


Marrying Anthropocentrism to Ecocentrism: The Rising Voices of Dissent in American Environmentalism

 DOI 10.18422/66-01

by Mohamed E. Bakari

In light of multiple significant incidents in its contemporary history, the American environmental movement (EM) seems to be at a crossroads as the national consensus on this movement—forged during the 1970s—starts to crack under the strain of rising challenges. Communities most adversely affected by environmental hazards—usually referred to as communities of color and labor—now seem to be estranged from and ignored by a mostly ecocentric movement they can hardly identify with. Against such a backdrop, I examine the emergence of new dissenting ‘anthropocentric’ voices within the American EM—most notably the Environmental Justice Movement (EJM)—and discuss the multiple facets of the anthropocentric-ecocentric divide and its bearing on the evolution of the movement. I will further analyze whether the emerging sustainability discourse will be able to contain this ideological divide and offer a reconciliation framework for a harmonization of these movements’ objectives, policies, and modes of activism.

Introduction

- 1 After various phases of evolution and with multiple new tributaries now feeding in its theoretical underpinnings and modes of activism, modern American environmentalism has significantly metamorphosed from mere conservation and preservation groups into a more comprehensive and diverse movement over the course of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century. This transformation has become even more salient in two main respects: Firstly, unlike the movement’s initial era, which focused on the protection or efficient management of the natural environment with conservationism and preservationism as its two main theoretical tributaries, modern environmentalism now focuses more on protecting nature by pushing governments to adopt stricter environmental laws and regulations. Secondly, modern environmentalism has succeeded in accommodating different segments of American society as it tackled diverse social, racial, and ethnic issues in an attempt to integrate them into its main cause.
- 2 During the last few decades, however, voices of dissent within the environmental movement grew all the more conspicuous as new rebellious groups sprang into action. As tension rose between these dissenting groups and the mainstream movement, a divide between the ecocentric voices (who want to focus on purely ecological issues) and the anthropocentric ones (who want to focus on such issues as environmentally safe working conditions and a fair distribution of environmental problems in the community) began to surface. Ultimately, this divide led to clashes between the different groups and the integrity of the EM started to be called into question nationwide.

Evolution of Environmental Tributaries

- 3 With its multiple variations, intricacies, and conflicts, the American EM has puzzled social movement theorists as how to categorize it. History shows, for instance, that the variety of ideological underpinnings and organizational structures within the American EM seems to have helped its survival and continuity over decades of hardships and struggles (Silveira 519). Despite the widespread claims of the growing multiplicity within the EM, the lack-of-diversity stigma constitutes one of the main criticisms directed at the movement. While some studies point to the dominance of ecocentric issues, other researchers (e.g., Agyeman, Bullard, and Evans *Just Sustainabilities*; Dowie; Hays) point out that most members of these various eco-groups were mostly wealthy, white, Anglo-Saxon males who enjoyed outdoor activities, such as hunting, fishing, and camping. Hence, the ecocentrism-anthropocentrism divide marked the evolution of American environmentalism as conservationists and preservationists had “disputes among elites—between those who wished to leave the natural environment in a pristine state and those who viewed it as a place for recreation and pleasure” (Gottlieb 30–31). For the most part, this tension persists in what environmental studies literature refers to as immanence and transcendence—a tension between the desire to live as an integral part of nature and the drive to rise above nature to be its absolute master, especially through a purely instrumental use of natural resources. It is essential to mention here that, as in most other social movements, there is no ideological homogeneity or conformity in the mainstream EM for its tributaries are most often scattered across an anthropocentrism-ecocentrism spectrum, and only the most devout hardliners stick to purely ecocentric causes.
- 4 Signaling the infusion of social values into environmentalism, Earth Day was widely celebrated in 1970 as an occasion to renew and consolidate a growing public commitment to the environmental cause (Rome 194–96). “Designed to challenge the environmental status quo through peaceful mass mobilization,” writes Stacy Silveira, “Earth Day 1970 brought twenty-million Americans together in celebration of quality-of-life issues and concern for the environment” (507). Despite the widespread public support it received, Earth Day 1970 did not escape criticism for the discourse disseminated on that occasion brought about the emergence of an anthropocentric-ecocentric divide between old and new activists. The organizers of Earth Day, for instance, were readily accused by environmental hardliners of pandering to the press, government, and corporate elites (Gottlieb). At the same time, traditional environmental organizations—such as the Sierra Club, the National Wildlife Federation, and the Audubon Society—expressed their concerns that Earth Day would “distort the notion of wilderness protection in favor of urban and social justice issues” (Silveira 507). A few years later, these concerns grew as the 1973–1974 energy crisis cast a negative bearing on environmental issues which then started to be increasingly ignored by the government in an attempt to develop alternative energy sources. During these turbulent years, however, other tributaries to the EM were gaining momentum as new anthropocentric causes of environmental activism, such as racial and social justice, sound working conditions, and urban equity, were recognized as new approaches for American environmentalism.

