

The father of environmental justice, on whether we're all doomed

Dec 10, 2021, 2:50pm EST



Robert Bullard, pictured here in Washington, DC, in 2013, received the John Muir award from the Sierra Club in 2014 for his contributions to the field of environmentalism.

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contributions to the field of environmentalism.

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Robert Bullard has been trying to explain to us for more than 40 years that the word “racism” isn’t so easily defined. Long before the water crises we see in cities like Flint, Michigan, the Texas Southern University professor was warning that racism can show up in our environment, especially if we have a certain zip code or skin color.

No one had coined the term “environmental racism” in 1979, when Bullard’s wife, attorney Linda McKeever Bullard, brought a lawsuit against Southwestern Waste Management for planning to put a municipal landfill in a Houston neighborhood where 82 percent of the residents were Black. It was the first litigation in United States history charging a corporation with racial discrimination in its environmental practices.

That legal action led to a groundbreaking study, “Solid Waste Sites and the Black Houston Community” — and it also began a crusade Robert Bullard continues today at [the historically Black Texas Southern](#) and as [a member of the Biden White House’s Environmental Justice Advisory Council](#). Born in Alabama in the ‘40s, during Jim Crow, Bullard has seen bigotry and discrimination in many incarnations that fit with the uglier and often outright violent signifiers we’ve all been taught to easily identify. Things such as a Klan hood, segregated buses, a noose, or racial slurs. Ever since

publishing the textbook *Dumping in Dixie* in 1990, the first of his 18 books, [he's been teaching](#) students and many others that racism can show up in dirty water, lead poisoning, and polluted air.

The man known by many as the "[father of environmental justice](#)" went to Scotland last month to attend and take part in [COP26](#), the United Nations conference on climate change. I couldn't wait to have Bullard on the show to hear about what he saw there, and how the world sees his domestic struggle against environmental racism as part of our global struggle to keep this world habitable for humanity.

Below is an edited excerpt from our conversation. Of course, you'll find much more in the full podcast, so subscribe to *Vox Conversations* on [Apple Podcasts](#), [Google Podcasts](#), [Spotify](#), [Stitcher](#), or wherever you listen to podcasts.

Jamil Smith

So first things first, Dr. Bullard, what is "environmental justice"? It's a term that I feel like people might understand instinctively, but as the father of environmental justice, I figure it'd be good to have you explain it.

Robert Bullard

Well, environmental justice embraces the principle that all people in communities are entitled to equal protection of our

environmental laws; housing, transportation, energy, food, and water security and health laws. Environmental justice is nothing more than this whole principle: people have the right to a clean, healthy, sustainable environment without regard to race, color, national origin. It's just that simple.

Jamil Smith

Indeed. It's been 30 years since you all convened at [the National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit](#). Can you tell me a little bit about October 27, 1991, and the principles that you all discussed there?

Robert Bullard

[It] was a historic moment. Dr. Benjamin Chavis was the director of the Commission for Racial Justice at the United Church of Christ. Here is a Black civil rights organization based in the church, a white denomination [that] called together a group of us that had been working on different issues around the country and said the environmental movement mainstream somehow is leaving out, leaving behind, and not addressing our issues — and that we need to plan a conference, a summit for ourselves.

It took us a year to plan it. We raised the money and it was a four-day summit. And we said that the first two days of this summit must only be people of color. Why? It's because

people of color in this United States, people of color, Indigenous people, we have suffered the indignities of and oppression of slavery, of genocide, of imperialism, colonialism. And so African Americans, native and Indigenous people, Latinos, Hispanics, Asian and Pacific Islanders, in 1991, we didn't know that much about each other. And so we had to get together, just ourselves, in a room and try to unpack all of that baggage of those -isms that basically created mistrust and misunderstanding.

And after we had those very painful, but enlightening two days, then we said, we have to bring everybody in. We gotta bring the white folks in, because we do not wanna be an exclusionary movement. So, [over those four days](#) we had meetings, we had sessions, we had seminars, we had trainings. We developed those [17 principles of environmental justice](#).

And the overarching theme of the principles is that people most impacted by environmental challenges must speak for themselves and must be in the room when decisions are being made. And that we must develop the kinds of research, the kinds of empowerment tools, so that we can speak for ourselves and not allow others to go to Washington or go wherever and speak for us.

When we got to Rio de Janeiro at the Earth Summit in June of 1991, those principles had been translated into at least a

dozen languages. Our principles of environmental justice may have been developed in the US, but they traveled well. Twenty years later in Johannesburg, there were thousands of us from all over the world representing our movement that was not a US movement, but was a global movement.

