

FOUNDATIONAL MODULE

# Introduction to Climate & Environmental Justice



# What's in this module?

## Description

This module is broken into 4 parts. Parts 1 & 2 introduce environmental and climate justice. Part 3 provides 5 case studies from the environmental/climate justice movements. Part 4 provides 4 different project or assignment options. This module could be broken into 3-4 class sessions or it could be used for an entire unit.

## Contents

4 parts  
2 videos  
4 readings  
4 activities  
4 optional projects

## Key Resources

- [Environmental Justice](#) (Mohai et al., 2009)
- [Climate Inequality: Forgotten History](#) (Martinez & Gupta, 2013)
- [A colonized COP: Indigenous exclusion and youth climate justice activism at the United Nations climate change negotiations](#) (Grosse & Mark, 2020)



# Learning Objectives

01

**Review** origins of climate and environmental justice with readings, discussion and lecture

02

**Brainstorm and communicate** definitions of climate & environmental justice

03

**Compare, contrast, and critique** definitions from both academics and activists

04

**Explore** stories & voices from the climate & environmental justice movements

# Warm up

**How do you define climate and/or environmental justice? What might be the difference between these terms?**

Turn to a partner or small group and brainstorm your ideas.



# Introduction to Environmental Justice

PART 1

# Introduction

The (modern) Environmental Justice (EJ) Movement began in the early 1980s as communities of color protested the inequitable distribution of toxins in their communities.

## This led to two landmark reports

1. Siting of Hazardous Waste Landfills and Their Correlation with Racial and Economic Status of Surrounding Communities (General Accounting Office, 1983)
2. Toxic Waste in the United States (United Church of Christ, 1987)
  - a. This report coined the term "environmental racism"

## The impact of the reports

These two reports led to the establishment of The Field of Environmental Justice and the creation of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)'s National Environmental Justice Advisory Council



© Ricky Stilley/Henderson Dispatch. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see <https://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/>.

# Early EJ Definitions

The EPA and Robert Bullard (a founder of EJ studies), originally defined EJ as the right to a safe and healthy environment for all.

## Robert Bullard

“All people and communities are entitled to equal protection of environmental and public health laws and regulations.”

## EPA

“The fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies. Fair treatment means that no population, due to policy or economic disempowerment, is forced to bear a disproportionate share of the negative human health or environmental impacts of pollution or environmental consequences resulting from industrial, municipal, and commercial operations or the execution of federal, state, local and tribal programs and policies”

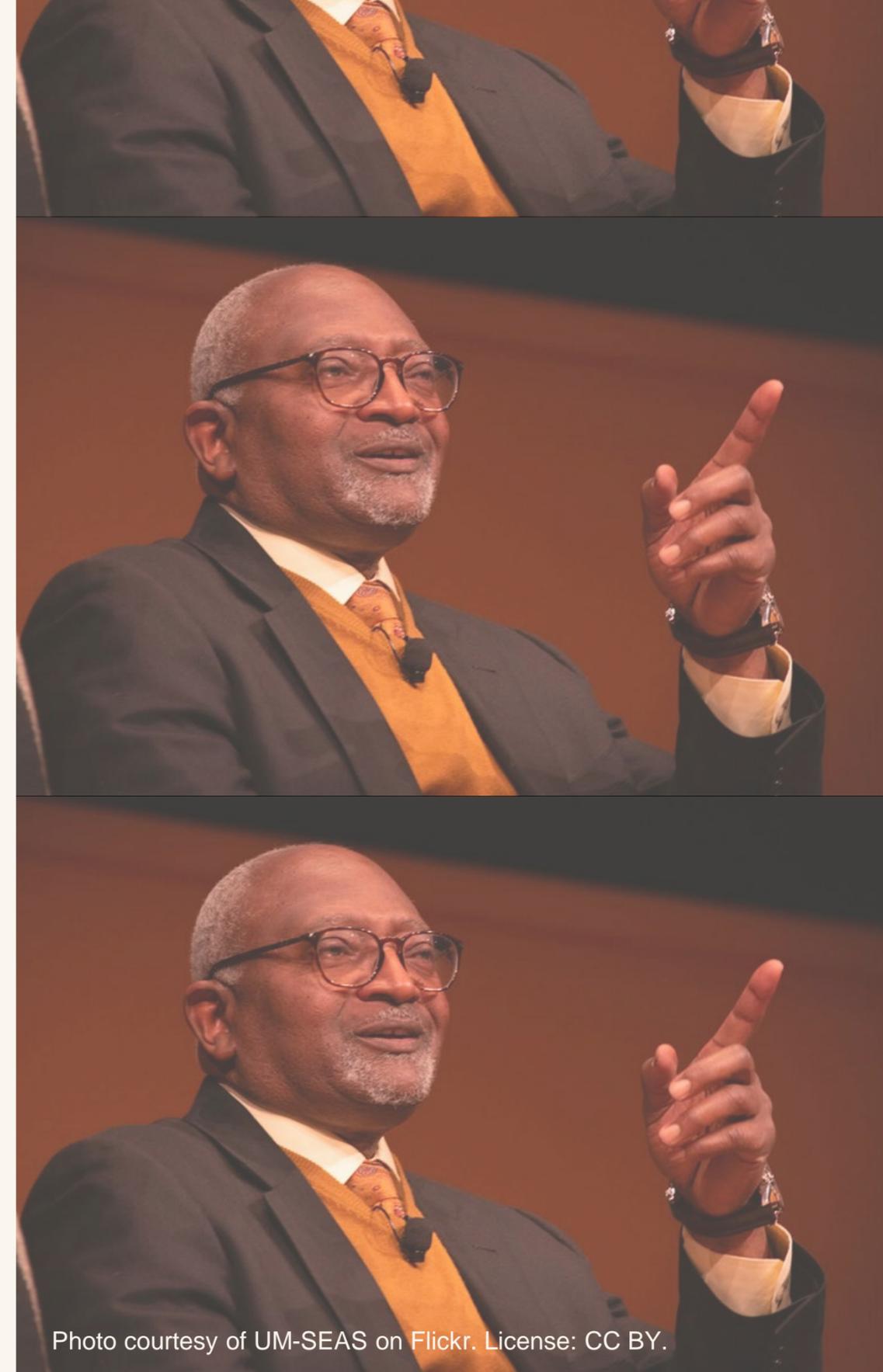


Photo courtesy of UM-SEAS on Flickr. License: CC BY.