The Emergence of Voices of Dissent in the Environmental Movement

- 5 American environmentalism, as we know it today, encompasses a wide range of ideologies, approaches, active groups, and organizations. It thus comes as no surprise that the

movement has progressively grown into a melting pot of various tributaries, such as New Conservation groups, Not-in-My-Backyard groups (NIMBY), Antitoxics groups, and Environmental Justice groups. The mainstream EM is, therefore, underpinned by a broad spectrum of ideologies, including conservationism, preservationism, deep ecology, bio-regionalism, feminist ecology, and Native ecology. However, at the macro level, most of these variations can be roughly lumped together into two major groups: ecocentrists (i.e., nature-centered), who prioritize ecological issues and defend nature per se, and anthropocentrists (i.e., human-centered) who prioritize human interests and believe in using natural resources instrumentally to ensure human well-being.

- 6 The Environmental Justice Movement (EJM) first emerged in the 1980s in the American south (e.g., Roberts and Toffolon-Weiss; Agyeman, Bullard, and Evans *Just Sustainabilities*; Cole and Foster; Bullard) with hundreds of groups and grassroots organizations combatting various social and ecological problems in their communities, such as unequal exposure to environmental hazards. Dissent was, therefore, anchored in the rancorous struggles of poor, often rural, African American communities against inefficient governmental agencies and exploitative gigantic corporations.
- 7 The EJM grew steadily by including poor white groups, Native Americans, and Hispanic minorities disgruntled at the unfair distribution of environmental risks (Roberts 285). Central to this movement's ideology, therefore, is the concept that all people—regardless of race, ethnicity, or class—have the right to not be ecologically harmed, but instead deserve equal protection of their natural environment, health, employment, housing, and transportation.



<https://youtu.be/1iCxh0BYjgl>

- 8 During the Warren County protests in North Carolina in 1982, this concept slowly took root in the American consciousness, triggered chiefly by more than 500 arrests in the African

American community of Afton, North Carolina, during a campaign of nonviolent civil disobedience to prevent the disposal of PCB-laced soil in the Warren County landfill. From that point onwards, the distinct discourse and practices of the EJM groups started to reshape both American environmental politics and public opinion (Jamieson 88).

- 9 As the EJM started to gain momentum, activists and politicians of color played a vital role in bringing the concept of environmental justice to the fore in American domestic politics. After being arrested during the civil disobedience events, one of the most influential figures, Congressman Walter Fauntroy, asked the United States General Accounting Office (GAO) to study the racial demographics of hazardous waste disposal. Historically, the above-mentioned 1982 demonstrations in North Carolina sparked the first large-scale civil disobedience rallies when hundreds of community-of-color members blocked trucks from dumping PCB-laced chemicals in Warren County, a community chosen for a toxic waste dump. A few years later, studies from both the GAO and the United Church of Christ reached similar conclusions: Disadvantaged segments of American society disproportionately suffer from environmental abuses of the current rates of consumption in the US (US General Accounting Office; United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice). Most activists in the EJM believe that neither the costs of pollution nor the benefits of environmental protection are evenly distributed throughout society as gross inequalities inherent in the socio-economic and political systems of the American society persist (McLaren; Taylor; Faber and McCarthy).
- 10 By the end of the 20th century, activists of the EJM succeeded in extending some of the established civil rights and other social justice causes using the rhetoric symbols, protest techniques, and mobilization strategies of those movements. Drawing upon these cultural symbols and building on both infrastructure and communication networks of previous movements, EJM activists preached new concepts, such as environmental racism and environmental apartheid, which resonated well with the increasing concern of communities of color (Agyeman, Bullard and Evans "Introduction"; B. Edwards). As a consequence, their growing support for the EJM entitled activists to draw even more on the tradition of the Civil Rights Movement (Faber and McCarthy; Sandweiss).
- 11 Bringing together different activists, such as African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans, the National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit, held in Washington, DC on October 24–27, 1991, signaled an important turn in the history of the EJM. Attended by more than a thousand activists from across the United States, Canada, Central America, and the Marshall Islands, this summit—popularly known as Summit I—concluded with the adoption of the seventeen "Principles of Environmental Justice" document which emphasized the unique identity of the EJM. During the movement's earliest stages of development, environmental justice organizations were remotely connected to one another and focused principally on local issues (Faber 135). The main objective in the 1991 Summit I, therefore, was to embrace broader social justice issues, such as economic and cultural liberation for all people of color and their participation in decision-making. Hence, with a mushrooming number of new organizational entities and the consolidation of the regional and national networks, the EJM activists succeeded in developing a new framework for collaboration and coordinated initiatives that went beyond the local level to the national

and international levels (see Faber and McCarthy 46 for a list of these groups and organizations).

