

Just Food Initiative of Fox Valley's Writing Contest Winning Entry

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How does food justice relate to environmental justice? Well, the two are intricately intertwined. Environmental justice cannot be achieved without food justice being an integral part of it. The 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.” Furthermore, the EPA asserts that environmental justice will be achieved when we all have the same level of protection from environmental and health hazards and the same decision-making access to be able to promote a healthy environment within our own communities. On the other hand, food justice is generally considered the fundamental human right for all people and communities to grow, eat, and sell healthy food.

Unfortunately, the government has a long, sordid history of promoting practices and supporting environmental and real estate legislation that has marginalized and harmed many underserved communities through practices like redlining and discriminatory housing practices, allowing polluting industries to operate without proper safeguards and failing to remediate known environmental hazards and toxins in underserved communities, prioritizing business and economic development and incentives in higher income communities, discriminatory practices by the USDA toward farmers in underserved communities, and the list goes on and on. In order to turn this trajectory around, we need equally aggressive efforts and solutions to counteract these toxic practices.

In cities and towns across the country, environmental hazards directly block a resident's ability to grow healthy food at home. In cities like Chicago, the high presence of lead in the water pipe system and also in the soil limits an affected resident's ability to grow vegetables in ground without the real concern of contaminated soil and contaminated water. Factory pollutants and chemical runoff pushed into nearby streams and lakes can make those water sources no longer viable for crop production. Furthermore, areas with food apartheid make it so that while some communities have many options for fresh, healthy, affordable foods, many of the same marginalized communities that are fighting for clean air, soil, and water, also have limited grocery store, farmer's market, and community garden access.

Environmental justice starts with everyone having the right to have clean air, soil, and water within their community. Once those big 3 fundamentals are in place everywhere, then it becomes easier to develop homegrown solutions to address food justice because each community will be able to become more resilient and self-sufficient. Supporting and educating communities about successfully growing, selling, and eating healthy food reminds me of the old idiom, “give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.” Mitigating the environmental hazards in marginalized communities and ensuring that these communities have the needed support to become more self-reliant in developing and controlling their own healthy food supply and distribution systems will pay eternal dividends. It's also simply the right thing to do.