## ACTIVITY #1

# NARRATIVES OF THE EJ MOVEMENT: ACADEMIC AND ACTIVIST

### Read and analyze

1. *The future of environmental justice is true equality*
2. *This environmental justice activist breaks down deep ties between racism and climate change*

### Before reading

- What are the origins of the EJ movement dating before the early 1980's?
- How are environmentalism and racism connected?

### Post-reading discussion questions

- For Yeampierre and Taylor, what are the roots of the environmental justice movement?
- What are some specific examples they give?
- How are the roots intertwined with history of systemic racism and discrimination in the U.S.?
- How do their personal experiences connect to environmental justice issues?
- What are their arguments for the future of environmental justice both for environmental organizations and for future government policy?
- What other insight do these articles give you about the environmental justice movement, both from an academic and activist perspective?
- How do these activists and scholars define environmental justice?
- Which perspective stood out to you more? Why?

## ACTIVITY #1

# NARRATIVES OF THE EJ MOVEMENT: ACADEMIC AND ACTIVIST

### Learn more about the authors

- **Elizabeth Yampierre** is a internationally recognized Puerto Rican attorney and environmental and climate justice leader of African and Indigenous ancestry born and raised in New York City.
- **Dorceta E. Taylor** is an American environmental sociologist known for her work on both environmental justice and racism in the environmental movement.

Left: © Matthei / Dr. Dorceta Taylor. Right: © Erik McGregor/Pacific Press/LightRocket via Getty Images. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see <https://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/>.



**Dorceta E. Taylor**

Author of: *The future of environmental justice is true equality*



**Elizabeth Yeampierre**

Author of: *This environmental justice activist breaks down deep ties between racism and climate change*

## ACTIVITY #1

# NARRATIVES OF THE EJ MOVEMENT: ACADEMIC AND ACTIVIST

## Reflection and Critique

1. Do the EJ definitions we have seen or read miss anything or anyone?
2. What critiques or questions do you have so far?
3. How do these readings compare and contrast with your own knowledge of EJ?



Photo by [Billy Huynh](#) on [Unsplash](#)

# Evolution of EJ Definitions

More recent definitions of EJ have evolved to take on a more critical stance.

## David Pellow's Four Pillars of Critical Environmental Justice

1. Emphasis on the intersectionality of multiple inequalities and axes of oppression—including domination of nonhuman species—rather than on single categories of difference
2. Attention to multiple spatial and temporal scales of environmental justice problems and solutions
3. A focus on state power as reinforcing and reproducing deeply embedded social inequalities
4. Recognition of the indispensability of marginalized populations and species that are often treated as expendable

DAVID NAGUIB PELLOW

WHAT IS  
CRITICAL  
ENVIRONMENTAL  
JUSTICE?



# Further Reading

## Toward a Critical Environmental Justice Studies: Black Lives Matter as an Environmental Justice Challenge (Pellow, 2016)

### Questions to consider after reading:

1. What theoretical perspectives does Pellow rely on to conceptualize “critical” environmental justice? Why?
2. How does EJ relate to the Black Lives Matter Movement?
3. What is the difference between 1st generation EJ studies and 2nd generation?
4. How does critical EJ studies take into account more “social categories of difference”? How does the concept of intersectionality help describe this?
5. What are your reflections and analysis on the four pillars of critical EJ?

## TOWARD A CRITICAL ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE STUDIES

### *Black Lives Matter as an Environmental Justice Challenge*

David N. Pellow

Department of Environmental Studies, University of California, Santa Barbara

#### Abstract

In this paper I expand upon the recent use of the term “Critical Environmental Justice Studies.” This concept is meant to capture new developments in Environmental Justice (EJ) Studies that question assumptions and gaps in earlier work in the field. Because this direction in scholarship is still in its formative stages, I take this opportunity to offer some guidance on what Critical Environmental Justice (CEJ) Studies might look like and what it could mean for theorizing the relationship between race (along with multiple additional social categories) and the environment. I do so by (1) adopting a multi-disciplinary approach that draws on several bodies of literature, including critical race theory, political ecology, ecofeminist theory, and anarchist theory, and (2) focusing on the case of Black Lives Matter and the problem of state violence.

**Keywords:** Environmental Justice, Black Lives Matter, State Violence, Racism, Speciesism, Scale, Expendability, Indispensability

#### INTRODUCTION

Black Lives Matter (BLM) is a social movement centered on the problem of state-sanctioned racist violence. The movement began as a response to the acquittal of George Zimmerman, a man who killed Trayvon Martin, a seventeen-year old African American boy in Sanford, Florida, in 2012. From that moment on, social media, mainstream media, and the Black Lives Matter movement would routinely intensify the national focus on racialized state-sanctioned violence when yet another video or testimony surfaced featuring an African American being shot, beaten, choked, and/or killed by police or White vigilantes. The role of social media technology was pivotal. As one writer put it, “Social media could serve as a source of live, raw information. It could summon people to the streets and coordinate their movements in real time. And it could swiftly push back against spurious media narratives . . .” (Bijan 2015).

BLM co-founder Alicia Garza explained what the movement stands for: “Black Lives Matter is an ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise. It is an affirmation of Black

---

**Du Bois Review**, 13:2 (2016) 221–236.

© 2016 Hutchins Center for African and African American Research 1742-058X/16 \$15.00  
doi:10.1017/S1742058X1600014X

# Introduction to Climate Justice

PART 2

# A Coalescence of Movements

## Structure of the EJ Movement

The EJ Movement evolved with a coalescence of various movements happening simultaneously, both at the U.S. level and globally including different groups, perspectives and issues.

## Evolution of the Climate Justice Movement

The Climate Justice Movement was one of many, overlapping movements that sought to broadly understand the injustices of climate change on the world's most vulnerable populations at both local and global levels, which involved a wealth of topics including energy, human rights, food, indigenous rights, trade, technology and more.



