

The Arc of the Moral Universe is Long, But It Bends Towards Justice: The Trajectory of the Environmental Movement and ECRI

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Good evening and thanks for coming to help ECRI celebrate 50 years of activism protecting the RI environment. Before beginning my talk I also want to acknowledge my retiring colleagues Meg Kerr and Rupert Friday. Their work will be missed. Then they will be replaced and the work will go on. I am looking forward to moving to other challenges by the end of the year myself and expect fully that ECRI will continue to move forward

I also need to say that you are getting my side of the story this evening. Everyone would tell this story differently. I also realize that as I shortened this to fit tonite that some of the pieces that hit the floor were the parts that discuss how oppressed communities of the world are their most important advocates and have much to offer to the environmental community. Going forward their leadership and participation will be crucial to keeping the planet and all communities healthy

The Arc of the Moral Universe is long, but it bends towards justice is not the exact quote abolitionist Theodore Parker penned in the 1840's when speaking of the inevitability of the ending of slavery, but it later inspired Martin Luther King Jr and it is how we think of it today.

Clearly most of the environmental groups that popped up in the United States as the passenger pigeons were being wiped out and the Bison slaughtered were founded by people as racist as the general population. Even if many of their members were not racists, which is not a given. the tone of the large environmental non profits was let us protect land, water, and wildlife with no real thoughts about the people who lived on the land, from time immemorial, or the relationship between long standing communities and the land the invaders wanted to think of as uninhabited wilderness.

All of North America is stolen land, and it is only now that western thinkers and scholars are beginning to understand that in North America, and actually across the entire world, indigenous communities have developed cultural adaptations that enabled them to harvest more for their communities while still maintaining healthy ecosystems, and have in many cases successfully managed these eco/cultural systems for thousands of years.

The Clean Air Act, the Clean Water Act, and the National Environmental Policy Act have been critical in efforts to clean up our air, waters, and neighborhoods; though how well depends upon whose neighborhood unfortunately. The sins of omission, the refusal to limit pollution in sacrifice zones even as some places got cleaner, clearly is part of the racist and classist trends that American politics has followed throughout history. The Black, Indigenous, and low income communities of color that have been the nation's dumping grounds reflect the

power structure of the United States as well as anything we see today except for racialized policing and the suppression of the vote. But even from its beginnings there were many active in the environmental movement that understood that justice was how we get to a clean environment; even if justice was not centered in the environmental movement.

The burst of progress beginning with the Voting Rights Act and the Civil Rights Act and continuing through the passage of key environmental legislation not only brought about the founding of ECRI, it also brought immense pushback, officially beginning with future Supreme Court Justice Lewis Powell's Chamber of Commerce memo in which the super rich declared war on progress, and began a massive 50 year PR campaign that is grounded in the racist neoliberal economic plans that came out of universities in Virginia. The campaign not only bequeathed to us horrible economic policy, it offered us attacks on democracy, voter suppression, underfunded infrastructure, and environmental roll backs. Unfortunately, the founders of neo liberalism understood quite well that no one would vote for their program if it was discussed honestly so they created the Big Lie.

These days almost anyone paying attention realizes that undercutting democracy and legislating injustice is almost always accompanied by an anti-environmental position so as to protect the profits of the super rich, but in the mid 1980's there was one group that specifically linked man's inhumanity to man to the destruction of the environment. While they continue to be a marginal piece of the American political and environmental story, the Green Party's slogan of Ecology, Equality, Democracy, Peace, chosen in 1984, reminded us that everything is connected and shows that even in the dimly lit past many in the environmental movement have always stood for justice, racial and economic, and understood that progress on all these issues is intimately connected.

Robert Bullard really began the process of opening eyes in the environmental community about environmental injustice with *Dumping in Dixie* in 1990. I read it and it opened my eyes.

Democracy has always been critical to ecological healing. Communities/governments where the people cannot be heard, where demonstrating is not allowed, where petitioning the government is stonewalled, Never take care of the environment, never care about public health, never tell people what is poisoning them. Authoritarians never let community opposition keep them from allowing the rich to do whatever they want in pursuit of profits.

Communities need the right to say no. Whether it is RIDOT wasting our money destroying Kennedy Plaza. Washington Park residents looking to stop the building of a dump, or the people of Burrillville rising up against a power plant, the right of a community to say no would save all of us big headaches.

I want to mention how important the study and discipline of anthropology has been to the development of some of the good trends we see,. Anthropology has roots as racist as any

academic discipline, but even from its earliest periods it had people that understood that skin color is malleable in evolutionary time in response to the amount of sunshine a community receives and that under the skin we are all pretty much the same. In the early 1950's a number of anthropologists were openly condemning racism as an idea with no scientific underpinnings.

