The environmental movement and the environmental justice movement are distinct but sometimes overlapping struggles. The environmental justice movement is founded in the intersection of the civil rights movement and the environmental movement. While civil rights activists were struggling for basic human rights, environmentalists were working to preserve wilderness areas and conserve forests.
Although occasionally they have been able to unite in common cause, for the most part, the two groups have had a relationship fraught with conflict and distrust.

The environmental justice movement solidified in 1987 when the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice issued Toxic Waste and Race in the United States, a report that concluded race, more than class or wealth, was the strongest determining factor when examining areas where toxic wastes were located. It was the first national study to correlate waste facility siting and race.

As tensions were rising between civil rights organizations and industrial interests, so were the tensions beginning to boil over between traditional environmental organizations and those in the environmental justice movement. Frustrated by a lack of support from traditional environmental organizations, African-American activists began to accuse traditional environmental organizations of discriminatory environmentalism. Adding to the divide was the fundamental difference in how the two factions defined the environment.

Traditional environmentalists have a vision of environment as a place preserved separate from human habitation. An environmental justice definition of environment is broader and includes the “place where we live, work, learn and play.” As one commentator noted:

When people of color and the poor find their environmental identity and social location in the industrial and hazardous settings, they become marginalized from the mainstream, naturalistic definition of environmentalism. As a result, these industrial environments become “unenvironmental” and “non-natural” to our mainstream environmental sensibilities and the people associated with these unenvironmental settings become marginalized from the political attention of environmental groups.5

On Feb. 11, 1994, President Bill Clinton issued Executive Order #12898 to address concerns that minority and low-income populations were bearing the brunt of hosting facilities and activities producing unacceptable levels of pollution and contamination compared to white and/or more affluent communities in the United States. Although an executive order lacks the force of law, it nevertheless sent a message about the President’s policy stance on the issue and helped galvanize grassroots efforts to combat the problem. It also sent a message to the environmentalists that embracing the movement could advance their separate agenda and, if nothing more, improve their image tarnished by accusations in 1990 from African-American activists that the groups used classicism, racism and exclusionary practices in hiring and selecting board members.

Environmental organizations’ and governmental agencies’ response to the attacks from activists and the emerging national agenda to combat the disproportional impact of pollution on low-income and minority communities was inconsistent. To compensate for exclusionary practices, many environmental groups and environmental agencies introduced environmental justice committees. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) now maintains an active environmental justice commission and many state environmental agencies have some sort of an environmental justice section. These responses helped to forge alliances between environmental justice advocates and mainstream groups, but such alliances haven’t remained galvanized.6

In an effort to allow the autonomy they felt low-income and minority communities needed in setting their own agendas and strategies, environmentalists remained on the sidelines when battles arose over pollution affecting these communities, particularly in urban areas. This move seems inconsistent with establishing environmental justice committees internally and hiring staff and appointing minorities to boards. That is not to say the mainstream groups never establish coalitions with the local grass roots; it appears, however, when they did get involved in environmental justice issues, it was to protect their romanticized vision of the environment which doesn’t include urban and densely populated “non-natural” environments.

Several national environmental groups joined with civil rights, faith-based, legal and academic centers to defeat the Shintech Title V permit planned for Convent, La., in 1997, causing Shintech to suspend its efforts to build a PVC plant in Convent. However, Shintech moved forward and, in short order, built a slightly smaller plant in a more densely populated community in another parish in Louisiana with no fight from environmentalists at all.

Further, while the fight was raging to stop the Shintech permits in Convent, an upscale, suburban community in California was successful in removing napalm buried in its community and transporting it to a spices plant near Scotlandville, La. (a minority community near Baton Rouge), where it was burned as an alternative fuel source — again — with little or no opposition from mainstream environmentalists who decided to leave this battle to local politicians and community leaders.

Many environmental justice advocates believe President Barack Obama has assembled an environmental justice army of sorts and that environmental justice might finally get its due.7 EPA Administrator Lisa P. Jackson served 16 years in the federal EPA before heading the New Jersey Department of Environmental Quality in 2006. She is credited with ordering the cleanup of many contaminated sites within the state during her tenure. She also has New Orleans connections and had family directly affected by Hurricane Katrina.8 Carol M. Browner, former EPA administrator in the Clinton Administration, is President Obama’s assistant for Energy and Climate Change. White House Council on Environmental Quality Chair Nancy Sutley worked for California’s EPA and, under Gov. Gray Davis, drafted an environmental justice

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policy to protect low-income and minority communities from pollution caused by development.

President Obama’s choices in other areas could link the many social justice concerns of environmental justice activists to the concerns of traditional environmentalists. Department of Housing and Urban Development Director Shaun Donovan is a long-time supporter of affordable housing. Office of Urban Policy Director Adolfo Carrion has been a champion of both affordable and energy-efficient, green-quality sustainable housing for low-income people. His domestic policy czar, Melody Barnes, once was a director for the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and is a strong proponent of income equity. Secretary of Labor Hilda L. Solis is focused on green jobs.9

An environmental justice army may be what is needed to handle the brewing debate over the permits for a steel plant with sights set on an old environmental justice battlefield. Nucor Inc., a North Carolina steelmaker, announced it is proposing a $2.1 billion pig iron plant in St. James Parish at the same site that Shintech Corp. abandoned amid environmental controversy in 1997.10 Will the environmental justice movement be revived and reunited with environmentalists to defeat this permit as it did in 1997, or will social justice concerns and the state of the economy play a role in offering avenues for the company and community to work collaboratively on principled options for co-existence?

FOOTNOTES

2. Id.
3. Id.
6. After several years of endorsing an environmental justice agenda, when faced with budgetary pressures in 1997, Greenpeace slid back into its former disposition. Further, a shift in leadership forced environmental justice advocates off of boards of directors. Environmental justice projects were shut down and many members involved in these projects were either dismissed or transferred to more mainstream projects. See, Bill Lawson, Faces of Environmental Racism: Confronting Issues of Global Justice, 2nd Edition (2001).
7. Online article, “Will Environmental Justice Finally Get its Due? Obama’s environment, energy and urban affairs appointees are poised to enact policies that environmental justice activists have long been pushing for,” Brentin Mock, Dec. 22, 2008. See, www.prospect.org/cs/articles?article=will_environmental_justice_finally_get_its_du.
8. Lisa Jackson, born in Philadelphia, Pa., was adopted weeks after her birth. After her adoption, she moved to the Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans and spent her childhood there. In 1979, she graduated as valedictorian at St. Mary’s Dominican High School in New Orleans. She graduated summa cum laude from the School of Chemical Engineering at Tulane University. She earned a master’s degree in chemical engineering from Princeton University. Her adoptive mother continued to live in New Orleans until Hurricane Katrina flooded the city in 2005.
9. Id.

Nannette Jolivette Brown, JD, LL.M. (energy and environment), is a visiting assistant clinical professor of law at Loyola University College of Law Mediation Clinic. As a trained mediator, she has mediated more than 100 disputes. (7214 St. Charles Ave., Box 902, New Orleans, LA 70118)