# A Coalescence of Movements

## Impact

These movements led to the field of EJ studies with various sub areas which continues to grow and expand in both depth and breadth.



## ACTIVITY #2

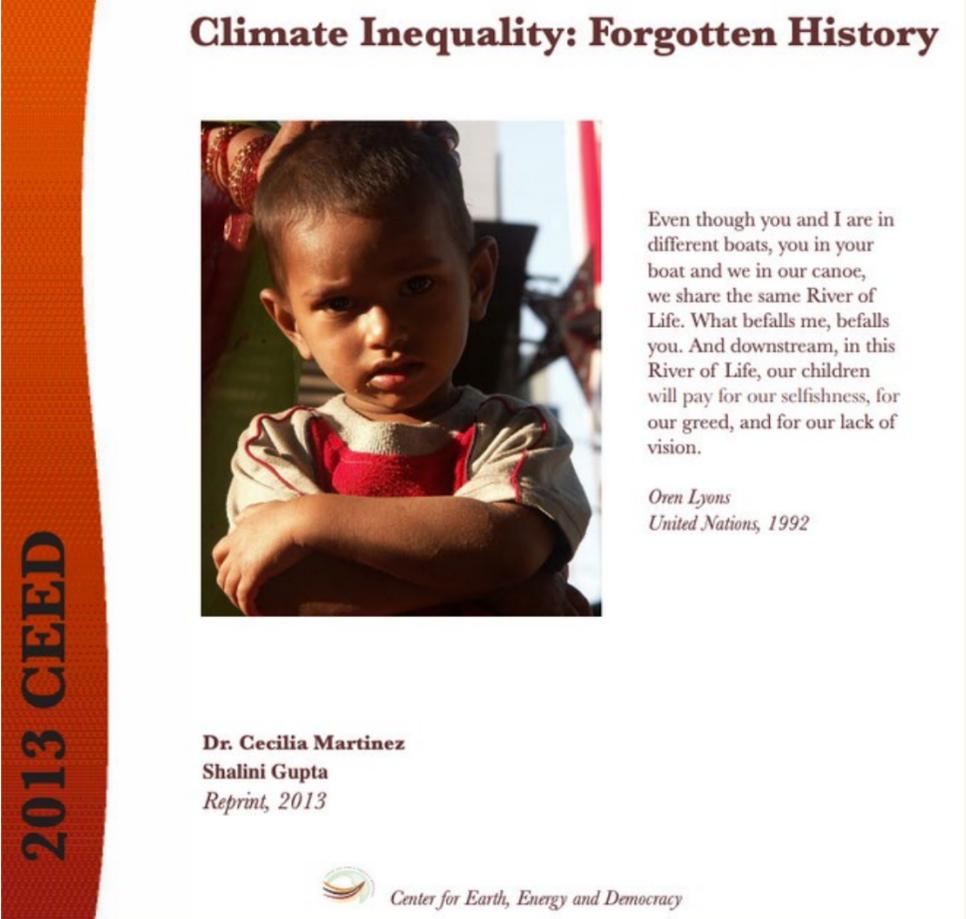
# NARRATIVES OF THE EJ MOVEMENT: ACADEMIC AND ACTIVIST

### Read and define

To build foundational knowledge, read *Climate Inequality: Forgotten History*, which describes the historical nature of climate change, which was rooted in inequality and injustice.

### Post-reading discussion questions:

- How does this historical piece define climate justice?
- What aspects of history are critical when defining or understanding climate justice? Why?



**Climate Inequality: Forgotten History**

Even though you and I are in different boats, you in your boat and we in our canoe, we share the same River of Life. What befalls me, befalls you. And downstream, in this River of Life, our children will pay for our selfishness, for our greed, and for our lack of vision.

*Oren Lyons  
United Nations, 1992*

**Dr. Cecilia Martinez  
Shalini Gupta  
Reprint, 2013**

2013 CEED

 Center for Earth, Energy and Democracy

© Center for Earth, Energy, and Democracy. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see <https://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/>.

# Further Reading

Want to see other definitions of climate justice? Here's some optional reading for more context:

- [What is 'climate justice'?](#) (Yale Climate Connections)
- [Climate Justice Explainer](#) (MIT Climate Portal)



Photo by [Markus Spiske](#) on [Unsplash](#)

