The environmental movement grapples with social justice in the age of Trump

This year, big environmental stories also had big social justice components. What happens now?

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In late August, a group of protesters, led by the Standing Rock Sioux, blocked construction sites for the Dakota Access pipeline at Cannon Ball, North Dakota. In the days that followed, more protesters—known internally as water protectors—joined the burgeoning camp, until their numbers swelled to the thousands. The protesters were diverse in their origins—some were Standing Rock Sioux, some came from other indigenous tribes, some came climate activist groups.

By the beginning of December—when the Army Corps of Engineers finally denied approval for the pipeline to cross beneath the Missouri River near the Standing Rock reservation's main source of drinking water—the camp of protesters had grown to include military veterans, activists from other countries, even people who had chosen to give up their jobs to move to the camp permanently.

The activists at Standing Rock were brought together for a single purpose: to halt construction of the Dakota Access pipeline, which would transfer oil from North Dakota to Illinois. But within that purpose, they found many causes—from indigenous rights to racial justice to climate activism. Writ large, the movement at Standing Rock wasn't simply an environmental fight over a pipeline; it was a social justice movement meant to push back against the power that strips indigenous communities of their treaty rights and then builds a fossil fuel pipeline through that same land.

The idea that the forces that engender environmental degradation and those that engender racial and economic inequality is not a new one. The environmental justice movement has been fiercely active for decades, growing largely out of the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s. But this year, in places like Standing Rock and Flint, Michigan—where thousands of residents, predominantly low-income and African American, were exposed to long-term lead poisoning through their drinking water—the concept of environmental justice became more than a thread in the fabric of the environmental movement; it was the loom that made the tapestry possible.

The environmental movement's gradual but marked embrace of environmental justice has come at a time of unprecedented attention to the issue at the federal level. The Obama administration's EPA has sought to make environmental justice a priority within the agency, releasing detailed plans about how to take race, income, and other factors into account when crafting environmental policies and regulations. But the movement is at a crossroads, facing an incoming administration that seems to care little for the

environment or social justice. So where does the movement—finally on the brink of breaking into the mainstream—go from here?

At the end of October, climate activist Bill McKibben took to the pages of the New York Times to argue that the construction of the Dakota Access pipeline had to be stopped. The primary reason, he said, was environmental racism.

"Originally, the pipeline was supposed to cross the Missouri just north of Bismarck, until people pointed out that a leak there would threaten the drinking water supply for North Dakota's second biggest city," McKibben wrote. "The solution, in keeping with American history, was obvious: make the crossing instead just above the Standing Rock reservation, where the poverty rate is nearly three times the national average. This has been like watching the start of another Flint, Mich., except with a chance to stop it."

Standing Rock took place in rural North Dakota, while the Flint water crisis took place in one of Michigan's largest cities. But the similarities between the two events are striking. In both cases, national attention was drawn to an environmental disaster, actualized or impending, that affected communities of color the most.

Surveys and studies have long shown that minority and low-income communities tend to bear the brunt of environmental problems. A 2012 study by the NAACP found that communities of color are more likely to be located near a polluting coal plant. A 2016 study by Environment Pennsylvania found that potentially explosive oil trains are more likely to run through communities of color. Toxic landfills, like those that store dangerous contaminants like PCBs, tend to end up near poor communities or communities of color. According to a survey by the Center for Effective Government, people of color are twice as likely to live within a mile of a dangerous chemical facility.

There are a number of potential explanations as to why the water crisis in Flint, or the protests at Standing Rock, captivated the national attention in a way not usually seen by individual environmental justice movements. It can be partially attributed to the fact that the events were so large—thousands of protesters camping for months on end, or an entire city poisoned by its own water supply—it was impossible for the mainstream media to ignore them completely.

But Lisa Garcia, vice president of litigation for healthy communities at EarthJustice, thinks that the attention given to the environmental injustices in Flint and Standing Rock might represent an emerging understanding from the mainstream environmental community—and the nation at large—that environmental issues are often inextricable from larger issues like racism or economic inequality.

"I think, just generally, maybe we have come to a place where people are becoming more aware that we have to live holistically with each other, and we have to accept that some people have to go hungry and that's not right, that some people have lead in their water, and that's egregious," Garcia said.

