

# Foreword

In *The Quest for Environmental Justice*, Robert D. Bullard has once again provided community activists, researchers, health and environmental protection advocates, policy makers, and civil rights proponents with a refreshing and timely overview of contemporary environmental justice struggles and the fight against environmental racism around the nation and, indeed, the world.

I am familiar with the important quest for clean air, water, land, schools, recreation areas, and communities, in large part because I represent in Congress the residents of the city I now call home—Los Angeles. Despite measures in place in California to substantially curb air pollution, this city—a place where many Latinos, African Americans, Asians, and whites reside together—still has some of the dirtiest air in the country. Nationwide studies have shown that air pollution levels are higher in poorer areas, such as those where African Americans and Latinos live, and that higher percentages of African Americans and Latinos than whites live in areas with poor air quality.

This is certainly the case in Los Angeles. As a result, groups such as the Concerned Citizens of South Central Los Angeles and Mothers of East Los Angeles have—with the support of regional and national environmental groups—organized important local campaigns to protect the

health of their families and neighborhoods. These groups have stopped proposed incinerators, which threatened to further endanger air quality and the health of those living in nearby neighborhoods and attending nearby schools.

In fact, throughout my home state of California, and throughout the nation, scores of organizations representing African Americans, Native Americans, Asians, Latinos, and poor and working-class whites have organized and often joined together with like-minded groups to fight back and protect their neighborhoods and families from life-threatening environmental hazards. These efforts are responses to racism, poverty, economic and social inequality, and unequal protection policies sponsored by government bodies such as the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

In his earlier edited work, *Unequal Protection*, Professor Bullard documented and analyzed patterns of environmental racism. He found that communities made up of poor people and people of color are disproportionately exposed to a variety of environmental threats. Racially discriminatory local and state policies governing the siting and licensing of industrial facilities allow polluting facilities of all kinds to be built closer to these communities.

Communities of color and impoverished neighborhoods throughout the country have become the primary dumping grounds for our nation's waste disposal and incineration facilities, and home to agricultural and manufacturing industries that pollute. Moreover, a disproportionate number of people of color are employed at low wages in unsafe and hazardous work environments, where their employers, and regulatory agencies such as the Occupational Health and Safety Administration, fail to provide them with adequate protection.

In recent years I and other members of Congress have often had to intervene on behalf of communities who appealed to us for help when they believed environmental threats violated their civil and human rights, and when their local elected officials and government agencies had failed to act on their behalf. We have written letters to the Environmental Protection Agency, for example, expressing our concern, and that of members of the Congressional Black Caucus and other supportive lawmakers, about the agency's failure to effectively enforce Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. If this provision were to be enforced in a manner consistent with historical civil rights jurisprudence and practice, it could help communities of color receive equal protection and justice under the law, as promised by our Constitution. In a 2003 report, the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights cited the fact that numerous communities have

filed. Title VI administrative complaints with the EPA's Office of Civil Rights, only to have their complaints languish for years in an administrative time warp—receiving no response or action from the very agency charged with protecting our health and environment in a nondiscriminatory manner.

Communities are organizing to take back their health and their environment. In April 2001, I was invited by Damu Smith of the National Black Environmental Justice Network—who at the time worked for Greenpeace USA—to participate in an environmental justice “Celebrity Tour” sponsored by Greenpeace. Among those who joined us on the tour were author Alice Walker, actor Mike Farrell, activist poet and author Haki Mahtibuti, and several other noted civil rights and environmental justice activists, including Dr. Bullard and Dr. Beverly Wright, director of the Deep South Center for Environmental Justice at Xavier University, located in New Orleans, which helped host the event. Our group toured mostly black, semirural, small-town communities located along the Mississippi River between Baton Rouge and New Orleans. This infamous area is known as “Cancer Alley” because of the numerous cases of cancer among the people who reside there. Near the towns, scores of petrochemical and other polluting industries dot the riverside landscape.