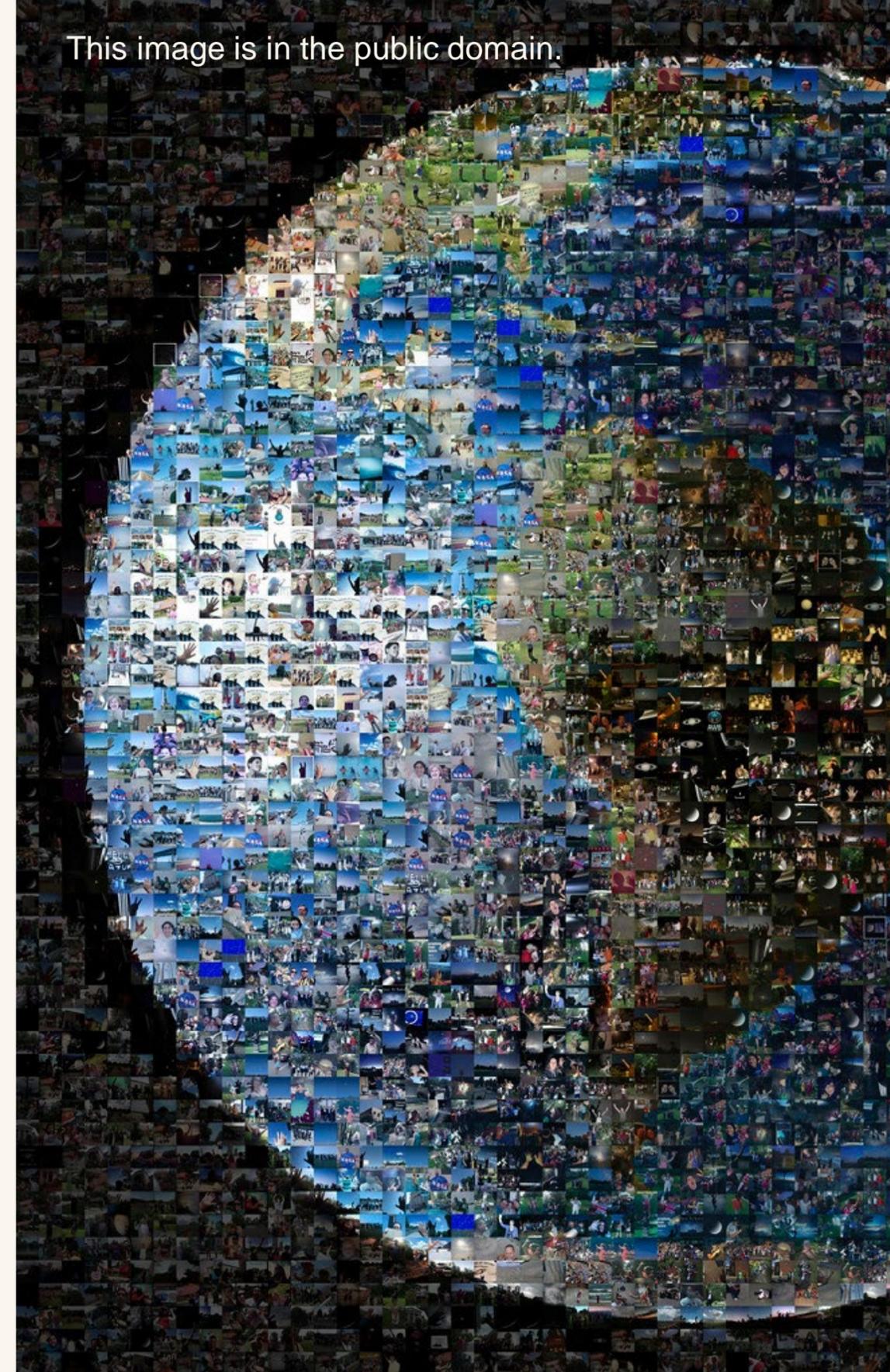
# Specific CJ Definitions

**Lisa Sun-Hee Park and David Pellow**

“Climate justice begins with an acknowledgement of climate injustice and views this problem not as an unfortunate byproduct of climate disruption, but as one of its core elements, and one that must be confronted if climate disruption is to be reversed.” [See more here.](#)

**Corrie Gross and Brigid Mark**

“The atmosphere is an ecological commons. Climate justice demands that this commons not be enclosed by a handful of polluters. Climate justice also demands that people be compensated for the impact of climate chaos caused by the actions of others. But above all, climate justice demands that every person, every community, every society have the freedom to create and defend economies that cause no harm to the climate or to other people.” [See more here.](#)



# Specific CJ Definitions

## CJ and Climate Debt

“The climate justice movement builds on grassroots traditions often led by black, Indigenous, and people of colour resisting legacies of colonialism and enslavement and focuses on climate debt as a key organizing arena.” (Gross & Mark, 2020)

Climate debt is two-fold.

### EMISSIONS DEBT

“...amassed by rich countries from their excessive consumption of the limited atmospheric space: they have left almost no space for developing countries to increase their greenhouse gas emissions if climate change is to be contained.”

### ADAPTATION DEBT

“...through their emissions, rich countries have disproportionately contributed to the impacts of climate change being felt by developing countries.”

“These are central values and goals of the climate justice movement. Addressing this debt requires a restorative approach: ‘the environmental space of the developing countries must be returned, decolonized.’”

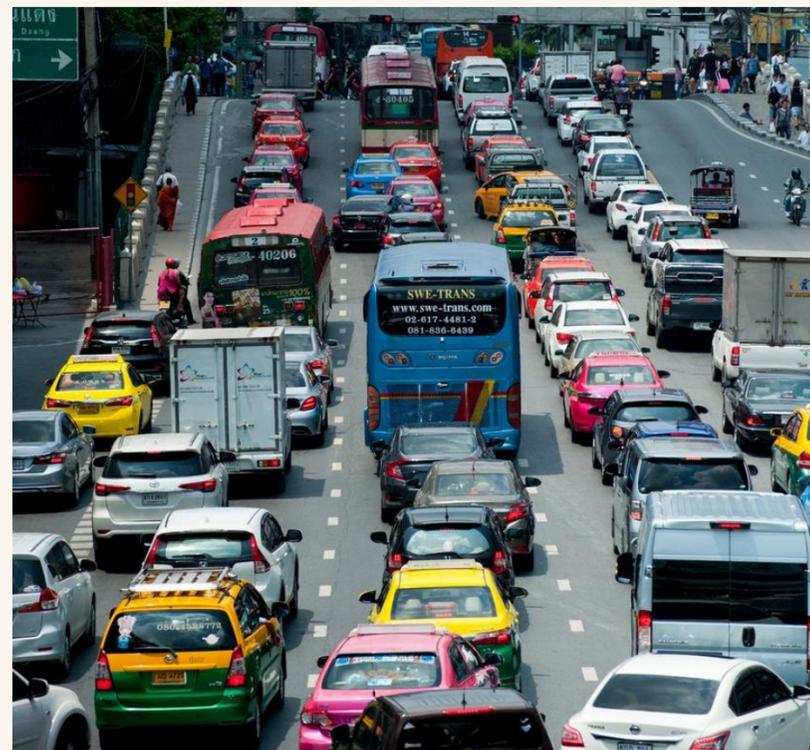
### ACTIVITY #3

## BRAINSTORM AND SHARE OUT LOCAL CJ ISSUES

What is an example of a climate justice issue in your city, country, or region?