- 12 Theoretically, the concept of environmental justice itself is not new as concerns about a fair distribution of natural bounties and environmental harms—around in politics since the 1970s—have always played a big part in the American consciousness. Culturally, some environmentally-informed writings of the 1960s and 1970s—such as *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson (1962), Charles A. Reich's *The Greening of America* (1970), Theodore Roszak's *Making of a Counter Culture* (1969), *Where the Wasteland Ends* (1972) as well as E. F. Schumacher's *Small is Beautiful* (1973)—contributed to the EJM's evolution. Emphasizing the problems associated with industrial society, these writings launched a new era of rebellion and protest in which the concepts of 'nature' and 'growth' were fundamentally re-construed to include elements of social/racial justice. Ultimately, this re-conceptualization of environmentalism opened the door even wider for anthropocentrism to be ushered in as a drive of EJM activism, thus planting the seeds of the anthropocentric-ecocentric divide that has marked the relationship between the two movements.
- 13 One of the salient features of the EJM is the way its activists structured their movement. Rather than reproducing the hierarchy typical of established American environmental organizations, EJM activists built their new networks horizontally by linking statewide and race-based networks, like the North Carolina Environmental Justice Network (NCEJN) and the African American Environmental Justice Action Network, through summits and other forms of activism. Using their newly established networks, EJM activists founded the Environmental Justice Fund in 1995, which connects six regional networks working together to support grassroots organizing (Allen, Daro, and Holland 110). By the end of the 20th century, EJM started to be institutionalized through empowering state governance and grassroots activism as public-private partnerships played an important role in boosting joint programs seeking environmental justice in local communities.
- 14 Politically, activist further supported the ascendancy of EJM by participating in major events, such as the 1999 World Trade Organization protests in Seattle, the 2001 World Conference against Racism in Durban, and the 2002 Rio 10 Earth Summit (Allen, Daro, and Holland 112). Other remarkable achievements included blocking numerous hazardous waste sites, precipitating the establishment of the Superfund law, and the signing of Executive Order 12898. This order mandated that "federal agencies are to make the achievement of environmental justice part of their mission by identifying and addressing, as appropriate, disproportionately high and adverse human health or environmental effects of its programs, policies, and activities on minority populations and low-income populations" (Council on Environmental Quality 23). Other important steps in this success story were the establishment of the National Environmental Justice Advisory Council (NEJAC) and the Interagency Working Group on Environmental Justice (IWG).
- 15 Despite the Executive Order 12898 and the accumulation of cases and agency decisions, observers note that "the 'seats at the table' were [already] taken by mainstream environmental groups by the time the environmental justice movement came along in the late 1980s" (Roberts 290). In fact, one of the main difficulties facing EJM in the US is that major environmental laws were formulated in the early 1970s without any provisions about

(environmental) racism and justice. This yawning gap between the American mainstream EM and EJM activists has resulted in the latter's rising voices of dissent expressed since the early 1990s for what they consider the "movement's racism, classism, and limited activist agenda" (Pezzullo and Sandler, "Introduction" 1-2). Consequently, tension and mutual accusations started to characterize the relationship between these two movements.

The EJM's Anthropocentrism and its Criticism of the Environmental Movement

- 16 Although they constituted one of the most salient pillars of American environmentalism, the conservative traditions of the EM remain as one main point of criticism. In fact, what is seen as the unique cultural history of American environmentalism seems to underlie much of the current estrangement between this movement and its bases. Hence, because of what is regarded as its elitist origin, the American EM is often regarded as significantly different from other social and political movements, such as the Labor Movement, the Civil Rights Movement, or the Women's Movement. Some critics point out that unlike the EJM, which is "associated with the daily smells and sights of blight, along with an awareness of ever-present danger and insult to one's body and to the community," the EM remains highly elitist (Allen, Daro, and Holland 128). Others cite the examples of many, mostly-white American environmental organizations (e.g. the Sierra Club), that have infamous 'whites only' provisions or require two sponsors for membership (e.g., Drury 9; Dowie 2). This elitist legacy has proven rather hard to shake since it exposed the movement's dire need for re-establishing its existence in the communities most directly affected by environmental hazards, such as low-income communities or communities of color.
- 17 Criticism by EJM activists revealed the growing divergence of views between the two movements in the early 1990s. Between January and March of 1990, for instance, the Gulf Coast Tenant Leadership Development Project sent a letter to "The Group of Ten" national environmental organizations, declaring, racism, and the whiteness of the EM as their Achilles heel. Actually, "The Group of Ten" is a nickname given to the major environmental organizations that combated the Reagan Administration's policies to curb the environmental movement and downsize its organizations. This group included the Audubon Society, the Environmental Defense Fund, Friends of the Earth, Izaak Walton League, National Parks and Conservation Association, National Wildlife Federation, Natural Resource Defense Council, Sierra Club, Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund, and The Wilderness Society (Pezzullo and Sandler, "Introduction" 19).
- 18 In the letter, EJM activists accused "The Group of Ten" of "ignorance, ambivalence, and complicity with the environmental exploitation of communities of colour within the United States and abroad" (Pezzullo and Sandler, "Introduction" 3). Famous EJM leading activists, such as Beverly A. Wright, Pat Bryant, and Robert D. Bullard, also criticized the 'whiteness' of the EM as a major barrier between the two movements resulting in the EM's inability to reach out to African Americans and people of color (qtd. in Pezzullo and Sandler, "Introduction" 8). They also pointed out that when the Group of Ten was established in 1980, they had selected a white leader as head of each organization manifesting a racial divide that significantly shaped their agendas. In addition, critics (e.g., Faber and McCarthy; Agyeman, Bullard, and

Evans "Introduction"; Figueroa; Lawson) deplored the fact that white middle-class inhabited places became the focus of protection whereas areas inhabited by people of color were almost ignored by these organizations.

