite critiques, political ecology offers useful ways to be inclusive of broader themes about equity in environmental work. Political ecology provides a robust critique of the causes of environmental degradation by placing it within the context of political and economic inequity, something that environmental justice also attempts to do. However, political ecology makes up for the perceived shortcomings of its environmental justice analyses, as it expands dialogues to include more characteristics prone to discriminatory treatment, such as race, class, and gender. Because environmental justice has been critiqued as being too broad, theoretically weak, and leaning heavily on liberal politics,<sup>65</sup> including a political ecology framework offers environmental justice advocates another tool from which to raise their concerns. Although political ecology is criticized for ignoring gender as an important site of contestation, access to resources, land management, and environmental justice can help to keep the movement inclusive of different perspectives.<sup>66</sup> Political ecology has been open to broadening the dialogue. Lively and dynamic debates between academics and practitioners offer opportunities for participation from a wide range of actors. Increasingly, moves within the field are aiming to incorporate more gender analyses, presently in the form of a feminist political ecology.<sup>67</sup> Environmental justice actors fit well within this framework, giving political ecology a wealth of case-based studies on political and economic marginalization that produce

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62. Anthropologists have debated the nature/culture dichotomy for many years. See, e.g., Arturo Escobar, *Constructing Nature: Elements for a Post-structural Political Ecology* in RICHARD PEET & MICHAEL WATTS, *LIBERATION ECOLOGIES* 46–68 (1996).

63. This argument was made by scholars who thought political ecology had gone too far in blaming all ecological crises on political and economic forces. For this critique, see Andrew P. Vayda & Bradley B. Walters, *Against Political Ecology*, 27 *HUM. ECOLOGY* 167, 167–79 (1999).

64. Kevin DeLuca, *A Wilderness Environmentalism Manifesto: Contesting the Infinite Self-Absorption of Humans*, in Sandler & Pezzullo, *supra* note 6.

65. HOLIFIELD, *supra* note 52.

66. Maureen G. Reed & Shannon Christie, *Environmental Geography: We're Not Quite Home—Reviewing the Gender Gap*, 33 *PROGRESS HUM. GEOGRAPHY* 246, 246–55 (2009).

67. *Id.*

and reinforce environmental inequality and receiving a theoretical model in which to contextualize environmental injustice. The call and response to applying political ecology frameworks to problems in the United States—what some scholars have called discovering the Third World within—illustrates the flexibility and resilience of the field.<sup>68</sup> If political ecology's driving force is to respond to an apolitical environmental discourse, then struggles for environmental justice are well suited for its analysis.

Recently, political ecologists have started to make political ecology applicable to problems in industrialized nations.<sup>69</sup> One perspective addresses the importance of a First World political ecology, arguing that such an approach might help in an analysis of mainstream environmental solutions.<sup>70</sup> Thus, examining ecovillages from a political-ecology angle with an eye to environmental justice offers a response to the suggestion that “if First World political ecology is to be more than an ersatz version of its Third World counterpart, then more ambitious and original work in this vein is required.”<sup>71</sup>

That political ecology has begun a “long intellectual journey home” rightly suggests that it is time for scholars who have worked on political ecology in the Third World to apply the same intellectual interest in addressing similar problems in the United States.<sup>72</sup> Environmental justice is a good place to continue this journey home, in part because it too addresses the complex nature of human and natural resource competition, including access to environmental “goods” and clean up of environmental “bads.” Political ecology can contribute to addressing the burgeoning racial and class injustices in the United States. The need to consider competing actors in the distribution of environmental costs and benefits is urgent, as the gap between those who are exposed to toxic

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68. The suggestion of the Third World within highlights that the United States contains many of the same economic, political, and social problems that scholars have addressed abroad. Our poor communities of color suffer many of the same consequences the poor in the Third World experience. Thus, it is useful to turn the political ecology lens that has focused its gaze on environmental injustices abroad onto comparable problems in the United States. See R.A. Schroeder, K. St. Martin & K.E. Albert, *Political Ecology in North America: Discovering the Third World Within?*, 27 *GEOFORUM* (2006).

69. Included in this growing literature is Peter Walker & Louise Fortmann, *Whose Landscape? A Political Ecology of the “Exurban” Sierra*, 10 *CULTURAL GEOGRAPHIES* 469, 469–91 (2003) and James McCarthy, *First World Political Ecology: Directions and Challenges*, 37 *ENV'T & PLAN. A* 953, 953–58 (2005).

