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LETTER

Evolution of the environmental justice movement: activism, formalization and differentiation

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Abstract

To complement a recent flush of research on transnational environmental justice movements, we sought a deeper organizational history of what we understand as the contemporary environmental justice movement in the United States. We thus conducted in-depth interviews with 31 prominent environmental justice activists, scholars, and community leaders across the US. Today's environmental justice groups have transitioned from specific local efforts to broader national and global mandates, and more sophisticated political, technological, and activist strategies. One of the most significant transformations has been the number of groups adopting formal legal status, and emerging as registered environmental justice organizations (REJOs) within complex partnerships. This article focuses on the emergence of REJOs, and describes the respondents' views about the implications of this for more local grassroots groups. It reveals a central irony animating work across groups in today's movement: legal formalization of many environmental justice organizations has made the movement increasingly internally differentiated, dynamic, and networked, even as the passage of actual national laws on environmental justice has proven elusive.

1. Introduction

The US has been at the frontier of environmental justice scholarship and activism from the movement's roots in the tactics and ideologies of the Civil Rights Movement, to its contemporary institutionalization within government agencies and academic institutions. The year 2014 marked not only the launch of an online, interactive international Environmental Justice Atlas[2], but also the 20th anniversary of Executive Order 12898 on Environmental Justice (Clinton 1994), the US's formal recognition of the need to assess the environmental justice implications of government programs, plans and activities. As environmental justice frames extend to new contexts and expand to include transnational issues and actors, work remains to be done domestically. The US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) recognized the 20th anniversary by implementing Plan[3] EJ 2014, a strategy to help integrate environmental justice into the EPA's day-to-day activities.

During the last three decades, grassroots activism around environmental justice has been effective in the United States, as evidenced by the number of court battles won by local communities, and the significant increase in attention gained from media, academics, and policy makers (Bullard and Wright 2012, Taylor 2014). This has bolstered growth in the number of organizations whose mission statements reference the fight against environmental injustices (Faber and McCarthy 2001). Having reviewed the vast literature about the history of the environmental justice

[2] This research was initiated in dialogue with the European Commission funded EJOLT project directed by Professor Joan Martinez-Alier at ICTA-UAB (Spain). That project seeks visibility for social conflicts around environmental issues worldwide. For more information about the EJ Atlas and EJOLT, visit http://ejatlas.org/ or http://hotinhere.us/1/post/2014/04/41114-ejolt-ejolt-environmental-justice-organisations-liability-and-trade.html

[3] http://epa.gov/environmentaljustice/plan-ej/

movement in the United States, we conducted in-depth interviews with 31 prominent environmental justice activists, scholars, and community leaders across the US. This yielded rich insights from a wide range of actors within the movement, to better understand how practices such as community organizing, media attention, and changing institutional relationships with academic institutions, regulators, and funders, have catalyzed change for environmental justice groups and communities.

This paper briefly summarizes the history of environmental justice in the United States, outlines the processes of formalization and our methods for studying it, presents results, and concludes with a discussion of the evolution of the environmental justice movement in the United States. We focus in particular on the types of strategies environmental justice groups have used in order to face the financial and political challenges that have emerged during the last 30 years.

2. Literature review

Originally framed as 'environmental racism,' the early movement focused on the unequal distribution, both social and spatial, of environmental burdens, an issue that was often ignored by the mainstream environmental movement (Taylor 2009, 2011, Arriaga 2010). There are a few benchmark events widely recognized as the founding moments of the environmental justice movement. The public debate about 'environmental racism' that emerged after the 1982 wave of grassroots protests in response to the siting of a PCB landfill in a predominantly African–American community in Warren County, NC, became the inspiration for two major studies that would solidify the environmental justice movement (US General Accounting Office 1983, United Church of Christ 1987). Confirming patterns of environmental injustice already clear to residents in polluted zones (Lerner 2010), both studies concluded that race was the single most important factor in predicting the location of hazardous waste facilities (Bullard and Johnson 2000, Mohai *et al* 2009). In the following years, the movement both broadened and formalized with hundreds of new studies that examined the relationship between minority communities, institutional power, and environmental hazards (Bullard *et al* 2007).

Environmental justice was institutionalized as a central priority of the federal government in 1994 through an Executive Order by President Bill Clinton. Following this order, federal agencies began to include environmental justice considerations in policy implementation and assessment processes (Mitchell and Dorling 2003). In 1991, the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit convened in Washington DC and authored the Seventeen Principles of Environmental Justice (Bryant and Mohai 1992). This moment represented an expansion of the scope of environmental justice concerns to include social issues such as transportation, housing, gender issues, and educational disparities (Bullard *et al* 2007).