One useful thing anthropologists have been able to do is to offer some intellectual heft and the amplification of indigenous voices around the world on the topic of how good indigenous stewards of the land are when their land base is intact, And how important indigenous communities maintaining their control of their land is to the future of the planet. This meme has radically changed conservation biology and laws on land tenure around the world and now local communities are at the heart of preserving and repairing the ecosystems that sustain them as well as benefitting from some of the tourists who are sustained by experiencing ecosystems in good hands. Applied locally it means being allies of the people organizing to protect their own communities.

Given my background in anthropology maybe it is not surprising that for about 20 years I have used the slogan "You cannot heal ecosystems without ending poverty, you cannot end poverty without healing ecosystems. I came up with it based on my understanding of how the poorest people live in the most degraded ecosystems, whether it is gatherers and swidden farmers in West Papua displaced by an iron mine, dump pickers in the Philippines, the residents of cancer alley in East Texas, or residents of Southside fighting natural gas expansion and dumps on Allen's Ave. The converse is also true. People living in healthy environments, if they have access to the resource base, have better nutrition and are healthier.

ECRI has not in the past been an outlier on issues of justice. Many ECRI activists care deeply about justice and have included justice advocacy in their lives. But we swam in the cultural stream as an organization. I do not think since 1990 we have shied away from environmental justice, it is just that we did not center it. About 12 years ago, to give a boost to work on environmental justice, ECRI was a part of group that created the Environmental Justice League of RI, which as much good as it did, did not do all we had hoped precisely because it was created by well meaning outsiders rather than arising from the community. A lesson to us all.

Recently, with the wave of issues around climate justice, fossil fuels, and the port a rooted EJ movement has started to take hold in Providence. Like many of these things, it was not any generic organizing that got it moving, it was a reaction to very specific threats to communities that activated people and organizations. ECRI has welcomed this organizing but there has been some tension over what ECRI brings to the table, the nature of the challenges, and what community groups would like to see from ECRI.

ECRI always has capacity issues, it mostly works on what its members want it to, so newcomers may find less than they wish in the way of support, often not understanding how few resources ECRI has, which are mostly the energy and knowledge of the advocates of the various member organizations that work together at ECRI. Sometimes it is hard to ponder how slow a coalition of 60 member organizations changes. These are the issues we have asked Resolve Conservation to work with us on.

One thing I have been pondering is that often the misunderstandings we encounter are with organizations very involved in elections, and using legislation to push an elections agenda rather than good governance. ECRI has been wise to stay out of the endorsements and elections business, as that allows us to focus on the work that goes on no matter who is in office.

The boost that Black Lives Matter has given to the movements for justice is immense. The push has permeated nearly every part of the environmental movement, adding to the pressures the climate justice movement of the youth was starting to generate. We can see it in all the large national environmental organizations, such as the National Wildlife Federation, which is proactively pushing its staff, board, and affiliates to center justice. We can see it in the ECRI membership with those organizations that clearly see justice in their mission moving faster than those with a little distance from these issues due to geography or topics of interest.

Sunrise has been important. Especially in its beginning phases it electrified the climate movement, expanding it, demanding that it center justice and demanding that communities and politicians rise up to actually meet the challenges of the climate catastrophe. And for the first time the climate/environment movement had a segment that reflected the diversity of America.

The work of the community groups focused on the port of Providence and the environmental mess there has been fabulous. The People's Port Authority and all of its predecessors and allied neighborhood organizations have changed the discussion in the city and contributed to real changes in city ordinances. The Conservation Law Foundation has been a resource for the neighbors, and other ECRI organizations and members, especially those based in Providence, have deepened connections with residents and expanded their activism along Allen's Ave.

If we honestly assess ECRI's contribution to forward progress, it is on a variety of fronts. We have recently been more ready to respond to calls for help and resolutions in support of front line urban communities. We have been more ready to support legislation of interest to EJ groups. We have taken upon ourselves to help the environmental community in RI and in our networks address these issues even as we work on ourselves. Often this work is

facilitated by ECRI connections, even if it is not officially an ECRI project. Just do not ask us to endorse half-baked bills.

I also hope that as people focused on ecology that we remember how important diversity is to environments and ecological stability and that all of us woven together are stronger and make more progress than all of us working alone. On a personal note I relish the idea that the next person in the ECRI office will reflect the changes in the environmental movement in ways that a dinosaur like me cannot and therefore help us connect better to the future movement..

Could ECRI do better, sure, everyone and every organization can do better. But we are moving forward, and are now trying to speed up the process with the help of experts. Whether the experts provide us with things we can use or not, the arc of the moral universe is bending toward justice and we are consciously trying to flow with it. We shall find new ways to bind our community together, we will better incorporate justice into our understanding of environmental issues, we shall better understand how issues are connected, and we shall be better neighbors and allies for front line communities. It will be a bit messy, misunderstandings and history will make it a bit bumpy. But we are all aware that the issues we all care about will only be resolved if we pay attention to the moral arc and move consciously towards justice. I look forward to a better ECRI.