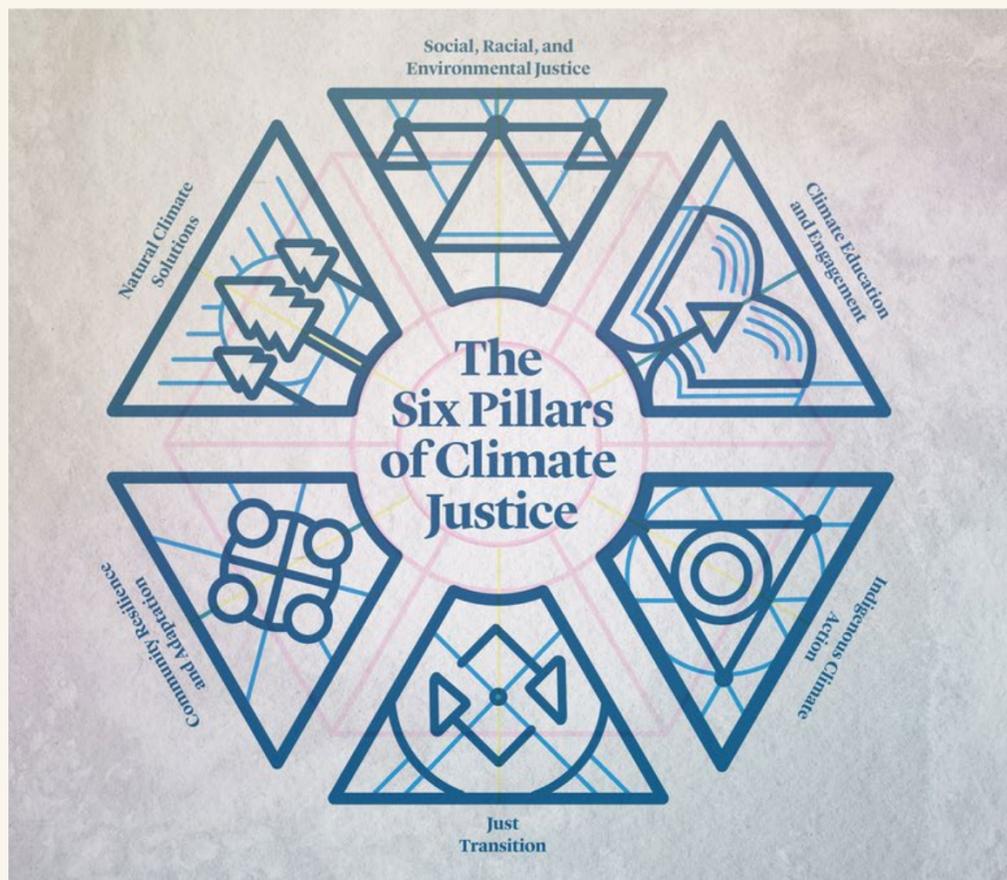
What are the causes of these issues? How do they intersect with social issues?

Are you interested or involved in any of these issues?



## ACTIVITY #4

# A DEEP DIVE ON THE 6 PILLARS OF CLIMATE JUSTICE



© Center for Climate Justice, University of California. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see <https://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/>.

## Choose and Review

Choose one of the Six Pillars of Climate Justice from the UCAL Center for Climate Justice, and review the text and video individually or in groups.

## Present

- How would you explain this pillar in a few sentences?
- How does this pillar advance climate justice and for whom?
- Can you provide 1-2 examples that are given in this pillar?
- Do you see this pillar being sufficiently enacted where you live or where you are from?
- What critique do you of this pillar if any? Why?

## ACTIVITY #5

# WHY IS CLIMATE CHANGE AN ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE ISSUE?

## Read and analyze

“Why Climate Change is an Environmental Justice Issue”



Hurricane Katrina 2005 (Photo: News Muse)

## Before Reading

- How are climate change and environmental justice connected?
- How are communities of color often more affected by climate change?
- What are some other examples of environmental justice?
- What are some steps needed to achieve Environmental Justice?
- Which ones most resonate with you?
- What examples of EJ have you experienced or learned more about through your communities?

## Post-reading discussion question

After reviewing definitions and reading these articles, what are some tools and strategies for addressing climate justice issues?

# Important Principles for Climate Justice

**01**

**Equity in distributing the burdens and sharing the benefits of climate change in communities and among nations**

**02**

**Social and political processes that recognize currently or previously marginalized groups as rightful participants in the governance and management of climate change**

**03**

**Freedom of peoples to make choices that maximize their capabilities to survive now and in the future**

**04**

**Rebuilding damaged historical relationships between parties, correcting past wrongs against humanity, and restoring the Earth**

# The Climate Justice Alliance

## Questions

- How does this framework for action compare to the previous slide? What's missing?
- What would be your role as a student or young professional?
- As you read more about climate justice activists, how do they implement some of these steps?



See the [CJA's website](#) to learn how they organize climate justice systemic change, depicted in the graphic above.

# Explore Stories from the CJ & EJ Movements

## PART 3

*Project Option: Students break into groups and research one of these stories or find their own to present to the class*



## ACTIVITY #6

# TARA HOUSKA AND INDIGENOUS RIGHTS

## Watch

[The Standing Rock Resistance and Our Fight for Indigenous Rights](#)



## Questions for Exploration

- What did you learn about Indigenous history that is important for the EJ movement?
- What does Houska say about how Indigenous people's are impacted by climate change?
- What are the costs of pipeline constructions?
- According to Houska, why was Standing Rock important? What did she learn in her experiences there and at other pipelines?
- What can we (you) do to help engage in this issue?

## More Resources

- [The Dakota Access Pipeline, Environmental Injustice, and U.S. Colonialism](#) (Whyte, 2017)
- [Indigenous Climate Action module](#)
- [The Standing Rock Resistance Is Unprecedented](#) (Donnella, 2016)

## ACTIVITY #7

# TWO FOUNDERS OF THE SUNRISE MOVEMENT

### Read

- *Varshini Prakash on Redefining What's Possible*
- *Dyanna Jaye: Bringing the urgency of organizing to climate policy*

### More Resources

- The Sunrise Movement website
- Climate Justice Policy module
- The Just Transition module

### Questions for Exploration

- What led them to their climate activism work?
- What insights can be gained by the four lessons Prakash has learned from youth movements?
- What role does “organizing” play in the climate justice movement according to Jaye?

Left: © Varshini Prakash. Right: Jaypix Belmer. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see <https://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/>.