A significant transformation that environmental justice groups in the US have experienced in the last 30 years is an increasing number of groups adopting formal legal status. In the US, becoming a registered organization is a two-step process, requiring first incorporation at the state level and then applying for 501c3 federal tax-exempt status (SEARAC and Mosaica 2009). If an organization chooses to incorporate and become a legal entity, it must then follow a set of rules allowing it to maintain assets and liabilities, raise limited amounts of funding, and retain liability for the actions and debts of the organization. While incorporation at the state level allows an organization to gain institutional and public recognition and credibility, as well as clarify the mission and structure of the organization, create broader accountability and limit the liability of individuals within the organization, it does have its disadvantages. Through incorporation, organizations lose some flexibility in determining what to do and how to do it, must comply with state regulations, pay a filing fee, spend time on tasks needed to manage a legal entity and concede individual control to a Board of Directors (SEARAC and Mosaica 2009). Advantages stem from the fact that applying for 501c3 federal tax-exempt status allows the organization to receive tax-deductible contributions and obtain funding through grants (SEARAC and Mosaica 2009). Additionally, many states allow 501c3 organizations to be exempt from sales and property tax. For many organizations, the increased legitimacy and survival prospects resulting from incorporation are worth the constraints (Meyer and Rowan 1977, Silber 2007).

Research demonstrates the enormous impact of different types of environmental justice groups including community groups, religious institutions, indigenous groups, youth organizations, and community development corporations on environmental justice victories across the country (Arriaga 2010). However, further research is needed to understand the roles and responses of environmental justice groups when they transition into registered non-profit organizations and hence face both planned and unanticipated consequences of that shift. For the purpose of this paper, we refer to this type of formal organization as registered environmental justice organizations (REJOs), and define them as a registered non-profit organization (with 501c3 status) whose core mission involves protecting people of color, low-income communities and indigenous organizations from environmental and health hazards and advocating for equal access to the decision-making process[4].

Literature written about the movement has identified how changes within the organizational structure

[4] All our interviewees agreed with this definition, though some specified that this type of organization is one of many that represent the environmental justice movement, including community groups, religious institutions, indigenous groups, youth organizations, and community development corporations.

of some environmental justice groups relate to the evolution of the environmental justice movement. Meyer and Whittier argue that each distinct social movement is part of a larger continuum of activism and that an individual social movement does not die out but rather carries over into new movements (1994). As they explain it, 'the ideas, tactics, style, participants, and organization of one movement often *spill over* its boundaries to affect other social movements' (Meyer and Whittier 1994, p 227). The environmental justice movement has been particularly successful at employing this 'spill over' effect to achieve major political and activism victories in a very short period of time (Taylor 2000, 2014). Social movements have been defined not just by their origins but by the challenge they present to the dominant cultural, economic, and political order. In this view, one of the central questions that emerge related to the role of REJOs in shaping environmental justice as a social movement is how communities and activists use organizational structure to claim legitimacy and power.

The environmental justice movement brings together a diverse group of impacted communities. Kurtz (2005, pp 79–88) asserts that: 'the term environmental injustice refers to both distributive and procedural bias against politically disadvantaged groups in society; the concept of environmental justice, is intended to be inclusive of a variety of site specific grievances'. More formal organizational structures have grown in the environmental justice movement in large part because community groups have turned to network building as a strategy to share strategic knowledge (Mix 2011). Minkoff (1994, p 944) theorizes that, once a few organizations have found success with a more formal structure others follow their example and 'over time, new organizations tend to be constructed with reference to a dominant structural form'. He further notes that foundations, media, and political authorities are more familiar with certain types of organizational structure and more likely to consider groups that adhere to that structure as legitimate. Subsequent work has shown this perception of legitimacy remains important for REJOs to gain access to resources, especially considering the rapid proliferation of new environmental justice groups in a short period of time (Stretesky *et al* 2012).

The emerging trend of environmental justice organizations (EJOs) adopting more formal legal status is not unique to the environmental justice movement. In a recent article, Fogarty (2011, p 207) analyzed how non-governmental organizations (NGOs), of which EJOs are a subset, have to make choices related to their organizational structure, noting: 'some NGOs bureaucratize their organizations and seek access to (and influence in) […] insider strategies—i.e. lobby and seek accreditation at multilateral institutions, […] while others reject formalization as betraying the social movement network ethos and inviting co-option'. According to his results, NGOs that bureaucratize their organizations are more successful in gaining access to those insider strategies, regardless of NGOs' budgets, age, or ideology. Indeed, environmental NGOs with international conservation mandates have been the subject of scathing critique (Chapin 2004) and much debate about whether their development of boards, trustees, donors, and public–private partnerships has cost them earlier more authentic connections to indigenous groups within conservation sites, rendering them more like private corporations in their institutional cultures and organizational strategies (Hardin 2011).

Although the success of the environmental justice movement is widely recognized and can be seen in the increasing number of environmental justice groups that have been able to achieve major activism victories, there is still a long way to go. Noted environmental justice scholars Robert Bullard and Glenn Johnson have observed (2000, p 573): 'although environmental and civil rights laws have been on the books for more than three decades, all communities have not received the same benefits from their application, implementation, and enforcement'. Indeed, one legal scholar and activist noted that much of his work is now spent on ensuring that progressive Acts bolstering poor families' abilities to retain their land are passed into law on a state by state basis, flagging the recurring challenge for the environmental justice movement; although its engagement with environmental expertise and issues is varied and strong, its engagement with the justice system still faces many challenges at many jurisdictional scales[5].