70. McCarthy, *supra* note 69.

71. Noel Castree, *Making First World Political Ecology*, 39 *ENV'T & PLAN. A* 2030, 2030–36 (2007).

72. Louise Fortmann, *Bonanza! The Unasked Questions: Domestic Land Tenure through International Lenses*, 9 *SOC'Y & NAT. RESOURCES* 537, 537–47 (1996).

environments and those who can escape to healthful environments continues to exist. The ecovillage movement and other new, rapidly growing forms of addressing social and environmental degradation risk excluding race and class from their efforts.<sup>73</sup> At the same time, some ecovillages, like those in Richmond, California, are demonstrating that people of color and poor communities are committed and attempting to create sustainable places to live that focus on equity and justice.<sup>74</sup>

Finally, political ecology stresses the importance of multiple scales of analysis. Using case-based and place-based methodologies, injustices are presented with a human face; although much of the focus centers on the plight of marginalized communities, it also encourages activists and scholars to “study up.”<sup>75</sup> Political ecology puts the causes and conflicts related to environmental degradation within the context of the domination and violence that produce discriminatory practices based on race, class, and gender. The political and economic structures of colonialism and apartheid have produced social upheaval, and resistance movements have arisen in response.<sup>76</sup> Environmental racism can be viewed as part of this framework that creates unjust practices of placing environmental “bads” in poor communities and communities of color while denying them access to environmental “goods.”<sup>77</sup> Environmental justice scholars point out that environmental racism ensures that race remains an important consideration when discussing injustice. Similarly, political ecology also rejects technological explanations for solving environmental

73. Critiques of climate change discussions have raised concerns that race and class are again marginalized from the discussion.

74. The Richmond, California, ecovillage is located in an urban environment and focuses on a community garden that keeps the project rooted within the larger community. Also, although African Americans and other people of color have been less present than their white counterparts in the major environmental groups, their concern for environmental problems has been equal, just not categorized in the same way. See, e.g., Dorceta E. Taylor, *Blacks and the Environment: Toward an Explanation of the Concern and Action Gap between Blacks and Whites*, 21 ENV'T & BEHAV. 175, 175–205 (1989).

75. In the late 1960s, Laura Nader made a call for studying up. By looking at institutions of power, she advocated for anthropology to broaden its gaze to include powerful institutions and individuals who contribute to injustices of others. This call is reflected in the work of many other scholars who are studying up by looking at the wealthy or privileged class. See Nancy Scheper-Hughes, *The Primacy of the Ethical: Propositions for a Militant Anthropology*, 36 CURRENT ANTHROPOLOGY 409, 409–40 (1995); Sol Tax, *Action Anthropology*, 12 AM. INDIGENA 103, 103–109 (1952). Laura Pulido and Louise Fortmann have also contributed to this study.

76. See generally PEET & WATTS, *supra* note 62; Nancy L. Peluso, *A Political Ecology of Violence and Territory in West Kalimantan*, 49 ASIA PAC. VIEWPOINT 48, 48–67 (2008).

77. Checker, *supra* note 7.

problems like those caused by hydroelectric dams,<sup>78</sup> and instead considers the complexity of development as a tool to alleviate poverty. Given these useful tools, political ecology can provide a helpful framework for responding to the absence of race and class in the ecovillage movement and in other social and environmental sustainability efforts.

Political ecology can be as useful to understanding injustice here in the United States as it has been to analyzing injustice abroad. That is, if we acknowledge and examine the multiple complex relationships that exist between different actors who compete for limited resources like space, clean air, healthful food, and meaningful employment in the developing world, we can better understand how environmental justice activists are competing with these same actors in the this country. At the same time, the insistence that race and class be scrutinized in discussions on the environment makes environmental justice useful in a political ecology analysis. In relation to environmental justice, political ecology can contribute significantly to the movement by offering a model to contextualize injustice within broader neoliberal economic policies that privilege one group over another. Specifically, if we adopt an analysis of “white privilege”<sup>79</sup> we can begin to broaden our focus of racial discrimination to ask why minorities are disproportionately exposed to environmental hazards.<sup>80</sup>

Ecovillages, in their effort to respond to environmental degradation and social isolation by creating social and environmentally sustainable communities, can learn from both the environmental justice movement and political ecology. In the case of ecovillages, we can ask why people of color are not a part of the effort to create socially and environmentally sustainable lifestyles.<sup>81</sup> In addition, as cases on environmental racism face rejection from our court system, there needs to be a more robust and historical analysis of policies that lead to discriminatory consequences.