**Varshini Prakash**



**Dyanna Jaye**

## ACTIVITY #8

# YOUTH ORGANIZERS FOR CLIMATE JUSTICE: The Climate Justice Alliance

## Watch

Front Line Youth: Fighting for  
Climate Justice

## Review

- The bios of the youth leaders featured in the video
- The Instagram takeover that several youth influencers led

## Questions for Exploration

- How does youth organizing around the country alter your views on climate justice action?
- What quotes from the different youth leaders stand out to you?
- What is needed from policy or education to better support these youth leaders and their organizations?



## ACTIVITY #9

# EQUITABLE & JUST NATIONAL CLIMATE PLATFORM: STORIES FROM THE MOVEMENT

## Explore Three Stories

- [A Community's Stand Against Pollution in Newark](#)
- [A community's fight against environmental racism in Savannah](#)
- [No Community Left Behind: Mossville, Louisiana](#)

## Questions for Exploration

- What are the specific strategies, or tools that these different communities use to take action and create change?
- What are the similarities and differences between stories?
- What insights can be taken from all of these stories about how communities can rise up and confront environmental/climate injustices?

## More Resources

[Equitable & Just National Climate Platform](#)

## ACTIVITY #10

# MOTHERS OF THE MOVEMENT

## Read

*Mothers of the movement: Black environmental justice activists reflect on the women who have paved the way* (Henry & Kutz, 2023)

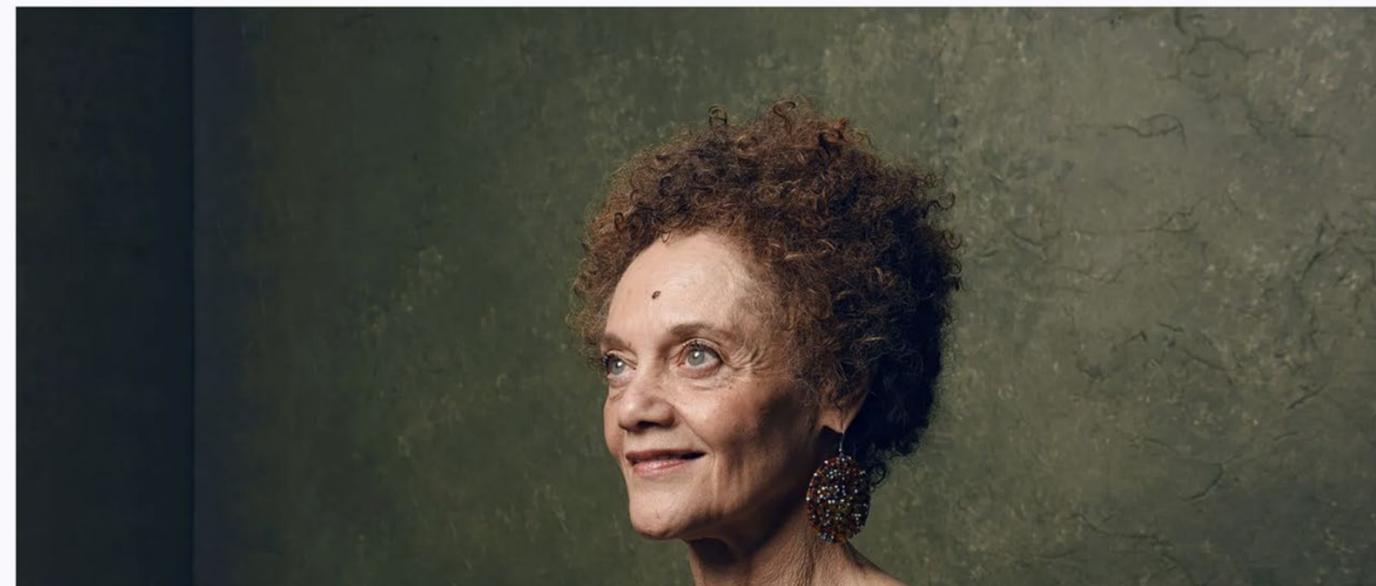
## Questions for Exploration

- What are some common threads among these activist women and the issues they were involved in?
- What issues did they help uncover?
- What traits do they have - similar and different - that helped them lead successful climate and environmental action?

Environment & Climate

# Mothers of the movement: Black environmental justice activists reflect on the women who have paved the way

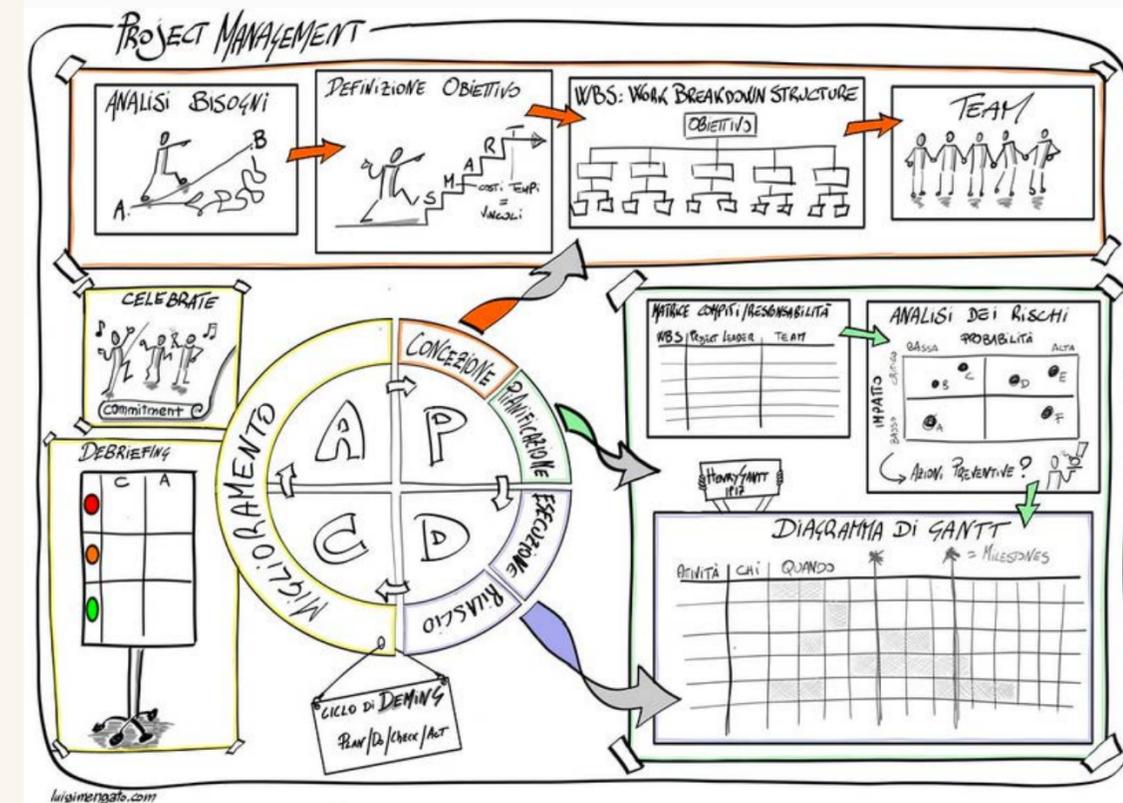
Described as “the backbone of the environmental justice movement,” these women pioneered the work to protect communities.