Having briefly summarized the history of the environmental justice movement in the US and discussed the processes of REJO formalization, this paper will now outline our methods, present results, and conclude with a discussion of the evolution of environmental justice groups in the United States. We focus in particular on the types of strategies such groups have used in order to face the financial and political challenges that have emerged during the last 30 years.

3. Methods: creating and implementing an interview instrument

Our goal was to obtain the insights of recognized experts and leaders in the environmental justice field through in-depth semi-structured interviews. Our first step was to draw a sample of these leaders. To be systematic in our approach, we identified potential respondents by examining the participation lists of several national environmental justice conferences, membership lists of past and present national environmental justice advisory committees, and names listed

[5] Thomas Mitchell, Professor of Law at the University of Wisconsin, on air 8 May 2015, with 'It's Hot in Here' at WCBN FM radio, Ann Arbor, MI: http://hotinhere.us/1/post/2015/05/05082015-law-property-and-society.html. See also Mitchell (2014).

in prominent environmental justice reports, such as *Toxic Waste and Race at Twenty* (Bullard *et al* 2007) and *Environmental Justice Milestones and Accomplishments* 1964–2014 (Bullard *et al* 2014). We began with some of the most frequently cited names. These experts and leaders are well-known inside the movement and in academia and to each other. Through snowball sampling, we elicited further respondents' names from our initial interview respondents, thereby building from interview to interview on the networks that link experts with local community based activists. We thus included several types of actors we deemed important from the standpoint of internal organizational transformation but who might not appear in our initial rosters. Altogether we netted 31 in-depth interviews. This group of research subjects yielded rich insights on how practices such as community organizing, media attention, and changing institutional relationships with academic institutions, regulators, and funders, have catalyzed change for environmental justice groups and communities.

In order to capture both long range overviews of the movement and more localized experiential knowledge, we developed two sets of interview questions, one for activists, and another for academics (see appendix). We refer to these as expert-specific questions. However, for all respondents we first asked if they agreed with our definition of a REJO. The majority of our respondents agreed with the definition we provided. In addition, responses to this question allowed us to evaluate where this new, more formalized structure fits in the traditional grassroots environmental justice movement.

Questions designed for academics focused on analyzing comprehensive trends of the movement. Most academics had their respective specialties within the environmental justice field that allowed us to see several different evolutions, sub-issues and trends within the larger movement. Questions designed for activists focused on understanding how their individual and collective participation in the movement, the activism tactics of their organization, and their understanding of the environmental justice movement had evolved over time. These questions helped us evaluate the historic and contemporary relationships between community-based environmental justice groups (both REJOs and non-REJOs), NGOs, and government decision makers.

Additionally, we developed questions designed for activists involved in REJOs as well as non-REJOs. If in a REJO, questions included:

- What made your organization decide to become a formally registered non-profit?
- How did that decision impact your relationship with the community?
- What is your relationship with other environmental organizations and EJOs and how has this changed over time?

If not in a REJO, questions included:

- Has your organization considered applying for nonprofit status? Please explain.
- What do you feel are some of the benefits and disadvantages of being a REJO?
- What is your relationship with other environmental organizations and EJOs and how has this changed over time?

For all respondents we asked personal work histories of their specific affiliation and engagement with the environmental justice movement and how this has evolved over the years. We also asked respondents about the relationship between academia and grassroots organizations, and their views on whether and how such linkages have been either beneficial or detrimental to the movement, or both.

Each interview was approximately one hour long, consisting of three main parts: an introduction of the project as well as of our goals for the interview, expert-specific questions, and then solicitation of additional contacts with whom we might continue our research. In order to fully capture the knowledge, expertise and experiences of each respondent, we requested permission to record the interviews and took extensive notes. Recordings and transcriptions allowed us to obtain data that could be easily analyzed, and labeled to correspond with the professional monikers we use here in lieu of names in order to identify informants while protecting confidentiality. We promised all our individual respondents at the beginning of the interview that their names would not be revealed.

4. Results

During the last 30 years, academic research literature has made considerable progress in evaluating the environmental justice movement, and there is an upsurge in interest internationally for the conceptual frame of environmental justice in understanding and comparing various forms of environmental conflict across sectors and national boundaries[6]. However, there is a need for further understanding the endemic state of environmental justice activism in the United States as well as how activism has catalyzed change and responded to the challenges faced by both environmental justice groups and communities. This study found that, over the past 30 years, environmental justice communities and groups have responded to

[6] According to Mohai *et al* (2009, p 420), 'the term environmental justice began to be applied outside of the United States in the early 2000s' and is gaining particular relevance where applied to issues of transnational pollution and within the debates about climate change.

growing financial and political pressures in highly innovative ways. Based on interviews with prominent environmental justice leaders and activists we outline below three main categories that help describe this evolving response: (1) adoption of formal legal status, (2) emergence of partnerships and networks, and (3) broadening of missions. These findings based on expert insight contribute to emerging efforts to offer a deeper understanding of how the environmental justice movement in the US has evolved alongside the growth of environmental justice groups.