Jamil Smith

One of these 17 principles that actually drew my eye in some conversations I've had recently with some friends is number six. You talk about environmental justice demands, the cessation of production of all toxins, hazardous waste, and radioactive materials. We think about the climate change, okay, this is the beginning of how it addresses the local concerns that people don't necessarily associate with the climate fight. Things like lead paint, things like garbage being dumped disproportionately in neighborhoods of color. How have you, over the last 30 years, gotten people to better recognize that this is part of being an environmentalist as well?

Robert Bullard

If you look at principle six, it's talking about the production of dangerous chemicals and waste. If you look at transboundary waste trade, where companies that produce all kinds of chemicals — not just US companies, but companies around the world — those waste products generally get shipped to

where? They don't get shipped to Europe. They get shipped to developing countries [in] Africa and Asia.

If you talk about the whole issue of production of materials for war, at the beginning of that process, you talk about radioactive waste or uranium being mined in Indian lands, and violating sovereignty, poisoning people. Then it's made into bombs, nuclear weapons that are not just here, you talk about the global threat. That principle involves the threat to humanity, whether it is talking about war, or the production of chemicals, or the production of the kinds of pollution that creates a problem.

There's another principle that talks about self-determination. That's another principle that if you look at domestically, you can see that we are talking about sovereignty. We're talking about: people have the right of self-determination and not somehow being predetermined what you will be, what your community will be, that you deserve not to be dumped on, whether it is poison, pollution, whether it's the greenhouse gases that's creating flooding and more, in terms of sea level rise; that self-determination principle may have started out as a domestic counterprinciple. When you blow it up, you're talking international, you're talking treaty rights. You're talking country-to-country kinds of things. Those principles, as they got pushed out, people around the world started to see that those principles were easily translatable and informed the

climate principles that came later.

Jamil Smith

It's sort of like blues' influence.

Robert Bullard

There you go.

Jamil Smith

I get it (laughs).

Robert Bullard

(laughs) There you go.

Jamil Smith

I want to get back to you: how you [became] this passionate, even still, about these particular issues. What was your upbringing like? What inspired you to get involved, not just in terms of conservation, but also this more specific fight later?

Robert Bullard

I grew up in Alabama, and the issues when I was coming of age were civil rights and justice. And you could see justice in almost every issue, whether it was housing; you grew up in segregated neighborhoods where the street pavement stops

at your neighborhood and you got dirt roads, you don't have sewer lines, you don't have water hookups, and you don't have street lights. And you can see at your segregated school, your libraries at your school, you can't go to the main library because it's white. You can't go to the swimming pool because it's white.

So, seeing the segregation of life in the South and not realizing that, later on, I would be involved in a study in a lawsuit that would challenge that separateness, understanding that America is segregated and so was pollution. I didn't realize it growing up. I know everything was segregated, including when you're born and even when you die and go to the cemetery, you go to a separate cemetery. But later on, if you look at the work that I was doing, teaching students and teaching another generation to make that connection between where you live and how long you live, and [how] what's in your neighborhood can make you healthy and what's in your neighborhood can make you sick, and how the good stuff gets somehow onto the west side of town and all of the nasty stuff gets somehow sent to the east side. Locally, "unwanted land use" is just another nice way that planners call all garbage dumps, landfills, incinerators, highways, and other things, [but in] the built environment we call infrastructure, all infrastructure is not created equal.

And all of my writings, all of my books, all of my research will

use that equity lens to look at most of the things that make communities unhealthy or somehow create less livability and less resilience. Now, that was a discovery that was unintended. I did not start out to do this. It was something that was, kind of like accidental environmentalists, if you can think of a term like that (laughs).

Jamil Smith

(laughs) You know, it makes a lot of sense. I know you grew up in Alabama, and actually you graduated in 1964, the same year as my dad from high school. And so, first of all, I just wanted to contextualize that for our listeners who didn't understand, maybe, that you grew up in the Jim Crow South.

How did that upbringing then lead to academia? I want to understand exactly why you finally felt like that was the path to you making the biggest difference.

Robert Bullard

In all of my readings, one of my heroes was W. E. B. Du Bois. He was a sociologist, an excellent professor and teacher — but also a heck of a political analyst. And so I graduated from college and I knew I always wanted to be a college professor.

