Brief Information Summary of Environmental Justice

National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences (NIEHS)
(http://www.niehs.nih.gov/kids/justice.htm):

Environmental Justice .....

What does that mean?

Environmental Justice is the fair treatment of people of all races, cultures and income with respect to the development, implementation and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, programs and policies.

But what does that really mean? Let's break it down and see:

The environment refers to everything around you. It is your home, your school, and where you play. And if you have a job, it's also refers to where you work. It includes your friends' and grandparents' homes, and any other places that you visit. It includes the lake where you might swim or fish, the places where your food is grown or prepared, and even the places your drinking water travels through on its way to your home.

Justice means fair treatment -- fair treatment for everyone!

So Environmental Justice is a new term that simply means making sure that everyone has a fair chance of living the healthiest life possible.

The opportunity to have a healthy life often depends on where someone lives, plays, and works -- yes, it depends on their environment! So it is important that ALL environments are free of unhealthy materials. Unhealthy materials can cause illness and sometimes even death. So Environmental Justice specifically refers to being sure that everyone has a fair chance of finding housing, employment, and a good education, all in a safe and protected environment.

Where are these unhealthy environments? They can be anywhere where steps have not been taken to remove the dangers. For example, some homes are unhealthy environments. There are people who still have to live in places with dangerous levels of lead. Many years ago, lead was used in paint, and more recently lead was used in gasoline products. So in some places it might still be present in the old paint used on the walls or even on old painted furniture. Lead can make children sick and interfere with their ability to learn.
Another unhealthy environment would be homes or schools where there are certain insects, such as roaches, or other animals (mice, rats, etc.) that may leave droppings. Animal droppings can increase asthma attacks in persons who already have asthma, and they can actually cause asthma in others.

Another unhealthy environment could be a playground that is near a chemical plant or a waste disposal site, or land that was previously the site of a gas station. If you play near such areas you may come in contact with hazardous substances that are still stored in the area, or that have seeped into the soil or water. Or you could be exposed to toxic (poisonous) gases released in the air from local plants or factories, large and small. And you've probably heard of the dangers of chemical spills, or of chemical wastes being improperly dumped in an area, exposing the people who live nearby and contaminating our water sources.

Employees of companies dealing with unhealthy materials are also at risk, since there are many things in the workplace that are hazardous to human health. For example, the people who work in chemical factories must be protected from exposures to the chemicals they produce or handle. And people who work in coal mines have to be protected from inhaling "soot", which causes black lung disease.

Even farming can involve exposure to environmental contaminants, such as insecticides or fertilizers. And animal production facilities (like poultry or hog farms) can adversely affect our environment if not managed properly.

Work in seemingly health-conscious environments, like hospitals, may place employees at risk too. For example, although X-rays are important tools for helping people identify their illnesses, people who work with X-rays may be harmed if they are not protected when using these machines. They either step behind a shield or wear protective coverings to prevent exposures. Have you ever been to the dentist and had your teeth X-rayed? Then probably you remember that they put a heavy apron over your body during the process. The apron was there to protect you from any unnecessary exposure to the X-rays.

So what can be done about this?
The fact is that many racial and ethnic minorities and poor people have to live, work and play in environments that cause them to be sick. Because they do not have the ability to move to other areas or change jobs, they often remain exposed to harmful materials for long periods of time, and suffer from a variety of illnesses.

This isn't fair, is it? I'm sure you agree that everyone should feel safe where they live, play, go to school, and work! Since something obviously needed to be done, as early as the 1970's an Environmental Justice movement was begun. Many community organizers and many people who were sick due to unhealthy environments, led efforts to bring attention to the fact that some people were sharing an unequal portion of illness because of where they lived, worked and played. But even with those efforts, little could be accomplished since there were no existing laws that addressed Environmental Justice issues. In 1994, in response to the continuing cries of protesters and demonstrators,President Clinton signed an Executive Order that directed the federal government to address the environmental health threats caused by people having to live, play and work in unhealthy environments.
**US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) (selections from FAQ)**
(http://www.epa.gov/compliance/resources/publications/ej/ej_bib.html):

**How Does EPA Define Environmental Justice?**
Environmental Justice is the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, culture, education, or income with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies.

Fair Treatment means that no group of people, including racial, ethnic, or socioeconomic groups, should bear a disproportionate share of the negative environmental consequences resulting from industrial, municipal, and commercial operations or the execution of federal, state, local, and tribal environmental programs, and policies.