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78. For an extensive discussion of the environmental and political problems of large dams, see PATRICK McCULLY, *SILENCED RIVERS: THE ECOLOGY AND POLITICS OF LARGE DAMS* (2001).

79. Laura Pulido discusses the importance of addressing structural racism and the place that whites historically have held in being positioned outside of environmentally degraded spaces. By focusing the lens away from racism and towards privilege, Pulido forces us to consider the deep, complex, and holistic ways in which people of color are marginalized in polluted spaces. See Pulido, *supra* note 51.

80. *Id.*

81. *Id.*

## V. THE ECOVILLAGE AT ITHACA

The EcoVillage at Ithaca (EVI) project sits high above the city of Ithaca on 175 acres of former farmland. Two completed neighborhoods of 30 households each sit on 2.5 acres and 3.5 acres, respectively, of the land. A third neighborhood is in the process of being designed. Surrounded by a 55-acre conservation easement, new-growth forest, meadow, and spectacular views of rolling hills and small farms, the village includes an organic community-supported agriculture farm, a U-pick berry field,<sup>82</sup> sheep and chickens, and a small pond. Socially and physically constructed after the Danish cohousing model, the community's goal of developing social and environmental sustainability is seen in the design of the homes: They are compact, clustered tightly together around a pedestrian-only walkway, and designed with large inward-facing windows that allow residents to see into (and through) each other's houses when curtains are open. The open design creates a continuous connection between the inside and outside of the living space. A large common house in each neighborhood hosts community meals, office spaces, a community library, recreation space for children and teens, and a shared laundry facility. The community houses are built with a variety of simple, energy-efficient technology, including passive-solar design, double-pane windows, insulation, energy-efficient appliances, and the ability to retrofit gray-water plumbing. The small footprint<sup>83</sup> of the built environment means that most of the land is allowed to lie fallow, providing residents with beautiful hiking trails weaving in and out of the woods. Residents have ample opportunity to connect with the natural environment and to connect with each other. The constant contact with the land serves to remind residents of the value of protecting and sustaining their environment and their community.

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82. Kestrel Perch Berries is a U-pick fruit community supported agriculture (CSA) farm that allows CSA members to receive weekly harvests of seasonal berries, but it also invites nonmembers to pick their own berries and pay for them by the pound. Kestrel Perch Berries, <http://www.ithacaberries.com> (last visited Apr. 21, 2010).

83. The concept of an ecological footprint is a tool to measure how much of the world's natural resources humans need to sustain themselves. Several organizations have emerged to develop the tool to visualize the impact our lifestyle has on depleting the planet's natural resources. For example, the nonprofit organization Redefining Progress includes a footprint calculator to allow a user to determine the number of planets necessary to replicate a participant's lifestyle. Redefining Progress, <http://www.redefiningprogress.org> (last visited Apr. 3, 2010).

EVI's original mission was to "redesign the human habitat";<sup>84</sup> to be a model for social and environmental sustainability.<sup>85</sup> Residents are not only interested in responding to environmental degradation, they specifically want to address what they perceive as social degradation—the breakdown of a sense of community that seems to plague suburbia and create urban hostility. For the community, it is not only vital to explore a way to live in harmony with the natural processes of the land, but also to create a community that is diverse, constant, and that provides a sense of sharing and cooperation.

I lived in EVI for 15 months and conducted ethnographic field research from 2001 to 2002.<sup>86</sup> My research consisted of participant observation and in-depth, open-ended interviews with residents in the first resident group (FRoG) and future residents of the second neighborhood group (SoNG).<sup>87</sup> My goal was to identify the ways residents attempted to create a sustainable lifestyle.<sup>88</sup> One of the themes that reoccurred was the lack of ethnic diversity in the community. While the neighborhoods are proud of various diverse populations, including religious, gender, sexual orientation, age, and European heritage, the lack of racial, ethnic, and economy diversity was troubling to some residents who were concerned that the project sometimes appeared as a gated green community. Others felt that the high cost of the community made it difficult to attract minorities. Despite expressing the desire to have racial diversity, residents had difficulty making it work. Subsidies were secured for some households in the SoNG but were not as successful as they had hoped. But not everyone believed that affordable houses would result in more diversity. As one resident noted:

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84. During the time I conducted my ethnographic research in the community, the mission statement on the community website and in newsletters was to "redesign the human habitat." However, residents were sometimes concerned that the statement was too bold and misleading, and put pressure on the community to be replicable. As of March 31, 2010, the original mission statement no longer appears on the ecovillage website.