I have four siblings. It's five of us. Four out of five are teachers. And I wanted to be a college professor because, you know... I thought it was cool to be a college professor. And so I went to

Atlanta University [now Clark Atlanta University] for my master's degree — and then I went to Iowa State University and finished my PhD. I wanted to model my career after one of my heroes. W. E. B. Du Bois developed the sociology department at Atlanta University. Du Bois did all of his research in Atlanta. Even though he could have gone anywhere, he did it at an HBCU.

My career has been modeled after someone who would write and work with community groups, Du Bois helped found the NAACP. He was not just a bookworm and a professor. He was also a political activist.

Robert Bullard

And so that's where I am. I write. I like to research. I like to work with communities and assist and support. I don't pretend to lead anybody, but if communities come to me and want me to assist and support, if I can, I will assist and support and get other allies and students to assist and support, because that's what our movement is built on; powering local communities to speak for themselves and getting them the tools and training so that they can combat the forces that are arrayed to kill them. This is a toxin. And let's not, you know, fancy it up and put a ribbon around it. Environmental challenges that many of our communities face, including climate challenges, are made worse by [racial redlining](#) that occurred 100 years ago, when Black communities were not provided flood protection, were

not provided the kinds of trees and green space and landscaping and design. In the 2020s, those same areas that were redlined are hotter because there are no trees, green canopy. They're more prone to floods. They have more pollution, and they have more Covid-19 infections, hospitalizations, and deaths.

You talk about what has happened over these years because of systemic racism and planners and policy and financing. That's how we have to use our science, use our research, use our data to combat that. If we're just going on strict emotion and we want people to be mad, angry, but we have to have other tools in our toolbox to combat that. And that's how our environmental justice movement has been able to create more individuals that are practitioners that can do this work.

Jamil Smith

One of those tools, of course, is the legal system. *Bean v. Southwestern Waste Management* — can you tell me a little bit more about what was so important about that lawsuit?

Robert Bullard

Bean was the first lawsuit to challenge environmental racism using civil rights law. And the legal theory behind *Bean* was that placing landfills, incinerators, garbage dumps in Black communities was a form of discrimination because you were

denying Black people equal protection under the law. And the emphasis was on using civil rights as the tool to say, "No, this is illegal, and therefore you can't do it." So, I was asked to do the study.

But understand that that lawsuit was filed in 1979, and the case went to court in 1985. The case was lost, but the loss of the case was not the end of the story. The significance of that is that even when you may lose a lawsuit, you gain the knowledge that this is a justice cause and a justice issue, and you pursue the next line of offense. Having a solid legal theory and a solid research methodology could point the direction to other kinds of legal arguments and research.

Dumping in Dixie came out of Houston, expanding the Houston case study to the whole South and looking at landfills, incinerators, petrochemical plants, refineries, where you found the same pattern that was found in Houston, and then expanding it from the South through the United States. And then expanding from the United States to look at, globally, which communities and nations around the world have basically received the worst impacts of our environmental policies, global industrial policies, global extraction policies, etc.

All of that sprang from Houston, from that one case and that one study. Eighteen books that connect the dots, with transportation, disaster response, energy security, food and

water security, issues around health housing.

These things connect in a way that we can really see it today. But 42 years ago, people would laugh at you and say, "Well, there's no such thing as environmental racism. And there's no thing as environmental injustice." I got nasty letters from publishers, you know, back in 1989, when I had the manuscript.

Jamil Smith

What kind of letters?

Robert Bullard

You know, they were saying, "No, you can't use that. There's no such thing as that."

Jamil Smith

So you have a new idea and they couldn't allow that because they hadn't heard about it before?

Robert Bullard

Eventually, the book got published in 1990 as *Dumping in Dixie*, and it got adopted as a textbook. You know, it was the only book on environmental justice for two years. And it kind of took off. This book was written in a way that challenged mainstream environmentalism. It challenged the

environmental groups in terms of not working on these issues, getting all the money, but not dealing with real issues on the ground in many communities. It was threatening in a way that was not my intent.

But the idea that here you have some organizations that had been around since the 1890s and had never dealt with these issues, and very smart people — but we know very smart people don't know everything. It took a while for some of our environmental friends to understand or grasp. At our people of color summit, we invited five leaders of environmental groups. Two came. The other three said, "We don't know what you're talking about." (laughs).

Jamil Smith

(laughs) My goodness gracious.

Robert Bullard

We've made progress since then, you know. In 30 years, we've made progress. But there's still a lack of understanding of these issues.

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