

ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE (2014)



Policy Statement

ASLA believes that all persons have the right to equitable access to environmental and community benefits in order to have a healthy environment in which to live, work, and learn. No group of people should bear a disproportionate share of the negative consequences resulting from public or private development, operations, or policies. Planning and design decision-making processes should provide for fair and meaningful public participation opportunities for all communities and interests. Environmental and community planning and design should equitably assess and balance the socioeconomic impacts of proposed environmental and land-use decisions. Moreover, ASLA encourages policies and practices that proactively recognize the presence and needs of vulnerable populations and works to ensure that their concerns and constraints are equitably addressed.

Rationale

The United States Environmental Protection Agency defines environmental justice as 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. There are many attributes that may make a population or individual vulnerable to harm or disadvantage by their environmental context. The Agency for Health Care Policy and Research defined vulnerable populations as “those made vulnerable by financial circumstances, place of residence, health, age, or functional/ developmental status; ability to communicate effectively; presence of chronic or terminal illness or disability; or personal characteristics. (1998)”

Historically, poor or minority communities and disenfranchised groups have been disproportionately exposed to environmental hazards and harmful environmental conditions. The environmental justice movement has utilized grassroots activism to focus on the rights and liberties of people of color and low-income communities in response to the disproportionate burden of industrial pollution and lack of regulatory enforcement in these communities. For example, numerous case studies have shown that neighborhoods with lower income and education levels are likely to have greater air pollution exposure. These same communities and groups have disproportionately decreased access to environmental benefits such as parks, green amenities, recreational opportunities, transportation services, health care facilities and healthy food supplies. Frequently, these groups and communities have not been afforded equitable participation in the decision-making process and the impacts on their community or group have not been adequately assessed and considered.

The goal of this policy is to encourage an environment where all people enjoy the same degree of protection from environmental and health hazards and equal access to the decision-making process to maintain a healthy environment in which to live, learn, and work. Fundamental to achieving this goal is the ability for meaningful involvement by all persons. This requires a process in which people have an opportunity to participate in decisions about activities that may affect their environment and/or health and assurance that their concerns will be considered in the decision making process. This may require decision makers to seek out and facilitate the involvement of those potentially affected, to provide for the equitable representation of vulnerable or isolated populations.