

ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES ARE SOCIAL JUSTICE ISSUES

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I [continue](#) to reject the idea that environmental issues are somehow different than other [social](#) justice issues and that the working class and environmentalism are irreconcilable enemies. That's because environmental issues are issues of power and justice and thus workers suffer more than the rich and people of color suffer more than whites. [That includes wildfires.](#)

Having grown up in San Diego, Ian Davies has strong memories of the 2003 Cedar Fire, which at the time was California's largest-ever wildfire.

Now, as a graduate student at the [University](#) of Washington, Mr. Davies has published a new study on wildfires, and on who is most at risk. "My sort of anecdotal memory of the wildfires is that the people who were most affected were, you know, white folks," he said. "So what we wanted to do was examine areas where wildfires are likely to occur in the U.S. and actually dig deep and see what types of communities are most vulnerable."

The study, which appears in the journal PLoS One this month, suggests that people of color, especially Native Americans, face more risk from wildfires than whites. It is another example of how the kinds of disasters exacerbated by climate change often hit minorities and the poor the hardest.

Floods, hurricanes and fires may be natural phenomena, Mr. Davies said, "but what makes them dangerous, what turns them into the disaster, is the social and political factors."

Mr. Davies, working with researchers at the Nature Conservancy, a conservation nonprofit, began by identifying which regions in the United States were most at risk for

severe wildfires. Their results included the Western United States, but also parts of the Southeast where fires will become more common under climate change.

They found that 29 million people in the United States live in high-risk locations. Most of them are white and not poor. But the researchers then used census data to identify 12 million people with characteristics that made them especially vulnerable to the effects of wildfires. Mr. Davies called those socioeconomic circumstances “adaptive capacity.”

“They are things that would make someone more vulnerable and less able to adapt to a wildfire if it occurred,” he said.

The people with the greatest vulnerability were disproportionately people of color. But it was not because these people were living in places that were more likely to burn in a fire.

Instead, the factors included things like [access](#) to a car — critical for evacuations — and whether the people spoke English fluently. In 2017, as three fires raged across California’s Napa County, most emergency messages were delivered in English even though 30 percent of Napa’s population identifies as Hispanic.

All issues are about power. Who has it and who does not have it sets the parameters of the struggle. And thus people of color are more affected by wildfire because they lack that power.