# Beyond the Module

## PART 4

**Note:** During these projects, students can be encouraged to connect their major, coursework, or research focus to climate justice issues



"sketchnote project management" courtesy of Luigi Mengato on [Flickr](#). License: CC BY.

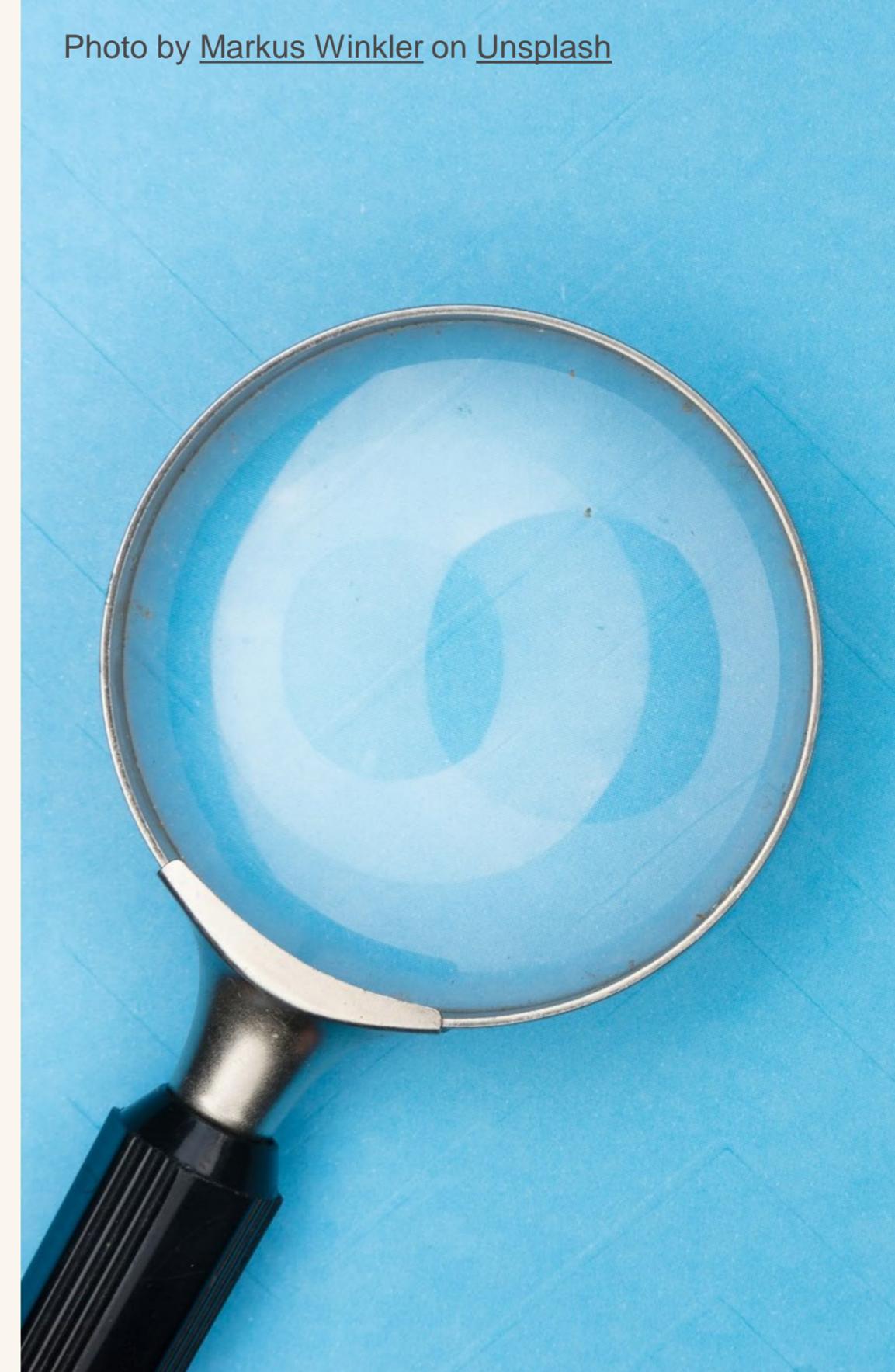
PROJECT OPTION #1

# Essay on Creating Climate/Environmental Justice Definitions

## Prompt suggestion

How do you define climate or environmental justice? How does your definition connect to your work or lived experiences?

- What are the main differences/similarities between the definitions we have reviewed?
- What is the difference between environmental and climate justice?
- What is missing in these definitions? What would you like to add?
- How have definitions evolved over time?



# Climate Justice Youth Activist Profiles

## Prompt suggestions

1. Choose a CJA youth activist and research their work to present to the class. What aspects of their work make them successful? What could be learned to share or replicate in other contexts?
2. Choose a CJA youth activist and do research on their Instagram takeover. Present their work and create your own Instagram story regarding a personal or community environmental issue you are passionate about.
3. Research and choose an EJ or CJ activist from anywhere around the world that speaks to you, and develop a presentation or paper related to their work.