85. The World Commission on Environment and Development definition of sustainability includes: "meeting our needs today without compromising the ability of future generations to meet theirs." BRUNDTLAND REPORT, *supra* note 12.

86. As a cultural anthropologist, I was warmly welcomed into the community. Residents sometimes expressed pride in having their own anthropologist study them; justifying perhaps, that they were indeed creating a village. Others commented that it was exotic to have an African anthropologist studying them, suggesting a reversal of roles of the "other observed" studying the observer.

87. The SoNG was at the beginning of their construction phase during 2002. They currently have 30 households.

88. I examine the sustainable lifestyle as a holistic way to incorporate social and environmental sustainability into the everyday life of residents.

Afro-American people, by and large, are not poor. There are a greater number of people among them that are poor, but hey! They are my professors. They're my doctors, they're my lawyers, and they're my accountants. They can afford to live here. Easily. And the same goes for the Spanish and Native American. They're the psychologists. They're the teachers. We have teachers here.<sup>89</sup>

I did not verify<sup>90</sup> that that this member's accountants, professors, and doctor were African American. But our conversation about the inclusion of people of color in the project ended when the physical location of EVI outside of the larger community was viewed as necessary for living in harmony with nature.

EVI was not designed as a social justice project, rather, it was envisioned as an alternative to suburbia, a way for wealthy households to live a comfortable, simple lifestyle; it was an opportunity for upper middle-class families to downsize from large mansions on separate plots of land and into an attractive green cohousing community. Thus, EVI was not designed to address social or environmental injustice but to provide access to environmental "goods" to families who have the economic and cultural means to access them. By creating a green community that does not address environmental injustice raises concerns among some residents that EVI produces green sprawl or a green gated community.<sup>91</sup> The ecovillage embodies a modernist response to expected outcomes of neoliberalism, and with it, a conflicted relationship to equity and justice. While the ecovillage project offers residents social and environmental well-being, emphasizes protecting individual entrepreneurial freedoms (separate financial and legal ownership of shares), and willingly lets the market determine who has access to it, little is done to respond to social and environmental injustice. It seems in the case of ecovillages, the effort to be green often conflicted or, at the very least, distracted residents from being just and inclusive of poorer, diverse communities that are often denied access to environmental "goods."

89. Interview with resident, EVI (2001).

90. Data for this project was collected during my ethnographic fieldwork in the community from 2000–02.

91. Scholars who work on gated communities have pointed to the exclusionary nature of the neighborhood design, but they also point out that exclusionary communities can have the effect of limiting discussion about social and political problems to community without input from the wider community. The disappearance of public space also decreases civic engagement amongst all community members in a city. See generally SETHA LOW, *The Edge and the Center: Gated Communities and the Discourse of Urban Fear*, 103 AM. ANTHROPOLOGY 45, 45–58 (2001); THERESA CALDEIRA, *CITY OF WALLS: CRIME, SEGREGATION, AND CITIZENSHIP IN SÃO PAULO* (2006).

It seems imaginable then, that in an ecovillage setting, a number of issues about race, access, and the role of justice and sustainability emerge, not because residents necessarily want to deal with them, but perhaps precisely because they do not. It is difficult to talk about social and environmental sustainability without talking about environmental justice. If we see environmental and social degradation when we leave our homes, why should solutions to the problem exclude people of color and the poor? At EVI, there were few opportunities to confront these challenges because everyone was often busy with other community activities, like creating an important car-share program or resolving a neighbor's conflict. Thus, we could either talk about the conspicuous absence of social and environmental justice, employing cognitive dissonance, or we could leave environmental justice out of the conversation with the argument that this ecovillage was not intended to be social justice project. Yet if the project hopes to move beyond green conspicuous consumption, then an examination of how to include concerns of the environmental justice movement is necessary. A redesign of the human habitat and a sustainable lifestyle will need to include all communities, especially those at the heart of environmental justice struggles.

## VI. INCLUDING EQUITY IN THE ECOVILLAGE MOVEMENT

In discussions at EVI and in much of the writing about ecovillages, social justice, environmental justice, and equity are excluded from the discourse of creating a sustainable community.<sup>92</sup> Addressing social, economic, or environmental justice was not necessarily a requirement for creating EVI. However, at the beginning of the project, many early participants left when it became clear that the sustainable community would not address or offer a solution to social and environmental injustices. According to the director, "over a very difficult six-month period, we made a key decision: we were aiming to reach middle-class Americans."<sup>93</sup> Thus, in the planning process, equity became a barrier to progress. Only after the decision was made to exclude class and racial diversity could the new community be built. Yet equity and sustainability should not be mutually exclusive.

