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How Environmental Racism Affects Global Warming

"Nevertheless, we, people of all shades, backgrounds, and beliefs, must fight back in order to protect ourselves and our planet."



Kari Fulton

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Photo: Getty Images



Water Week is a Teen Vogue series guest-edited by **Mikki Halpin**, exploring the ways that water intersects with issues we care about, like climate change, reproductive rights, racial equality, social justice, and personal health. In this op-ed, Empower DC's environmental justice community organizer Kari Fulton explains how **environmental racism** is affecting lower-income communities and why we need to do something about it.*

Welcome to our dystopian present. We are living in the science fiction novels of yesteryear. Our televisions **spy on us**, and **our cars drive themselves**. Corporations know more about us than we know about ourselves because our histories are for sale via our Internet browsers. And strangest of all, multinational conglomerates are allowed to buy water from **public land**, bottle it up, and sell it back to us in a process that **uses vast amounts of natural resources**. While this clean water is going into private hands, low-income communities and **communities of color** live in areas more likely to have **unsafe drinking water** and **higher rates of pollution**. That's the way harmful environmental policies and racism connect in our country. This is why we need to fight for environmental justice.

If you have never heard the term environmental justice, it refers to a mission and movement to address environmental and social practices that disproportionately affect communities of color, indigenous people, and those with low and moderate incomes. Environmental justice is also committed to examining the causes of climate change and to raising the voices and needs of those most impacted by it. We all deserve the right to live, work, and play in healthy, safe communities, so we choose to fight for it.

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And we must fight today. **By 2050**, we could reach a dangerous 2 degrees Celsius (3.6 degrees Fahrenheit) increase above preindustrial levels in global temperature, determined by climate scientists to be a point of no return when it comes to the devastating impacts of climate change. At the same time, if we do not change the public policies that put the least powerful communities in positions where we are most vulnerable to environmental devastation, we will ensure a future in which only the elite survive.

How do we fight back? With our principles. In my work as an organizer, I follow the **Principles of Environmental Justice**, which were created in 1991 at the first-ever National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit. The preamble is a call to action for people of color that clearly links liberation with environmental issues:

“WE, THE PEOPLE OF COLOR,...do hereby re-establish our spiritual interdependence to the sacredness of our Mother Earth; to respect and celebrate each of our cultures, languages and beliefs about the natural world and our roles in healing ourselves; to ensure environmental justice; to promote economic alternatives which would contribute to the development of environmentally safe livelihoods; and, to secure our political, economic and cultural liberation that has been denied for over 500 years of colonization and oppression, resulting in the poisoning of our communities and land and the genocide of our peoples....”

Now more than ever, we need to remember these words. Members of the current administration are committed to rolling back civil and immigration rights and environmental protections and are outspoken climate change deniers. Nevertheless, people of all shades, backgrounds, and beliefs, must fight back in order to protect ourselves and our planet. We have the power to do it.

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We can change our world in lots of ways like reducing our waste, pushing for clean, renewable energy, supporting a campaign for better wages for workers at our schools, engaging in a local political cause, or even just talking to someone different than us. Read the Principles of Environmental Justice and see what they mean in your life. Look around your community with an eye to environmental issues and whom they are impacting. Join the fight for a just and sustainable future today. Together, we must change the world in order to save it.

Kari Fulton is the environmental justice community organizer with Empower DC.

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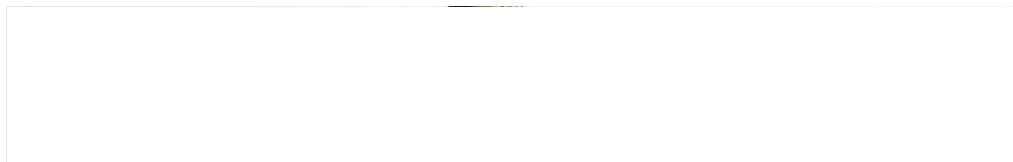
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