Before discussing these responses, we provide a brief overview of the principal challenges faced by EJOs noted by our respondents. The most common challenge mentioned was scarce financial resources. Funding deficiencies slow the growth and potential influence of organizations. As one respondent explained, it is difficult for a successful organization to survive on volunteers alone. Stable long-term funding allows activists to immerse themselves in the movement while being able to sustain themselves financially. At the same time, seasoned activists note concern about the infusion of new corporate funding sources for particular events or processes, such as that offered by coal companies for the anniversary march on Selma this past year[7].

Linked closely with financial challenges is the competition for political influence in the midst of a field dominated by large NGOs. A key element to understanding the evolution of the environmental justice movement is the increasing role of environmental justice groups and organizations in legislation and public discourse. Some respondents expressed that making environmental justice central in discussions at the local, state, and federal level is still a major challenge. Many believe that closer connections to political channels represent a means of increasing the influence of environmental justice in policymaking, leading to systemic change. The Executive Director of a state-based EJO, highlighted the importance of creating partnerships to expand connections as a way of navigating this difficult political context often driven by an anti-regulation agenda. In some of our respondents' views, if there are no policies to support communities' activities, efforts of organizations can be futile. However, we also heard from several respondents, especially those connected to more established REJOs, that the increasing role of environmental justice groups in legislation and public discourse is one of the most important success stories of the movement.

[7] Robert Bullard, Professor and Dean of the Barbara Jordan-Mickey Leland School of Public Affairs at Texas Southern University, on air 20 March 2015 at WCBN FM radio, Ann Arbor, MI: http://hotinhere.us/1/post/2015/03/03202015the-importance-of-growing-authentic-leaders-from-communities-most-impacted-by-environmental-injustice-and-climate-change.html.

4.1. Adopting formal legal status

In response to these mounting financial, political, and organizational challenges, some environmental justice community groups elected to transition from a participatory structure to a more formally structured 501c3 status. Some of our respondents felt that taking on 501c3 status allows organizers a way to diversify channels of financial support, ensuring thus the sustainability of their work as well as continued engagement on key issues. Others are concerned about the transformations such status provokes, and the attendant questions about redirected energies of staff and leaders, as that may make them lose accountability to grassroots level concerns and processes.

As discussed in the literature review, by obtaining 501c3 status REJOs are able to draw consistent financial support from a diversity of channels, allowing the organizations to receive tax-deductible contributions and obtain funding through grants (SEARAC and Mosaica 2009). The Director of a nationally recognized REJO stated how 'during the first three to 4 years [since becoming a REJO], we began to have federal research grants. […] Some of those grants were for developing partnerships with universities. Those grants really allowed us to develop capacity—hire highly qualified staff'.

The increase in financial stability that often comes with the nonprofit label also has important implications for the political influence of environmental justice groups. A member of a state-wide environmental justice network noted that many grassroots organizations do not have the funding or resources to maintain a presence at the state capitol or engage directly with agencies. In her view, many groups gain more political influence through their status as formal (registered) nonprofit organizations. Respondents also acknowledged how well-established REJOs have been able to become stakeholders within the decision-making processes. This might respond to Minkoff's concept of the dominant structural form (Minkoff (1994), where foundations, political authorities and media recognize the legal form (a REJO) as legitimate.

Although the configuration of REJOs as dominant structural forms has allowed the environmental justice movement to gain political legitimacy, respondents also acknowledged some of the problems that occur when community groups become REJOs, and the tensions that emerge as the process of formalization becomes a norm within the environmental justice movement. The formal non-profit designation of 501c3 status brings with it a suite of organizational changes. Although changes like the adoption of formal bylaws, establishing a Board of Directors, and making budgets publically accessible can increase transparency and accountability, they also alter leadership structure within the organization and potentially impact constituent relations. One respondent noted that one of the first changes that non-profit status brings is a new distinction between paid and unpaid

members. Some respondents noted challenges that arose in trying to find a balance between effectively serving as the voice of the community and dealing with new administrative burdens (money, personnel, and building space to manage). The director of one of the first EJOs to become a REJO found that the new financial status that provided staff, a building and resources also created jealously among other leaders within the community.