How can equity matter in an ecovillage project? Is it possible to create social and environmental sustainability without considerations of equity? The challenge to EVI and similar projects is to find a way to open the concept of equity and justice and to broaden and invite more diverse

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92. Kirby, *supra* note 21; WALKER, *supra* note 17; Fischetti, *supra* note 21.

93. See WALKER, *supra* note 17. Although ecovillages suggest that they are new models of middle-class families, upper middle-class is a more accurate description than middle-class.



perspectives to the decision-making process—arguments that environmental justice advocates have been making for years. Including these ideas offers the possibility of providing realistic solutions, support environmental justice groups in their struggle to clean up degraded spaces, and create stronger bonds between members of the larger community.

Sustainable efforts like ecovillages can have the appearance of justifying conspicuous consumption by consuming green landscapes. In the case of EVI, if creating a community with a smaller footprint than a typical suburban development becomes the main focus of the green lifestyle, then residents may feel justified in ignoring equity. While the project strives to create social and environmental sustainability, its inability to confront race and class makes its viability questionable—not everyone can move into new green housing developments, nor would it be desirable to create new green suburbs in order to build a green lifestyle. Not only do the homes cost more than those in the city of Ithaca, but the houses are themselves barriers for entire groups of people. For example, the housing design at FROG includes multiple floors, making them inaccessible to people with disabilities. Environmental justice and political ecology can offer help.

There is an opportunity for ecovillages to be part of addressing social and environmental degradation by working with environmental justice activists. While the environmental justice movement has lost key legal cases, it has been successful in keeping race in the environmental discourse. For its part, political ecology has successfully argued for a multiple-scale analysis in addressing the sources of environmental degradation. In both cases, ecovillages acknowledge that they are challenged by addressing race and class in its goal to model sustainable living.

Political ecologists and environmental justice advocates offer at least two tools that are useful to contextualize ecovillages. First, political ecology insists on a deliberate analysis of environmental problems within social, political, and economic structures that includes access to resources and participation in political decision-making. Second, environmental justice advocates have insisted that the disproportionate burden of exposure to environmental “bads” and limited access to environmental “goods” be addressed. Together, both political ecologists and environmental justice advocates can support the creation of meaningful relationships among neighbors in order to collectively respond to environmental degradation and support environmental stewardship.

## VII. CONCLUSION

If we are serious about sustainability, and if we believe that equity matters, then we need to be engaged in a dialogue that is critical of how equity matters in our everyday life, including the academic conferences

we attend, the peers with whom we build relationships, and the people who make up our neighborhood and community. We need to be willing to be inclusive, not only by inviting environmental justice activists to our tables, but by joining environmental justice struggles where they are being fought. Striving for equity needs to extend beyond academic scholarship and move into personal politics. Environmental justice is not simply an issue we can choose to address or not: it matters regardless of whether we intentionally want it to or not. As a project that responds to social and environmental degradation, ecovillages can become models for redesigning an equitable way of life and a just environmental and social sustainability.

Ecovillages as they are currently designed and situated embody white privilege, and are places where conversations around race are essential but rarely addressed.<sup>94</sup> A good starting point to bring ecovillages closer to the causes of environmental justice communities could be to focus on addressing the context in which ecovillages are created. A social and environmental sustainability that advocates a green lifestyle—personal green consumer choices like organic food, bamboo flooring, or moving into a green neighborhood—focuses an important global imperative on personal benefits rather than a societal effort. Instead of a focus inwards on personal or neighborhood concerns to be sustainable, ecovillages must focus their lens outward into the larger community. For instance, because it is evident that ecovillage members are concerned with sustainability, they should join battles alongside environmental justice activists who fight unfair waste-distribution practices and unjust siting of polluting industries. Both the ecovillage and environmental justice movements strive for a better, cleaner, more sustainable environment than what currently exists. If they join together, environmental justice activists, political ecology scholars, and ecovillage residents can begin to respond and shape the future for a more sustainable, equitable, and just society for all.

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94. See, e.g., JULIAN AGYEMAN, *SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES AND THE CHALLENGE OF ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE* (2005); Reed & Christie, *supra* note 66.