- 19 Other criticism was directed at the hardliners within the mainstream EM who defended purely ecocentric concerns at the expense of pressing social and environmental issues of poor people of color and working-class Americans. Steve Schwarze points out that large segments within the mainstream EM have been confined to a narrow political agenda focused mainly on "public land preservation and species protection that is rooted in a false dichotomy between humans and nature" while showing "a significant silence regarding issues that it [the EM] perceives as insufficiently 'environmental' in character" (171). In an attempt to further debunk the idea of the priority of wilderness issues in mainstream environmentalism, Kevin DeLuca (38) and William Cronon (69–80) contend that this concept remains essentially a human creation despite its wide celebration in the American environmental history. Further mocking the EM's ecocentric traditions, EJM activist George Garrison declared that he did not want to be labeled an environmentalist as he would not like to be thought of as "hugging trees" and not people, pointing out that "the people who hug trees don't usually hug people" (qtd. in Allen, Daro, and Holland 120). The yawning anthropocentric-ecocentric gap between the EJM and the hardliners' wing in the mainstream EM was further deepened by studies which asserted that most of the environmental justice activists surveyed "did not identify with, and did not want others to identify them with, the more biocentric stances of environmentalism" (Allen, Daro, and Holland 120).
- 20 Overall, the marginalization of communities of color and their issues has negatively impacted on the possibility of forging alliances between the EM and EJM. Based on these practices, EJM representatives started talking about environmental discrimination and environmental exclusion. Despite the popularity of these new concepts among communities of color, some studies pointed out that poor, white working-class communities suffered from marginalization of "The Group of Ten" as well. Phaedra C. Pezzullo and Ronald Sandler contend, for instance, that despite joint activities of labor activists and environmentalists on occupational health and safety legislation, the false divide of jobs versus the environment still prevailed, thus affecting local struggles between the two groups ("Introduction" 8).
- 21 In addition to the environmental discrimination issue, other equally important concerns, such as sex and gender issues, also proved to be contentious topics that raised friction between activists from the two movements. Despite having played key roles throughout the history of American environmentalism, women's contributions, for instance, have often been ignored or undervalued by environmentalists. Critics (e.g., Merchant 136) specifically condemn the movements' denial of leadership roles or positions in major environmental organizations, thereby limiting women's roles to mere grassroots activism. Accordingly, tensions between the two movements were often exacerbated by the attitudes and practices of the predominantly male EM leadership as female leaders found themselves less respected and less represented in the movement they had helped to found.
- 22 At a broader level, race, class, and gender challenges were merely a reflection of an increasing conceptual, cultural, and rhetorical divergence between the two movements, mostly reflected in their anthropocentric-ecocentric divide. In spite of the widespread

concern about toxic pollution and its harm on public health within the EM, many EM groups remained primarily concerned with the preservation of wilderness areas and the protection of endangered species (Faber and McCarthy; Bullard and Wright). Environmental justice activist Giovanna Di Chiro points out that while community activists were trying to stop the location of a 1,600-ton-per-day solid waste incinerator in a South Central Los Angeles neighborhood in the mid-1980s, local environmental groups, such as the Sierra Club or the Environmental Defense Fund, did not support their efforts on the grounds that “these issues were not deemed adequately ‘environmental’” (qtd. in Pezzullo and Sandler, “Introduction” 9). Further aggravating the EJM activists’ estrangement from mainstream environmentalism was the EM’s support (with the notable exception of the Sierra Club, which objected to this agreement) for the North American Free Trade Agreement despite intense activism condemning this agreement as harmful for both labor and the environment in the US and worldwide. Alienation further deepened by the anti-immigrant positions adopted by many Sierra Club activists and other environmental groups that barely concealed their hostility to colored people and ethnic minorities who entered the US as illegal immigrants (Drury 12).

- 23 Shaken up by the EM’s neglect of their anthropocentric concerns, EJM activists started to rethink the conventional approach to environmental protection and instead sought an alternative that would embrace their diverse range of voices and cultures. EJM activist Deehon Ferris explains that “shifting the terms of the debate” became the motto of the movement’s activism, hence their linguistic and terminological recourse to the civil rights movement’s base of activism (qtd. in Pezzullo and Sandler, “Introduction” 10). In addition to emphasizing their own identities, activists on both sides also started talking about the necessity of a harmonization between the EJM and the mainstream EM. However, EJM activists insisted on transforming the EM’s focus on wilderness and nonhuman nature to focusing on human existence instead.
- 24 Historically, the shift from ecocentric to anthropocentric concerns that the EJM advocated within mainstream US environmentalism also became evident at Summit I. Among the Summit’s Principles of Environmental Justice, only one focused on nature and nonhuman environment with most other principles being primarily concerned with humans and their well-being. Another sign of this shift was the foundation of the Gibbs Center for Health and Environmental Justice (CHEJ) that focused on a variety of issues affecting human health and existence but was uninterested in wilderness issues (DeLuca 30). Before talking about attempts to bridge this anthropocentric-ecocentric divergence, it is essential to discuss the EM activists’ replies to these criticisms and their own critique of the EJM.

Mainstream EM Criticism of the EJM

- 25 Since many environmentalists also seek environmental justice, they tend to dismiss the EJM’s accusations of racism. Particularly EJM’s claims of being a victim of environmental racism or environmental exclusion have often been dismissed as lacking a scientific basis and derided as “a mask for efforts of minorities and other disenfranchised groups to gain political power” (Peterson et al. 1993). Despite admitting that poor and minority communities are often located in or near environmentally degraded areas, Jeremy Mennis asserts that no reliable studies exist that substantiate a causal relationship between decisions to locate polluting

industries in certain areas and the social or ethnic background of local residents (281–82).