On the tour, we spent a long day traveling to communities severely affected by the suffocating toxic emissions from these huge facilities. We saw firsthand a landscape that constitutes one of the worst environmental nightmares in the nation and, in fact, the world. At one town hall meeting, we heard riveting, emotional testimony—mostly from black children, women, and men—about the deadly and debilitating effects of some of the most dangerous chemicals known to science, which rained down on them almost daily from the sprawling, nearby oil refineries, plastics-manufacturing plants, and other industries. Residents told us of chronic asthma and other respiratory illnesses, skin rashes, heart ailments, cancer, and other serious illnesses, which they believed were the result of their exposure to a “toxic soup” of chemicals that emanated from these plants.

We visited Convent and Norco, Louisiana, where residents were, at the time, in the midst of now-famous battles. Residents of Convent were fighting with government officials about the Shintech Corporation's proposed polyvinyl chloride production facility, and Norco residents were battling the Shell Oil Company. In one of the most important civil rights/environmental justice battles ever fought, the residents of Convent successfully defeated a proposal to build the world's largest polyvinyl chlo-

ride production facility, which was to be located in the most impoverished section of the mostly black town, near an all-black elementary school. Norco residents were fighting to get Shell to cover the costs of relocating residents of four streets as far as possible out of town and away from the Shell plant, which for years had tormented the community with its toxic emissions and frequent accidental chemical releases.

When I visited Norco that day, I promised the leader of Concerned Citizens of Norco, Margie Richard, as well as all the other individuals I met with on a playground next to the Shell facility, that I would call and write Shell's chief executive officer, Steven Miller, and ask him to meet the demands of the community to relocate everyone on the four streets under consideration who wished to relocate. After several exchanges of letters and phone calls with Miller's office—during which he retreated from his initial promises to me—and after continued pressure by Norco residents and their supporters from around the nation, Shell finally agreed to buy out those residing on the four streets so they could relocate out of harm's way.

My next visit to Norco in July 2002 was a joyous occasion. My husband and I and other family members attended a community event in which the residents of Norco celebrated this victory for the environmental justice movement. The community presented me with an award for my efforts, but I told them that they and their allies were the true heroes and sheroes. Together they had persisted. They had stood up to Shell and said they wanted justice, dignity, and respect for their community. These economically poor and politically disenfranchised men, women, and children had taken on one of the richest and most powerful multinational corporations in the world and won. Nothing that anyone else did would have mattered had they not stood up, organized, and spoken for themselves.

The stories of Norco and Convent, and of the communities within Los Angeles who fought back, are part of a larger heroic story about countless efforts waged by scores of marginalized communities throughout the United States and other powerful industrialized nations, as well as in the less industrialized nations of Africa, Asia, Latin America, the Caribbean, and the Pacific islands. This larger heroic story is about standing up for environmental justice, which is part of the global struggle for human rights and racial, social, and economic justice.

I would be remiss if I did not specifically mention the pivotal role of black women and all women of color in the fight for environmental justice. From California to Louisiana, from New York to Washington State, and elsewhere around the world, women of color especially have taken

their rightful place in these battles as leaders, organizers, and defenders of their communities on behalf of their children and other family members. And black women have been at the forefront of this female leadership. Around the world, they have taken up the mantle to protect communities under toxic siege.

I congratulate Margie Richard for winning the 2004 Goldman Environmental Prize (the first black woman to receive the honor) for her leadership and sacrifices on behalf of Norco's residents; Peggy Shepard of New York's West Harlem Environmental Action for receiving the 2003 Heinz Award; and Florence Robinson of Alsen, Louisiana, for winning the 1998 Heinz Award. Other black women—such as Charlotte Keyes of Jesus People against Pollution of Columbia, Mississippi; Donele Wilkens of Detroiters Working for Environmental Justice; and Monique Harden of the New Orleans-based Advocates for Environmental Human Rights—have also received notable awards and recognition for their efforts.

At the Second National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit held in Washington, D.C., in October 2002, Dr. Beverly Wright—a woman warrior who has immeasurably helped numerous communities in Louisiana—led the effort to honor women of color in the environmental justice movement, which was a highlight of the conference. From Africa to America, and all around the world, women of color have risked their lives to defend their communities.

In this book you will find the stories of many of these women, the organizing strategies used by communities who have waged important environmental justice battles, descriptions of the conditions under which many people of color are forced to live, and details about effective strategies for achieving environmental justice. Take the time to read and learn.