Becky Kelley, president of the Washington Environmental Council—an environmental organization now in its 50th year—has seen this realization take place from within the environmental community, especially in the last few years.

"There has been a growing recognition in recent years that we were viewing our environmental work in too much of a silo, as if environmental protection weren't innately connected to all these other social and societal issues," Kelley said. "We are

recognizing that you really can't silo off environmental protection and environmental degradation from how people are doing economically."

A primary critique of the environmental movement has been its overwhelming whiteness: the staffs of many of the largest environmental groups are white, and those predominantly white organizations tend to receive more money, and are more able to dictate the national conversation, than small environmental organizations doing community-based work. Some of the earliest and most significant wins for the mainstream environmental movement came from policies that were crafted at the very highest level by white policy makers, like the Clean Air Act and the Clean Water Act. For too long, critics say, environmentalism has been focused on nature to the exclusion of the most at-risk communities.

But a series of high-profile defeats—from the failure to pass a cap-and-trade bill at the national level in 2009 to the routing of environmentally-minded candidates backed by Tom Steyer in the 2014 midterms—caused some traditional environmental organizations to take a step back and look inward for solutions.

In California, where Latinos have been the state's largest single ethnic group since 2014, local environmental justice organizations have worked with state regulators and local politicians to raise the profile of how air pollution disproportionately impacts communities of color in California, and how those communities have felt little relief from the state's landmark cap-and-trade program, which began in 2006. Their efforts paid off this year: when California passed a law deepening its emissions reduction targets, it also passed a law requiring the state to prioritize direct emission reductions over market-based systems, which in turn would benefit communities of color—a compromise seen by many as being made possible by the pressure from the environmental justice movement.

In Washington state, where Kelley works, a similar transformation has been taking place within some of the state's most established environmental groups—but that the process hasn't been without its own growing pains.

"When you're in a privileged place, sometimes it takes a long time and a lot of painful examples of what isn't working to re-examine your privilege, because it is comfortable," Kelley said. "I think we had to be humbled and broken down a little bit and grapple with our weakness in a way that made us willing to reflect on what's not working about our movement."

The state's environmental community grappled with the importance of including diverse voices in environmental policy head-on in 2016 through the drama of a carbon tax initiative—the only such initiative in the country on the ballot this November. The initiative was written by Yoram Baumann, an environmental economist who believed that a revenue-neutral carbon tax that funneled the money raised into tax cuts, both for low-income Washingtonians and businesses, would be the best path forward for climate action in the state.

But in crafting the initiative, Baumann and his colleagues at CarbonWA, a group created to help pass a revenue-neutral carbon tax in the state, failed to make low-income communities and communities of color feel like they had sufficient say in the process. And that cost them a lot of support from environmental groups that they had counted on—from the Washington Environmental Council to the Sierra Club, which argued that

for a price on carbon to be good policy, it had to include input from those hardest hit by environmental and climate degradation.

The initiative failed, and Washington will be forced to return to the legislature—or voters in 2018—to try to put a price on carbon. But the lessons of the campaign have reverberated both throughout Washington and into some corners to the mainstream environmental movement: leave out communities of color, pass up a chance to make environmental progress a social justice issue, and the road to success will be difficult.

"As much of a failure as it was, I consider it a win at the local level because of the lesson that it offers," Anthony Rogers-Wright, policy and organizing director for Environmental Action, said. "I would agree that this is a moment for the environmental movement to learn from. Whether they will, that remains to be seen."

In Washington, groups like the Washington Environmental Council are moving forward with the recognition that environmental issues can attract more than just conservationists. In early 2015, Kelley and other local leaders helped form the Alliance for Jobs and Clean Energy, a kind of social justice juggernaut that brings together groups from labor, environment, social justice, religion, public health, and business, to help combat issues of environmental and social injustice. The group is currently working on its final proposal for its version of a carbon tax, which it hopes to bring to the legislature in 2017.

"If you believe that the power structures that are causing environmental degradation, racial oppression, and destabilizing the middle class, are the same folks, we really ought to make common cause and we have to combine our political power in order to make progress," Kelley said.