- 26 Responding to allegations of being purely ecocentric in its concern with wilderness, EM activists assert that ecocentrism has been a politically effective trope that enabled them to vehemently defend both the environment and people against anti-environmental governmental decisions. DeLuca contends that the concern with wilderness has not only resulted in preserving ecosystems and biodiversity, but has also saved many areas and communities from ecological abuse thanks to the “constant use of wilderness images via photography, calendars, screen savers, books, and ecotourism by the environmental movement” (48). From a broader theoretical perspective, environmentalists maintain that “the autonomy of nonhuman nature seems to [...] [be] an indispensable corrective to human arrogance,” asserting that “any way of looking at nature that helps us remember—as wilderness also tends to do—that the interests of people are not necessarily identical to those of every other creature or of the earth itself, is likely to foster *responsible* behavior” (Cronon 87).
- 27 From an environmentalist’s viewpoint, the EJM can hardly be termed ‘environmental’ given its primary focus on human justice and well-being rather than nature. This opposition to ecocentric issues constitutes the main obstacle to any harmonization between the two movements. In a similar vein, EJM criticism of the environmentalists’ strong concern for endangered species is similarly dismissed as another aspect of human self-absorption. Environmentalists particularly deplore the misconception in the EJM discourse that any concern with the extinction of nonhuman species is a form of racism against a certain race or ethnic minority. They further assert that human rights and social justice are not a priori concerns for environmental organizations given that their *raison d’être* is primarily to defend nature (DeLuca 33–34).
- 28 Overall, the EJM discourse becomes almost irrelevant to the essence of mainstream environmentalism since the imminent catastrophes facing the world today (e.g. ozone layer depletion, global warming, and biodiversity loss) are basically ecological in nature and not related to human rights or social justice. For scholars, such as Dobson and DeLuca, human rights and social justice concerns are not to be defended on equal par with ecological concerns for two main reasons: First, the status of social justice and human rights is globally better now than at any other period in human history; and second, these concerns are by no means new and imminent unlike global ecological issues. However, in the face of intensifying challenges posed by globalization and neoliberal capitalist policies of development at both the national and global levels, reaching a common ground for mutual understanding, collaboration between activists from both movements has become all the more urgent if they are to survive in their ever-changing environment.
- 29 Despite the rising tension between activists from both parts, overcoming the anthropocentric-ecocentric divide between the mainstream EM and the EJM has received much attention from scholars over the past few decades. Some observers note, for instance, that “there are no inherent conflicts between the goals of environmentalism and environmental justice (justice related to environmental decision making) for the poor” (Wenz 57). In fact, studies demonstrate (e.g., Drury 12; Allen, Daro, and Holland 106–08) that communities of color have shown growing support to environmental causes when

approached in a culturally appropriate manner and significantly contributed to consolidating the base of the EM in deprived areas. With a conspicuously rising impact of the environmental issues on communities of color and disadvantaged segments of the American society, their support for the environmental cause seems to offer a great potential that mainstream environmental activists cannot afford to lose.

Reconciliation Attempts and Lingering Setbacks

- 30 Attempts to bridge the gap between the EM and the EJM started as early as Summit I when a prominent corollary to articulating a vision for the EJM addressed the relationship between environmental justice communities and environmental organizations. Entitled “Our Vision of the Future: A Redefinition of Environmentalism,” a whole session was dedicated to debating ways to initiate a harmonization between the two movements. The speakers included African American, Latino, Asian American, and tribal representatives of the EJM from across the United States as well as two EM leaders, namely John H. Adams, Executive Director of the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC), and Michael Fischer, Executive Director of the Sierra Club (Pezzullo and Sandler, “Introduction” 5).
- 31 Even the 1990 letters to the Group of Ten, which contained extensive criticism of the American mainstream EM, entailed a clear call for a discussion of how ecological abuses affect communities of color and pleaded for an increase in hiring minorities and their assignment on their governing boards. The responses from some major national environmental organizations were mainly supportive. Founded in 2000, the Sierra Club’s National Environmental Justice Grassroots Organizing Program, for instance, offered help with the groups’ organization and training as well as financial support to low-income communities and communities of color. Overall, it was clear that the main aim of the discussion between activists on both parts was to create more room for collaboration. Accordingly, there have been attempts within both movements to delineate the type of relationship desired for such alliances.
- 32 One of these attempts was the document issued by the 1999 Sierra Club Environmental Justice Program Site Selection Committee, called “Guidelines of Environmental Justice Grassroots Organizing.” This document tried to define the goals of their Environmental Justice Program and outline the relationships of the Sierra Club volunteers, staff, and affiliated community representatives. During Summit II in 2003, another document entitled “Principles of Working Together” was developed by delegates and participants who aimed at “identifying the ideal conditions for building alliances” (Pezzullo and Sandler, “Conclusion” 310). Increased collaboration between activists on both sides often proved to be successful. For example, many environmental organizations worked with community members from the largely African American community of North Richmond to force the Chevron refinery to use modern pollution control equipment to reduce refinery emissions by one-third. In addition, they provided \$2.1 million to establish a community health clinic for the poor community (Drury 13).
- 33 The EM-EJM coalitions also sought to broaden the American public’s understanding of ecological impacts, especially when it comes to insufficient policies and ever-growing corporate powers. New organizational models of environmental activism, such as the

National Environmental Justice Advisory Council (NEJAC), came out of these coalitions, “designed to maximize the democratic participation of community residents and organizational members in decision-making processes of both the coalitions and government policy-making bodies” (Faber 158). With various emerging political-social-scientific alliances between the two movements, activism on both parts soon included new segments of the American society, such as toxicologists, epidemiologists, agro-ecologists, foresters, and geographic information system (GIS) experts (Di Chiro, “Indigenous Peoples” 251–52). Thus, it was evident that the concept of environmental justice began to attract more players in American environmental politics as a new understanding of this concept transcended racial and ethnic boundaries.

