



In the Alaska Native community of Kivalina, reduced sea ice leaves the coast open to fierce fall storms leading to rapid erosion. This community, like many others being forced to consider relocation, is facing tough decisions along with political and financial hurdles.

[Kivalina Seawall](#) by [Bretwood Higman](#) & [Erin McKittrick](#) via [Ground Truth Trekking](#)
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Environmental justice: Vitaly important, but difficult to define

Paul G. Harris

Environmental justice. It's fundamental to understanding and managing our relationship with the biosphere. It's invoked by scholars, activists and even diplomats. But environmental justice is also a concept that means different things to different people. In this essay, Paul G. Harris moves toward a definition, in the process highlighting how justice and environmental sustainability are two sides of the same coin.

The human relationship with the environment is largely about values and perceptions, and the role that these play in our behavior. One thing that people value greatly, often to the point of driving their behavior, is justice. Most people recoil against injustices to themselves and to other humans, and many have similar reactions to injustices to other species. We may condemn environmental pollution that harms individuals, communities, ecosystems or animals. Similarly, people tend to value outcomes that they perceive to be just. We often support, at least in principle, protection of environmental commons, such as waterways and forests, especially if they are perceived to belong to our community. We may also think that it is unjust to live in ways that unnecessarily contribute to long-term environmental change because this will harm future generations.

But what does it mean to talk of “justice” in the environmental context? The answer is far from clear. This should come as no surprise given that almost every community debates

justice when faced with fairly distributing collective resources, such as tax revenues or water from rivers. Debates about the just use of natural resources can be especially acute in poor communities where scarcities and pollution can be life-threatening. When it comes to determining environmental justice across national borders, for example when allocating responsibility for climate change or sharing ocean resources, things become even more complicated.

Nevertheless, it may still be possible to approach a widely accepted conception of justice as it relates to environmental sustainability. Generally speaking, justice is realized when actors (human or potentially nonhuman) receive treatment that is appropriate to their circumstances. Justice is about determining to whom rights are owed and to whom associated duties should be assigned. It is about how much of the burdens of protecting those rights each actor with duties should bear. As Wolfgang Sachs and Tilman Santarius have noted in their book, *Fair Future*, everyone should be “taken into account in accordance with their rights, their needs or their performance. The conflict among these principles . . . is in large part the substance of struggles over justice.” What this means is that justice is often about the distribution of benefits, such as environmental resources, as well as burdens, such as pollution (or the costs of preventing it). The benefits and burdens may be distant in space and time. One variant of environmental justice is thus concerned with the “rightness” or “fairness” of how environmental benefits and burdens should be allocated.

But what, precisely, is right and fair? This is where community debates often become paramount. Ultimately, that which is widely deemed to be just may be a consequence of political bargaining or struggle among the actors concerned (however unpalatable environmental philosophers may find this approach!). Significantly, distributive justice is not about equalizing the sharing of resources. This is because it is not necessarily unjust for some to have more of a resource than others. A just distribution will depend on how the actors involved relate to one another – on whether there is some kind of social relationship among them. If one person has more water than another, or if one person suffers pollution while another does not, justice applies only if the relationship between them can affect the distribution. Most obviously, if one person takes resources from another or pollutes the other’s environment, justice does indeed apply. Less obviously, if there is no clear direct connection between the two people but one is capable of helping the other – if I have more clean water than I need while my neighbor may die from lack of it – we might argue that justice also applies.

Justice is often about how policies are decided – procedural justice – and what comes from decisions and actions – consequentialist justice. To realize procedural justice, people’s rights should be respected during decision-making, and individuals and communities affected by decisions should be allowed to participate in the decision-making process. Environmental justice thus requires that people affected by pollution have a say in how that pollution is reduced or prevented, and it requires that affected people be allowed to participate in determining who benefits, and how, from policies to correct past pollution. Environmental justice arguably also requires that the actual distribution of environmental benefits and burdens be fair. Most obviously, polluters should be required to stop polluting and to compensate those who suffer from their pollution. The justice of the outcome may be hard to assess, but it should at least avoid what Brenda Almond calls “striking inequalities.”

Interpretations of justice can evolve quite dramatically as the natural environment changes. In the 1970s David Miller reasoned that, for something to be truly unjust, it must be affected by people's actions. In what is, in retrospect, a chilling vignette, he illustrated his reasoning this way: "although we generally regard rain as burdensome and sunshine as beneficial, a state of affairs in which half of England is drenched by rain while the other half is bathed in sunshine cannot be discussed (except metaphorically) in terms of justice – unless we happen to believe that Divine intervention has caused this state of affairs, or that meteorologists could alter it." It is remarkably ironic that Miller's metaphor now mirrors reality. Human-caused climate change is already altering the weather, and research is underway on technologies to "geo-engineer" both weather and climate.

Miller's illustration of circumstances in which justice could not reasonably apply in the 1970s is where it applies today and will do more so in the future as humans shape the global biosphere. Thus, as Steve Vanderheiden argued in *Atmospheric Justice*, climate change confounds traditional definitions of justice: "conventional assumptions regarding moral and legal responsibility are complicated by the complex causal change and aggregative nature of climate-related harm." Surely the profound burdens of climate change can be defined as being unjust. Indeed, the 2015 Paris climate change agreement specifically noted the importance for some actors of "climate justice." While the Paris agreement, much like other international environmental agreements, leaves the definition of justice unspecified – and thus open to continued debate – it nevertheless demonstrates how justice and the environment are two sides of the same coin.

Acknowledgement

This essay draws upon Paul G. Harris, [Global Ethics and Climate Change](#) (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016) and works cited therein.

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