Another change that comes with the process of formalization is that, in order to survive, registered non-profits need to draw consistent financial support for what they often need to build a wider membership base and/or request assistance from the philanthropic sector. Building a wider membership base in turn implies a broader set of conversations with stakeholders, some of whom may have limited knowledge about the circumstances or causes that catalyzed the group's early formation, and may seek to orient the REJO in new directions. An environmental health scientist specializing in environmental justice noted how these dynamic changes are often very difficult for organizations with limited staff and capacity to navigate, let alone to carry out with continued legitimacy among originating stakeholders. The issue of REJOs tapping into the foundation and grant making world also provoked mixed opinions among respondents. While some interviewees believe that the increase in foundation-support for EJ groups is essential in order to end disparities in organizing capabilities between environmental justice and mainstream environmental movements, others argue that foundation money shifts the communities' agendas. A community organizer pointed out how 'too much trouble is not worth investing in by foundations. Direct action work is not well funded or not funded at all. […] It is almost impossible to build grassroots power'.

This fragile balance between challenges and opportunities that emerge when groups embark on the process of formalization also raises an interesting dilemma around the environmental justice principle that says 'we speak for ourselves', meaning that only vulnerable communities should have a say about the issues within the communities. Some respondents believe that large REJOs that move from grassroots to more top-down structures become political actors and try to represent the whole movement, distorting thus the grassroots foundations of the movement. However, another group of respondents believes this concept restricts organizational growth because in order to become a larger social movement, communities need people to speak for them (e.g. in Washington DC); they call it 'natural evolution of social movements'.

The environmental justice movement until relatively recently was seen as a 'grassroots phenomenon' due to its both democratic and participatory approach that relied heavily on local groups. This unique dual organization avoided following the mainstream environmental groups' trend of top down governing structure, an approach critizised within the movement for lack of response and accountability to local communities. In their review of the environmental justice movement, Pellow and Brulle (2005) criticize this resource focus/dependence on philanthropic and government sources, claiming that it causes EJ organizations to pay less attention—'and even [to be] less accountable to' local issues (Pellow and Brulle 2005). The dilemma of whether to become a REJO or remain a grassroots organization serves as a perfect example of Fogarty's reflections about the different strategic organizational decisions NGOs encounter (Fogarty 2011). Pellow and Brulle (2005) criticized how many of these nationally recognized REJOs do not have a membership base, and are solely funded by grants awarded from the philanthropic and the public sectors. They claim that 'in many cases these activists become token 'representatives' for their entire community, vested with the authority to speak not only 'for themselves' but also for thousands of others. This raises the more immediate question about democratic and participatory decision making within EJ organizations' (Pellow and Brulle 2005, p 14). It would be interesting to further analyze whether that conflicting view of ultimate political representation has influenced the fact that, according to some respondents' views, the environmental justice movement has had a more difficult time infiltrating the national sphere as the other social movements have, or whether, according to some environmental justice scholars, starting to take the same top-down approach followed by mainstream organizations could represent one of the biggest failures of the environmental justice movement (Pellow and Brulle 2005).

4.2. Emergence of partnerships and networks

Clouds, however, can have silver linings. The shortage of funding opportunities and the search for increased political legitimacy have, in many cases, led to the creation of networks and partnerships. The formation of horizontal networks, or alliances between environmental justice grassroots groups of different legal statuses, has been described as an essential element behind the strengthening of the movement since the beginning of environmental justice organizing. In the words of an academic and campaigner against environmental racism, '[Environmental justice] groups have been able to overcome hurdles and barriers [i.e. limited resources]…by working with and forming partnerships/alliances…. [T]he movement is able to grow because of these relationships'. One of our interviewees used as an example of such a partnership a statewide union of non-profit organizations, universities and other local partners working to achieve a clean, healthy, and safe environment for the state's most vulnerable residents in alignment with environmental justice principles.

Horizontal networks such as this statewide coalition have been forming throughout the United States, seeing successes as well as challenges. These networks greatly increase their influence by taking advantage of human capital and by working together to write grants and increase their resource base. Building cross-organization partnerships allows environmental justice groups to transcend the geographic limitations of grassroots activism. Technologies and greater involvement of people of all ages have given these groups opportunities to make a bigger impact and create a larger presence in political spheres.

Coalitions have proven to be very impactful in communities across the United States and have yielded positive and sustainable solutions, something many of our respondents noted as being one of the greatest successes of their organizations. The Program Director of a national environmental NGO explained how their NGO has been able to be a resource for one of the leading REJOs in the US. Although she recognized that her organization does not have say in the REJO's organizational goals, she is aware that these REJOs are an asset due to their national/international media presence and access to technological professionals. Global issues such as climate change cut across boundaries and often form the foundation of successful environmental justice networks. According to an expert in the field of climate change and indigenous peoples, 'all legal and institutional mechanisms used in the past to deal with environmental issues are neutralized with climate change'.

Vertical networks, or the collaboration with partners outside the movement are also necessary for the long term success of the environmental justice movement because advocates do not always have a large enough power base to win the larger struggle for justice on their own (Cole and Foster 2001). Within the group of vertical networks, respondents identified the increase in collaboration between mainstream environmental organizations and REJOs as relevant to this discussion. 'Although the US environmental justice movement has forced mainstream environmentalism to acknowledge the roles of race and class in shaping environmental inequalities' (Harrison 2014, p 651), conflicts of 'white privilege' and unequal collaboration have historically threatened these potentially productive relationships.