- 34 Yet, despite the promising common ground of mutual understanding that the rapprochement between the mainstream EM and the EJM established, discussions about whether to integrate the two movements into one comprehensive movement flared between activists. Hardliners from both groups seemed rather incapable of overcoming the ideological anthropocentric-ecocentric rift. Thus, the harmonization between the EM and the EJM encountered various setbacks as many of the environmentalists’ responses to EMJ activists’ charges were perceived with suspicion. Some of the environmental organizations’ initial efforts to accommodate environmental justice, for example, were regarded as disguised attempts to raise more money from foundations (Di Chiro, “Environmental Justice” 112). As a result, more and more voices started questioning the existence of a genuine role for environmentalists in the EJM. Faber contends that more than ten years after Executive Order 12898, EPA attempts to integrate environmental justice into its day-to-day policies and operations failed and that “significant organizational problems, political conflicts, and growing pains also plague the [EJ] movement” (136).
- 35 Amid these different, sometimes conflicting, appraisals of the relationship between those two movements, the questions of identity, independence, and self-determination surface again as salient features of the lingering anthropocentric-ecocentric divide. One of the main factors to undermining successful cooperation between the two movements is their divergence over which movement’s values are to be prioritized and defended—ecocentrism or anthropocentrism. Despite recurrent complaints that environmental justice issues are still marginalized by major environmental organizations (e.g., in Allen, Daro, and Holland), the moves of these organizations to embrace environmental justice were also harshly criticized by environmentalists themselves. According to DeLuca, for example, the efforts of the Sierra Club to foster principles of environmental justice “at the expense of a focus on wilderness [...] is a grievous error” (46). Notwithstanding exchanged accusations between mainstream EM and EJM activists, new initiatives within the emerging sustainability discourse seem to offer not only a propitious framework for discussions and reconciliation between the two movements, but also a new approach that harmonizes their social, economic, and ecological exigencies into a comprehensive paradigm of human development.

Marrying Anthropocentrism to Ecocentrism in the Sustainability Discourse

- 36 As they faced various criticisms from hardliner environmentalists, dissenting voices in

American environmentalism looked for a new framework of activism that would be more favorable for their anthropocentric cause—with a broader and more inclusive agenda than that of the mainstream movement. Because they are causally interdependent, both anthropocentric and ecocentric concerns are to be addressed evenly in the sustainability discourse, and any attempt to prioritize one over the other would be counterproductive. In essence, it is the context in which sustainable development is to be implemented that dictates which imperative to accentuate, for “in some cases, there may well be greater emphasis on development than sustainability, whereas in others the reverse may be true” (Dale 37). Accordingly, the emphasis on environmental justice or on purely environmental concerns would vary from case to case and from region to region, because local factors—such as economy, population, culture, and indigenous knowledge—determine how this reconciliatory approach is to be implemented. This flexible and holistic approach offers a great opportunity for activists on both parts to narrow and eventually bridge the gap between their visions and engage in more collaborative modes of activism if they are to survive challenges posed by neoliberal capitalist policies in the US.

- 37 Although essentially anthropocentric in nature, the concept of sustainable development accommodates major ecocentric concerns as part of its consensus-seeking entity. Amid the plethora of definitions and interpretations of “sustainable development” in the literature, I am using the UN World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) definition of this concept as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (World Commission on Environment and Development 43). Fathoming the multi-dimensionality of this project helps significantly in capturing its full potential as a reconciliation framework. Michael Thompson argues, for instance, that “just as there is no single culture, there is no single meaning of sustainable development,” illustrating that we “cannot homogenize development, unsustainable or otherwise, in the presence of what are multiple, distinctly heterogeneous cultures and actors” (qtd. in Dale 105).
- 38 Over the past few years, an increasing number of scholars, such as Ann Dale, Andres Edwards, and Stuart Hart, called for an integrative approach based on reconciliation between the ecological, economic, and social imperatives. This reconciliation and integration of objectives and approaches has great potential to provide a new ground of understanding as well as a common framework of action for both parts. Awareness of the high level of interaction and interdependence between the three imperatives of sustainability (i.e. ecology/environment, economy/employment and equity/equality) ultimately constitutes a solid tenet upon which efforts to bridge the current anthropocentric-ecocentric divide should be based.
- 39 The new sustainability discourse has also given the EJM and the EM the platform from which to forge a much broader coalition for economic, societal, and political change at the local, regional, and global levels. Accommodating both the anthropocentric and ecocentric concerns of different stakeholders, the sustainability discourse offers a much wider context in which the legitimate interests of different environmental groups in economy, politics, and social activism can be reconciled. Within this new holistic approach, I find the ‘social equity’ issue particularly important for boosting the EJM cause as it adds noticeable richness and versatility to this movement. With an increased focus on the social equity issue, the

sustainability discourse has more chances to reach out to the poor and disadvantaged by supporting their rights. Ultimately, both the projects of sustainable development and the EJM would significantly benefit from this rapprochement; all the more so because they badly need this empowerment to survive in a socio-economic paradigm dominated by neoliberal capitalist powers.