Environmental justice work has been carried out for decades by community organizations working at the grassroots level to connect issues of racial discrimination and poverty to environmental degradation. But there are some mechanisms at the federal level that can help give environmental justice work a boost—and those programs now face an uncertain future under President-elect Donald Trump.

Trump campaigned on a promise to cut climate research and regulations but champion clean air and clean water. But his actions tell a different story: he has tapped vocal EPA critic Oklahoma Attorney General Scott Pruitt as EPA administrator, ExxonMobil CEO Rex Tillerson as Secretary of State, coal-friendly Rep. Ryan Zinke (R-MT) for Secretary of the Interior, and former Texas governor Rick Perry as Secretary of Energy. These are men with ties to the fossil fuel industry, some of whom have shown deep distrust of the very agencies they have been selected to lead. Environmental groups are especially concerned with Pruitt as EPA administrator; Benjamin Schreiber, climate and energy program director for Friends of the Earth, argued that Pruitt's nomination shows Trump is ready to "wage war on clean air and clean water."

When the EPA was first created, it did not have any specific mandate to consider environmental justice concerns in its work. That changed, slightly, in the early years of the Clinton administration. In 1994, President Clinton issued an executive order requiring the federal government to consider environmental justice in their programs and their decision-making. But the order, according to David Konisky,

associate professor at Indiana University, was largely symbolic—little changed, from a federal standpoint, with regards to environmental justice.

The situation improved in really fundamental ways under the Obama administration. Obama's first EPA administrator, Lisa Jackson—the first person of African American descent to serve as EPA administrator—made environmental justice one of the agency's top priorities, creating policy guidance for how agencies should consider environmental justice concerns in their rules and programs. That work eventually resulted in the release of Plan EJ 2014, the EPA's plan for including environmental justice in their programs and policies. That roadmap has since been extended to EJ 2020—though it faces an uncertain future under Trump.

Trump and Pruitt could choose to handle environmental justice in any number of ways, from continuing the Obama administration's focus on the issue (an unlikely scenario) to choosing not to prioritize the issue at all. They could choose to cut funding for key environmental justice grants, which help community organizations do environmental justice work at the grassroots level, and could choose not to fund remediation for polluted sites like brownfields. And, in what environmental justice advocates consider a worst case scenario, Trump could choose to rescind Clinton's executive order—an order that has survived through one Republican presidency already, albeit in different political times.

"The EPA is not mandated by law to consider environmental justice," Konisky said. "Anything that the agency decides to do is purely discretionary—and it's those kinds of policies that can be easily set aside by any incoming administration."

Another possible result of a Trump EPA headed by a man that has been a vocal critic of the EPA's central mission could be that enforcement of environmental violations—from illegal pollution discharges to air quality violations—might simply go unenforced at the federal level. That's something that concerns EarthJustice's Garcia, who notes that the EPA is already known for lagging behind on enforcement—especially when it comes to environmental violations that are also civil rights violations.

In 2015, a Center for Public Integrity investigation found that the EPA's Office of Civil Rights had dismissed nine out of every 10 complaints alleging environmental discrimination, numbers that were later supported by the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights. It's likely that number will only rise under Trump—or that Pruitt might choose to abolish the EPA's Office of Civil Rights altogether.

"Forget about environmentalists saying, you could do better," Garcia said. "Communities are faced with the fact that even the laws we do have aren't being complied with by facilities in their backyard. Rolling back resources or efforts to make sure that there is compliance—that's the one big thing that could go away."

But for all the struggles likely to come at the federal level, environmental justice activists say that the Trump administration offers community organizations an opportunity to redouble their efforts to bring social justice and environmental progress together.

"You have an equation that is going to call for more local, community-based resistance. You can't have environmental justice if you're not going to have a Department of Justice that is unwilling to investigate and enforce these infractions against communities of color," Rogers-Wright said. "If the environmental movement wants to remain significant, they are going to have to go into these communities more than ever."

For Garcia—who has worked in environmental justice for decades—it's the past resiliency of the movement that gives her the most hope for its future.
"Environmental justice survived under the Bush administration," she said. "The environmental justice movement, and the leaders in it—even our young leaders now—they are not afraid of an unfriendly government or not having great partners in the federal government. They are resilient and they are going to do the great work that needs to be done."