Respondents noted that EJOs felt that diversity and the environmental justice movement were not embraced by mainstream environmental organizations. The goals of EJOs and NGOs have not always created a common space to work within. Respondents noted that there has been a feeling of under-appreciation within successful collaborations. This distrust was already voiced in the early 1990s during the first National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit when 'delegates detailed numerous examples where the unilateral policies, activities, and decision-making practices of environmental organizations have had a negative impact on the social, economic, and cultural survival of communities of color in the United States and around the world' (Alston 2010, p 15).

Although these previous disappointing interactions have created distrust between EJOs and NGOs, many respondents have begun to see the potential partnership as essential to gaining legitimacy and opening up political avenues. Many respondents believe that these collaborations have been strengthened and made more effective through honest and respectful discourse. However, challenges still remain, in particular a lack of understanding of environmental justice communities on the part of NGOs that do not engage with communities on the ground dealing with environmental injustices. In addition, one respondent claimed that a lack of consideration by mainstream organizations of the distributive implications of their policies is a source of primary tension. These groups, she states, are concerned only with the successful passage of a new policy or initiative rather than the full implications across society.

Non-profit organizations (REJOs and community groups) are not the only actors that play a role within the environmental justice movement. Although not discussed in depth with respondents, further research should include the importance of partnerships between local environmental justice groups and other key actors, such as academia, government authorities and the private sector. An example of successful partnerships between local environmental justice groups and government authorities is a local environmental justice community organization that was formed in the 1990s to address numerous contaminated sites and public health issues arising from them in two communities. The organization saw an opportunity to expand discussions with local government and environmental agencies to include equitable neighborhood revitalization and, in 2000, formed a partnership with representatives from the County and the City. With examples like that, our interviewees emphasized how environmental justice groups are finding great success through these public–private partnerships and through them have sought to tackle quality of life concerns to create sustainable and livable communities.

4.3. Broadening of missions and broadening of reach

Another key characteristic of the current environmental justice movement highlighted by respondents is the broadening of missions by environmental justice groups and communities. Today, environmental justice groups not only focus on traditional issues of environmental justice regarding environmental burdens but also work to create 'healthy and sustainable communities'. They push for equal access to environmental goods, such as public green space and healthy foods, and meaningful participation of all residents in decision-making processes. One respondent identified

this change, noting that environmental justice groups have become 'more diverse in mission and focus' incorporating 'health, land use planning and climate' into their priorities.

Examples of this broadening of missions can be found in many REJOs that are currently developing initiatives that combine environmental health, reproductive health, and environmental exposure, linking these concerns with economic and policy development in their communities. These all-encompassing initiatives aim to sustain the overall health of the community rather than address distinct environmental justice concerns separately. The research community has also pushed for framing environmental justice in terms of environmental health risks. By putting environmental health studies at the forefront of environmental justice research, both academics and activists alike have helped provide more informed and compelling evidence about the disproportionate impacts for economically deprived populations and racial minorities (Sexton and Adgate 1999). These evidences have been instrumental in winning court battles and pushing for policy reforms across environmental justice communities (Bullard and Johnson 2000). By moving beyond the inequity issues in the distribution of environmental bads, the environmental justice movement has ultimately redefined 'the concept of the environment, the factors behind the production of injustices, and the pluralist conception of justice' (Scholsberg 2013, p 38). This enables enormous potential for connections to environmental challenges already framed as human rights issues across the world, including access to clean water and arable land, and evictions of people from designated conservation areas.

Another way that the mission of environmental justice has broadened recently is through the merging of social justice with the sustainability movement, calling on communities, governments and organizations to work towards ensuring a 'better quality of life for all, now and into the future, in a just and equitable manner, while living within the limits of supporting ecosystems' (Agyeman *et al* 2003, Agyeman and Evans 2006). This is known as the Just Sustainability Paradigm, reflecting clearly the beliefs and sentiments from our respondents, and not limited to the US but present globally. This ultimate broadening of missions goes beyond demands for a healthy environment, and is made in conjunction with demands for a new (green) economy that includes sustainable economic development opportunities for everyone. A representative of these demands is Anthony Van Johns, an attorney, environmental and civil rights activist, who in 2008 outlined the principles of the Green Collar Economy, an approach to solve both environmental degradation and the socioeconomic disparities linked to the current economic system (Jones and Conrad 2008, Jones 2009). Similarly, an interview respondent emphasized that environmental justice groups are 'tackling issues that are addressing wider concepts of sustainability…not just local conflict, but long-term social, economic and environmental sustainability issues'.