- 40 With the sustainability discourse offering a reconciliation framework to the voices of dissent within the EM, the big challenge facing activists today is to learn from the failures of this movement's past policies and to figure out how to put an inclusive, holistic approach into practice. Bridging the anthropocentric-ecocentric divide necessitates a re-conceptualization of basic concepts (i.e. growth, development, and progress) to embrace wider features of human life, such as social ties, charity and voluntary work, environmental justice activism, and social equity. The fundamental integration of ecological, social, and economic imperatives in one comprehensive model of development can, therefore, be a vital step to the move from an anthropocentric-ecocentric divide to an anthropocentric-ecocentric continuum. By virtue of this integration, these imperatives would change from competing interests to reconcilable, complementary issues, thus eliminating most causes of friction between these two movements. Most importantly, the sustainability reconciliation framework offers a chance to reduce any trade-offs between 'the three Es' (i.e., ecology, economy, and equity) imperatives which do not have to exclude one another to receive enough attention from decision-makers.
- 41 Despite the promising reconciliation framework that sustainability discourse offers to environmental activism, marrying anthropocentrism to ecocentrism is still looked at with suspicion by some critics. Andrew Dobson claims, for instance, that he "ha[s] come to the reluctant conclusion that social injustice and environmental sustainability are not always compatible objectives," asserting that "the differences between them are not merely tactical, but strategic: their objectives differ in fundamental ways" (83). Dobson further contends that there is no sufficient empirical research on the relationship between policies for environmental justice and environmental sustainability to safely claim they have 'compatible objectives' (84). This criticism comes as an eye-opener for researchers, hopefully inducing them to conduct more in-depth empirical research on the nature and scope of both the relationship between the EJM and the EM and between the EJM and the sustainability discourse.

Works Cited

Agyeman, Julian, Robert D. Bullard, and Bob Evans. "Introduction: Joined-Up Thinking: Bringing Together Sustainability, Environmental Justice and Equity." Agyeman, Bullard, and Evans, *Just Sustainabilities* 1–16. Print.

Agyeman, Julian, Robert D. Bullard, and Bob Evans, eds. *Just Sustainabilities: Development in an Unequal World*. Cambridge: MIT P, 2003. Print.

Allen, Kim, Vinci Daro, and Dorothy C. Holland. "Becoming an Environmental Justice Activist." Sandler and Pezzullo, *Environmental Justice* 105–34. Print.

- Bullard, Robert D., ed. *Unequal Protection: Environmental Justice and Communities of Color*. San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1994. Print.
- Bullard, Robert D., and Beverly H. Wright. "The Quest for Environmental Equity: Mobilizing the African-American Community for Social Change." *American Environmentalism: The U.S. Environmental Movement, 1970–1990*. Ed. Riley E. Dunlap and Angela G Mertig. New York: Taylor, 1992. 39–49. Print.
- Cole, Luke W., and Sheila R. Foster. *From the Ground Up: Environmental Racism and the Rise of the Environmental Justice Movement*. New York: NYU P, 2001. Print
- Council on Environmental Quality. *Environmental Justice: Guidance under the National Environmental Policy Act*. Executive Office of the President, 1997. PDF.
- Cronon, William. *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*. New York: Norton, 1996. Print.
- Dale, Ann. *At the Edge: Sustainable Development in the 21st Century*. Vancouver: UBC P, 2001. Print.
- DeLuca, Kevin. "A Wilderness Environmentalism Manifesto: Contesting the Infinite Self-Absorption of Humans." Sandler and Pezzullo, *Environmental Justice* 27–56. Print.
- Di Chiro, Giovanna. "Environmental Justice from the Grassroots: Reflections on History, Gender, and Expertise." *The Struggle for Ecological Democracy: Environmental Justice Movements in the United States*. Ed. Julian Agyeman, Robert D. Bullard, and Bob Evans. New York: Guilford, 1998. 104–36. Print.
- . "Indigenous Peoples and Biocolonialism: Defining the 'Science of Environmental Justice' in the Century of the Gene." Sandler and Pezzullo, *Environmental Justice* 251–83. Print.
- Dobson, Andrew. "Social Justice and Environmental Sustainability: Ne'er the Twain Shall Meet?" Agyeman, Bullard, and Evans, *Just Sustainabilities* 83–95. Print.
- Dowie, Mark. *Losing Ground: American Environmentalism at the Close of the Twentieth Century*. Cambridge: MIT P, 1996. Print.
- Drury, Richard Toshiyuki. "Rousing the Restless Majority: The Need for a Blue-Green-Brown Alliance." *Environmental Law and Litigation* 19.5 (2004): 4–19. Print.
- Edwards, Andres R. *The Sustainability Revolution: Portrait of a Paradigm Shift*. Vancouver: New Society, 2008. Print.
- Edwards, Bob. "With Liberty and Environmental Justice for All: The Emergence and Challenge of Grassroots Environmentalism in the United States." *Ecological Resistance Movements: The Global Emergence of Radical and Popular Environmentalism*. Ed. Bron Raymond Taylor. New York: SUNY P, 1995. 35–54. Print.