Chamoru/Taotao Tāno youth climate activist, yoga instructor, entrepreneur, and indigenous land and water protector Francesca De Oro from the **Micronesia Climate Change Alliance** took over IG account recently which you can check out on our IG page!

© Climate Justice Alliance. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see <https://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/>.

# Community Engagement

## Prompt suggestion

This project has several options, as long as students engage with community in working towards addressing a climate or environmental justice issue. Students can share or reflect on this project either in writing or presentation form.

### Option 1

Volunteer or engage in activities with a particular community organization. This may include attending meetings, or providing labor (whether physical, digital, scholarly, etc.).

### Option 2

Students can launch their own community initiative. Examples include a petition drive, a letter writing campaign, a social media project, or a new campus student group that interacts with the local community.

## Guiding Questions

- What are the opportunities and limitations that community organizations face in response to EJ/CJ issues?
- How can universities/educational institutions better listen to or support community orgs.?
- How can this experience help you critique academic concepts or theories? Do they function in real-world contexts?

# Structured Reflection: Finding your role in climate action

## Prompt suggestions

Students can first watch the [TED talk by Ayana Johnson](#), and fill out their own venn diagram. Then, based on their venn diagram they can work individually or in groups to write an essay, engage in a campus/community initiative, or create a presentation on how they can use their unique talents and strengths in the on-going movement for climate action. During this process, students can also reflect on the emotional, psychological and personal dimensions of the climate crisis.



# Further Reading

## Academic Articles

- [Climate and the Personal Essay — A Reading List](#) (Martines, 2020)
- [Environmental Justice](#) (Mohai et al., 2009)
- [Trends and Directions in Environmental Justice: From Inequity to Everyday Life, Community, and Just Sustainabilities](#) (Agyeman et al., 2016)
- [Evolution of the environmental justice movement: activism, formalization and differentiation](#) (Colsa Perez et al., 2015)
- [From environmental to climate justice: climate change and the discourse of environmental justice](#) (Schlosberg & Collins, 2014)
- [The Dakota Access Pipeline, Environmental Injustice, and U.S. Colonialism](#) (Kyle Powys Whyte, 2017)
- [Theorising environmental justice: the expanding sphere of a discourse](#) (Schlosberg, 2013)
- [Transforming knowledge creation for environmental and epistemic justice](#) (Temper & Del Bene, 2016)
- [Climate Justice in the US. What Next?](#) (Dayaneni, 2009)

# Further Reading

## Online Readings

- [Wealth inequality and carbon emissions in high-income countries](#) (Knight et. al., 2017)
- [Why we can't have climate justice without social justice](#) (Global Landscapes Forum, 2023)
- [Higher Education's Role in Advancing Climate Justice](#) (Briscoe et. al., 2022)

## From the Climate Justice Movement

- [All We Can Save](#) (Johnson & Wilkinson, 2020)
- [Climate and the Personal Essay — A Reading List](#) (Martines, 2020)
- [To Free Ourselves, We Must Feed ourselves](#) (Penniman, 2020)

For more resources on climate and environmental justice: **Please explore other modules in the Climate Justice Instructional Toolkit.**



# Module References

- [Environmental Protection Agency \(EPA\). \(2023, July, 7\) Environmental Justice.](#)
- [Equitable and Just National Climate Platform. Stories.](#)
- [Frontline Youth: Fighting for Climate for Climate Justice. Climate Justice Alliance.](#)
- [General Accounting Office. \(1992\). Siting of Hazardous Waste Landfills and Their Correlation with Racial and Economic Status of Surrounding Communities: Report. The Office.](#)
- [Grosse, C., & Mark, B. \(2020\). A colonized COP: Indigenous exclusion and youth climate justice activism at the United Nations climate change negotiations. Journal of Human Rights and the Environment, 11\(3\), 146-170.](#)
- [Henry & Kutz \(2023\) Mothers of the movement: Black environmental justice activists reflect on the women who have paved the way. The 19th.](#)
- [Houska, T \(2017\) The Standing Rock resistance and our fight for Indigenous rights. TED Talk.](#)
- [Johnzon, E. \(2022\) How to find joy in climate action. TED Talk.](#)
- [C. Martinez, S. Gupta \(2013\) Climate Inequality: Forgotten History.](#)
- [Mohai, P., Pellow, D., & Roberts, J. T. \(2009\). Environmental justice. Annual review of environment and resources, 34, 405-430.](#)
- [MIT Climate Portal. \(2023, July, 7\). Climate Justice.](#)
- [Pellow, D.N., and L. Sun-Hee Park \(2009\), 'From Climate Change and Climate Disruption to Climate Justice: Analysis and Policy Considerations for African American Communities', Department of Sociology, University of Minnesota. Pellow, D. N. \(2017\). What is critical environmental justice?. John Wiley & Sons.](#)
- [Pellow, D. N. \(2016\). Toward a critical environmental justice studies: Black Lives Matter as an environmental justice challenge. Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race, 13\(2\), 221-236.](#)

# Module References

- Prakash, V. (2020) Varshini Prakash on Redefining What's Possible. Sierra Club.
- The Climate Justice Alliance. How we Work.
- Rosado, L. (2023) Dyanna Jaye: Bringing the urgency of organizing to climate policy.
- Taylor, Dorceta (2020) The Future of Environmental Justice is True Equality.
- United Church of Christ. Commission for Racial Justice. (1987). Toxic wastes and race in the United States: A national report on the racial and socio-economic characteristics of communities with hazardous waste sites. Public Data Access. Chicago.
- What is Climate Justice? University of California Center for Climate Justice, (2023, July, 7).
- What is Climate Justice? Yale Climate Connections (2020, July).
- Why Climate Change is an Environmental Justice Issue. Columbia Climate School, State of the Planet, Renne Cho (2020)
- Yale Environment 360 (2020) This Environmental Justice Activist breaks down deep ties between racism and climate change.

MIT OpenCourseWare

<https://ocw.mit.edu>

RES.11-003 Climate Justice Instructional Toolkit Spring 2025

For more information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit

<https://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.