Energy production and environmental justice have long been linked through the history of controversies surrounding the siting of heavy pollution-producing energy facilities such as coal fired power plants and oil refineries (Ottinger 2013). For many years grassroots activists have also pointed to the disproportionate impact of the long-term consequences of global energy choices on low income and minority populations (Scholsberg and Collins 2014). Hurricane Katrina brought issues of climate justice into the spotlight. A nationally acclaimed researcher in the field of environmental justice pointed out how, in general, the climate change debate remains dominated by big NGOs that are able to put lobbyists in government institutions. Key environmental justice groups in the US are responding to this imbalance by shifting their missions to introduce climate change to the center of the discussion. This researcher believes that 'We need to make small, local groups close to the ground pay attention to these issues'. Not all climate policies are created equal. Different approaches to mitigation and adaptation result in very different distribution of burden both in terms of economic hardship and exposure to hazards (Ottinger 2013, Scholsberg and Collins 2014). It is widely recognized among our respondents that climate change will need to be a focus of the environmental justice movement moving forward and climate change activism is growing rapidly at the international scale.

Another mission area expanding rapidly within the environmental justice movement is food justice. As Agyeman and McEntee (2014) explain, 'food justice as a social movement arose largely from urban-located social justice groups that explicitly addressed food inequalities based on race or socioeconomics'. Grassroots organizations work in the field of food justice span issues of pesticide use and exposure to urban food desserts. Many of our respondents were engaged in grassroots efforts surrounding food justice. A lawyer and community organizer stated how 'after years fighting things that are proposed, we are now developing projects to help bring the good things, like a community-led garden. Food desert problems can be solved by providing resources to these communities'.

As the mission of environmental justice has expanded to take on new fields of activism, technology has dramatically expanded outreach capacity of these same groups. Our respondents described how an increase in technological sophistication, has been instrumental in reshaping community action, allowing for better networking between community groups and reaching a greater number and greater diversity of people. The director of a nationally recognized REJO, noted that increased prevalence of social media allowed her organization to realize that their work was

not solitary. A leading academic in the field of environmental justice, explained how 'the web made things easier…you cannot have any funding and you can still spread your word globally…get volunteers to get the word out…that is now the most widely used way to organize'.

This broadening of themes also draws on emerging scholarly voices whose engaged work within communities as legal advocates better positions them to describe what Osofsky (2015) terms law's 'intersectionality' with fields like public health, geography, sociology, and medicine to confront challenges ranging from disability, energy poverty, unfair land use and zoning, or adaptation to corporate environmental damage or climate change for vulnerable populations (Osofsky 2012, Mitchell 2013, Malloy 2014, Dyal Chand 2015). In many ways, the literatures on environmental justice have proliferated, diversified, and integrated alongside organizations themselves. In these respects we are working in a watershed era for environmental justice agendas, with new resources and approaches for tackling the core legal, policy, and international governance challenges that will define a next generation of EJ activism and research.

5. Conclusion

In our study we sought a deeper understanding of the evolution of the contemporary environmental justice movement in the United States through in-depth interviews with 31 prominent environmental justice activists, scholars, and community leaders across the US. This study found that, over the past 30 years, environmental justice communities and groups have responded to growing financial and political pressure in innovative ways. Our interviews looked at insider testimonials of how environmental justice groups and communities have responded to various challenges, representing a vision of the evolution of the environmental justice movement through the lens of activism. These strategic changes have enabled environmental justice groups and communities to gain and maintain a relevant position in the fight against environmental injustices within their communities and elsewhere.

Based on the interviews with prominent environmental justice leaders and activists we identified three primary categories that help describe this evolving response: adoption of formal legal status, emergence of partnerships and networks, and broadening of missions and reach. These findings based on expert insight offer a deeper understanding of how the environmental justice movement in the US has evolved alongside the growth of environmental justice groups.

Although both the literature and respondents recognized that there is still a long way to go and many challenges to be faced, our respondents have helped us understand how, by never detaching themselves from the roots of the environmental justice communities, the environmental justice movement (comprised of both REJOs and non-REJOs) has maintained a kind of mission hybridity (sociopolitical and environmental) that keeps them more honest, more accountable, more capable of continued respect from original stakeholders, making them less susceptible to the kind of critiques international conservation NGOs have received.

Our interviews with recognized experts from the environmental justice movement also gave us some insights into where the movement is going in the near future. The evolution of the environmental justice movement has led to growing partnerships and networks, continual advancement in political legitimacy, and growing 'intersectionality' of key academic fields and disciplines required for robust EJ research and advocacy agendas. One of the strongest common responses we found was around the expansion of organizational goals for the movement as a whole. Further, opinions converged around three primary new directions: climate change, food justice, and environmental health. The growing focus on climate change and international effects of climate change on environmental justice communities has many respondents believing that this will be a determinate for establishing new goals for REJOs and non-REJOs both domestically and internationally. In addition to climate change, environmental health disparities will also be influential in creating future goals of the movement. Many see the continued expansion of the health focus in environmental justice work as creating key new avenues for institutional and scientific partnership. Such strengthening of existing and new partnerships and networks will play an essential role in the fight against environmental injustices across the United States, as competition for both financial and political resources is expected to continue to grow, representing a key constraint for both REJOs and other forms of EJ organizations.