- Faber, Daniel. "A More 'Productive' Environmental Justice Politics: Movement Alliances in Massachusetts for Clean Production and Regional Equity." Sandler and Pezzullo, *Environmental Justice* 135–64. Print.
- Faber, Daniel, and Deborah McCarthy. "Neo-liberalism, Globalization and the Struggle for Ecological Democracy: Linking Sustainability and Environmental Justice." Agyeman, Bullard, and Evans, *Just Sustainabilities* 38–63. Print.
- Figuroa, Robert Melchior. "Other Faces: Latinos and Environmental Justice." *Faces of Environmental Racism: Confronting Issues of Global Justice*. Ed. Laura Westra and Bill E. Lawson. 2nd ed. Lanham: Rowman, 2001. 167–84. Print.
- Gottlieb, Robert. *Forcing the Spring: The Transformation of the American Environmental Movement*. Washington, DC: Island, 2005. Print.
- Hart, Stuart L. *Capitalism at the Crossroads: Aligning Business, Earth, and Humanity*. 2nd ed. New York: Pearson, 2009. Print.
- Hays, Samuel P. "From Conservation to Environment: Environmental Politics in the United States since World War Two." *Environmental History Review* 6.2 (1982): 14–41. Print.
- Jamieson, Dale. "Justice: The Heart of Environmentalism." Sandler and Pezzullo, *Environmental Justice* 85–102. Print.
- Lawson, Bill. "Living for the City: Urban United States and Environmental Justice." *Faces of Environmental Racism: Confronting Issues of Global Justice*. Ed. Laura Westra and Bill E. Lawson. 2nd ed. Lanham: Rowman 2001. 41–56. Print.
- McLaren, Duncan. "Environmental Space, Equity and the Ecological Debt." Agyeman, Bullard, and Evans, *Just Sustainabilities* 19–37. Print.
- Mennis, Jeremy. "Using Geographic Information Systems to Create and Analyze Statistical Surfaces of Population and Risk for Environmental Justice Analysis." *Social Science Quarterly* 83.1 (2002): 281–97. Print.
- Merchant, Carolyn. *Earthcare: Women and the Environment*. New York: Routledge, 1996. Print.
- Peterson, M. Nils, Markus John Peterson, and Tarla Rai Peterson. "Moving toward Sustainability: Integrating Social Practice and Material Process." Sandler and Pezzullo, *Environmental Justice* 189–222.
- Pezzullo, Phaedra C., and Ronald Sandler. "Introduction: Revisiting the Environmental Justice Challenge to Environmentalism." Sandler and Pezzullo, *Environmental Justice* 1–24. Print.
- . "Conclusion: Working Together and Working Apart." Sandler and Pezzullo, *Environmental Justice* 309–20. Print.
- Roberts, J. Timmons. "Globalizing Environmental Justice." Sandler and Pezzullo, *Environmental Justice* 285–308. Print.

Roberts, J. Timmons, and Melissa M. Toffolon-Weiss. *Chronicles from the Environmental Justice Frontline*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001. Print.

Rome, Adam. "The Genius of Earth Day." *Environmental History* 15.2 (2010): 194–205. Print.

Sandler, Ronald, and Phaedra C. Pezzullo, eds. *Environmental Justice and Environmentalism: The Social Justice Challenge to the Environmental Movement*. Cambridge: MIT P, 2007. Print.

Sandweiss, Stephen. "The Social Construction of Environmental Justice." *Environmental Injustices, Political Struggles: Race, Class and the Environment*. Ed. David E. Camacho. Durham: Duke UP, 1998. 12–31. Print.

Schwarze, Steve. "The Silences and Possibilities of Asbestos Activism: Stories from Libby and Beyond." Sandler and Pezzullo, *Environmental Justice* 165–88. Print.

Silveira, Stacy J. "American Environmental Movement: Surviving through Diversity." *Boston College Environmental Law Affairs Review* 28.2 (2001): 497–532. Print.

Taylor, Dorceta E. "The Rise of the Environmental Justice Paradigm: Injustice Framing and the Social Construction of Environmental Discourses." *American Behavioral Scientist* 43.4 (2000): 508–80. Print.

United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice. "Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States: A National Report on the Racial and Socio-economic Characteristics of Communities with Hazardous Waste Sites." *Palgrave Environmental Reader*. Ed. Daniel Payne and Richard Newman. New York: Palgrave, 2005. 259–64. Print.

US General Accounting Office (GAO). *Siting of Hazardous Waste Landfills and Their Correlation with Racial and Economic Status of Surrounding Communities*. Washington, DC: Gov. Printing Office, 1983. Print.

World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED). *Our Common Future*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1987. Print.

Wenz, Peter. "Does Environmentalism Promote Injustice for the Poor?" Sandler and Pezzullo, *Environmental Justice* 57–84. Print.

Author

Mohamed El-Kamel Bakari holds a PhD in American Studies from the University of Manouba, Tunis, Tunisia, and is a published researcher in American environmentalism, sustainability, and globalization studies. He is now a lecturer at KAU University, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.

Suggested Citation

Bakari, Mohamed E.. "Marrying Anthropocentrism to Ecocentrism: The Rising Voices of Dissent in American Environmentalism." *American Studies Journal* 66 (2019). Web. 30 Apr. 2019. DOI 10.18422/66-01.

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 3.0 Unported License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/).

