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Indigenous Peoples and Environmental Justice: The Impact of Climate Change

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The “Environmental Justice” movement of the 1980s and 1990s sought to highlight the distributional impacts of the dominant society’s environmental decision-making process on various ethnic minorities. Environmental activists attempted to include Native peoples within that movement, citing the multitude of hazardous conditions that disproportionately affect Native communities. For example, the legacy of uranium mining on Indian reservations in the western states is widespread radioactive contamination of land and water resources. Coal-fired power plants located on or near the reservation also result in disproportionate levels of air and water pollution. The widespread attempts of private companies, throughout the 1990s, to locate hazardous and solid waste dumps on the reservation, due to the availability of raw land and relatively lower cost of siting such facilities in Indian Country caused further controversy.

Of course, the efforts of environmental activists to portray Native peoples as victims of social injustice were bolstered by the popular romanticized vision of Native Americans as a noble people who lived close to the land and in harmony with the land. Solid waste dumps were further evidence of the white man’s greed and willingness to corrupt tribal leaders by offering millions of dollars in “incentives” to locate such undesirable industries on the reservation. Some Native leaders spoke out against these stereotypes, claiming that they limited the tribes from engaging in economic development that made sense, given the tribes’ own needs to have revenue and access to waste disposal facilities. According to these Native leaders, tribal self-determination means that tribes get to decide their own priorities for economic development, without paternalistic notions of what is truly “Indian” behavior. If they want to develop their lands, that is their right, as sovereign governments. In short, the “racism” component of the environmental justice movement ought not to be employed against Indian nations as sovereign governments.

So, where do Native peoples fit within the current perspectives on “environmental justice”? This paper examines the impact of global climate change by exploring indigenous peoples’ concerns about protection of culture, health, and subsistence lifeways. My focus in this paper is on the human rights aspect of environmental justice as a global phenomenon. I am less concerned in this paper about arguments to protect tribal sovereignty within the domestic arena and more concerned about the impact of climate change as a global phenomenon on indigenous lifeways. I am particularly interested in the health impacts of climate change on indigenous peoples in regions such as the Arctic and Pacific, where the environmental is closely tied to indigenous lifeways. In some ways, this focus may evoke the controversy over “romanticized” notions of indigenous identity and about paternalism in federal or international policy. However, it seems quite clear that indigenous peoples living traditional lifeways are particularly vulnerable to climate change, and because climate change is often thought to be the inevitable byproduct of industrialization and not an “intentional” policy of national governments, the “rights” of indigenous peoples are often not directly at issue. Thus, the battle of federally-recognized tribes in the 1980s and 1990s for “sovereignty” and “economic development” is normatively quite distinct from the battle of indigenous peoples living traditional lifeways in the 21st century. This paper examines those issues and tensions and makes some preliminary recommendations.