Although in this paper we have focused on how the grassroots activism around environmental justice in the United States has evolved to address the challenges facing the movement, the fight against environmental injustices is a global phenomenon. As globalization exacerbates cross-border and cross-cultural environmental challenges, environmental justice is increasingly an international movement (Speth 2003, Rootes 2005). In many developing countries, questions of the North–South divide in environmental inequality have inspired new activism (Anand 2003, Bullard 2005). At the same time, international environmental organizations are entering the realm of 'cross-movement' activism connecting environmental concerns to international development, corporate globalization, poverty alleviation, indigenous rights and feminism (Carmin and Bast 2009). As the environmental justice movement has grown and evolved to take on new global dimensions, a central question remains how international trends in justice advocacy

will interact with and connect to the US domestic environmental justice movement.

Appendix. Interview questionnaire

Introduction

- Research goals and objectives
  - · Interviews with EJ activists and academics is central to our research and better understanding the circumstances that lead to the formation of EJOs and their influence.
- Additional information to provide to interviewees:
  - · The purpose of this research is to gain a deeper understanding of EJOs, as one of the many types of environmental justice groups. For the purpose of this interview, we are defining an EJO as a registered non-profit organization whose core mission involves protecting people of color, low-income communities and indigenous organizations from environmental and health hazards and advocating for equal access to the decision making process.
  - · We acknowledge that EJOs are just one of many actors within the environmental justice movement. Much research has been done demonstrating the enormous impact of other types of environmental justice groups (including community groups, churches, indigenous groups, youth organizations, community development corporations, etc) on EJ victories across the country. Much less has been written about the role of EJOs and we are hoping to explore these types of groups further in order to understand their place in the wider EJ movement.
- For academic: Do you think this definition is accurate? Is there anything you would change/add? Do you have any questions before we get started?
- For activist: We consider you an active actor within the environmental justice movement. According to our definition your organization *is/is not* considered an EJO. But, do you agree with our definition? Do you consider your organization to be an EJO? Why or why not?

Activists specific interview

- Affiliation with the environmental justice movement
  - · Name and current job title.
  - · How you first became engaged in the EJ movement?
  - · How has your role within the movement changed over the years?
- Tell us about your organization/community group:
  - · When and why was it first formed?
  - · What are some of the major issues it has been involved in over the years?
  - · What would you consider the biggest successes of the organization?
  - · What have been some of the most significant challenges?
  - · To what extent of your organization involved in policy decision making and political advocacy? Do you think there is a trend of increasing involvement in policy within Environmental Justice community?
  - · Moving forward what are the organization/groups goals for the next 5 years?
  - · Can you speak a bit about the structure of your organization and how that relates to the activism you are involved in? (type of leadership, has structure of your organization changed/how?, how many people?, has this changed over time?)
- If an EJO:
  - · What made your organization decide to take steps to become a formal registered nonprofit?
  - · How did that decision impact your relationship with the community?
  - · How did it impact your activism approach to core issues?
  - · What is your relationship with other environmental organizations and EJOs? How has your collaboration with those organizations changed over time?
- If *not* an EJO:
  - · Has your organization considered applying for nonprofit status? follow up Why?
  - · What do you feel are some of the pros and cons of being a registered organization?
  - · How do you think an EJ group's decision to formalize might impact its relationship with the community? If at all?
  - · What is your relationship with other environmental organizations and EJOs? How has your collaboration with those organizations changed over time?

- Academia and grassroots relationship:
  - In what ways does your organization collaborate with the academic community? How often do you work directly with EJ scholars (students or professors) and in what capacity?
  - Do you have any recommendations for other people we should interview for our research?

Academics specific interview

- Affiliation with the environmental justice movement
  - Name and current job title
  - How you first became engaged in studying the EJ movement?
  - What is your primary research focus and how has that changed over the years?
- Structural changes of EJ organizations/groups
  - Intro: As we mentioned before there are several types of environmental justice groups that have helped shape the movement. As the movement has progressed, the diversity of groups and the way in which they have organized has also evolved
  - Based on your expertise, what do you think have been the most significant changes to these groups over time?
  - Do you feel that EJOs (registered nonprofit organizations) are becoming more prevalent?
  - If yes, how do you think this has impacted the broader EJ movement? Relationships between activists and communities? Role in policy advocacy?
  - How do you think the EJ movement and the prevalence of EJOs will progress in the next decade?
  - Do you feel as an EJ scholar that you have strong ties to the activism community? How often do you interact with organizers? In what ways?
  - How do you think indigenous environmental justice groups are unique from other EJ groups and organizations?
- Academia and grassroots relationship
  - What do you feel is the relationship between academia and the EJ grassroots community?
  - Many larger EJOs carry out community-based participatory research as a way of building bridges between academia and local communities. What do you feel are the strengths and weaknesses of this grassroots based research?
  - Do you have any recommendations for other people we should interview for our research?

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