Meaningful Involvement means that: (1) potentially affected community residents have an appropriate opportunity to participate in decisions about a proposed activity that will affect their environment and/or health; (2) the public's contribution can influence the regulatory agency's decision; (3) the concerns of all participants involved will be considered in the decision-making process; and (4) the decision-makers seek out and facilitate the involvement of those potentially affected.

**What Are Some Examples of Environmental Problems?**

Lead. Almost two-thirds of American housing units were built before 1970. Although the use of lead paint for houses was banned in the 1970's, older homes often contain paint with high concentrations of lead. Additional sources of lead in the home are: drinking water extracting lead from lead pipes and fixtures, lead in dust (usually from paint), and contaminated soils carried in from outside. The primary pathway for exposure is from ingestion of paint chips and dust containing lead. There is a particularly high concentration of lead problems in low-income and culturally diverse populations, who live in the inner city where the public housing units were built before 1970.

- **Waste Sites.** Low income, and quite often culturally diverse populations, are more likely than other groups to live near landfills, incinerators, and hazardous waste treatment facilities.
- **Air Pollution.** In 1990, 437 of the 3,109 counties and independent cities in the U.S. failed to meet at least one of EPA's ambient air quality standards. Many Americans live in these communities: 57 percent of all whites, 65 percent of African Americans, and 80 percent of Hispanics.
- **Pesticides.** Approximately 90 percent of the 2 million hired farm workers in the United States are people of color, including Chicano, Puerto Ricans, Caribbean blacks and African Americans. Through direct exposure to pesticides, farm workers and their families may face serious health risks. It has been estimated that as many as 313,000 farm workers in the U.S. may suffer from pesticide-related illnesses each year.
- **Wastewater: City Sewers.** Modern sewage systems were developed to carry sewage and storm water separately to prevent overflow problems that are common in older, urban areas. Many inner cities still have sewer systems that are not designed to handle storm overflow. As a result, raw sewage may be carried into local rivers and streams during storms, creating a health hazard.
- **Wastewater: Agricultural Runoff.** More recently, streams and rivers in rural areas with concentrations of commercial truck farms and animal feedlots have suffered mysterious lesions in fish and algae blooms resulting in fish kills. High levels of phosphorus support...
algae growth, which blocks re-aeration, reducing the level of oxygen needed to support aquatic life. It is suspected that the increased use of commercial fertilizers and concentrations of animal wastes contribute to the degradation of receiving streams and rivers in rural areas, with communities that are often low income and culturally diverse.

How Did the Environmental Justice Movement Arise?
The environmental justice movement was started by people, primarily people of color, who needed to address the inequity of environmental protection services in their communities. Grounded in the struggles of the 1960's civil rights movement, these citizens from every facet of life, emerged to elucidate the environmental inequities facing millions of people. These communities rose to articulate and to sound the alarm about the public health dangers which posed an immediate danger to the lives of their families, their communities and themselves.

What is Executive Order 12898 "Federal Actions to Address Environmental Justice in Minority Populations and Low-Income Populations"?
The Executive Order was signed by President Bill Clinton on February 11, 1994, to focus federal attention on the environmental and human health conditions of minority and low-income populations with the goal of achieving environmental protection for all communities. The Order directed federal agencies to develop environmental justice strategies to aid federal agencies identify and address disproportionately high and adverse human health or environmental effects of their programs, policies, and activities on minority and low-income populations. The Order is also intended to promote nondiscrimination in federal programs substantially affecting human health and the environment, and to provide minority and low-income communities access to public information on, and an opportunity for public participation in, matters relating to human health or the environment. The Presidential Memorandum accompanying the Order underscores certain provisions of existing law that can help ensure that all communities and persons across this nation live in a safe and healthful environment.

What programs exist to educate individuals and communities about environmental justice issues?
For several years, EPA has sponsored an internship program with the express desire to encourage students to pursue an environmental career. The internships, which are limited to six months of duration, formalize training and provide "hands-on" experience for students. Students must be registered at a university to participate. In addition to the internship program, the Small Grants Program is available to increase address local problems, raise environmental awareness, expand outreach, and provide training and education. More information about these programs can be found on the environmental justice web page.

What Tools Are Available?
The National Environmental Justice Program Office is developing a National Environmental Justice Handbook to provide an institutional framework for EPA of what environmental justice is, its history and principles and basic definitions. The Handbook among other things is intended to: (1) Develop one programmatic template for environmental justice programs across the agency; (2) Develop one consistent set of methodologies for assessing environmental justice problems; (3) Develop one set of basic commonly used definitions; (4) Identify outreach and participation strategies for key partners in the environmental justice mission, both internal and external to EPA; and 5) Provide a set of working protocols for integrating meaningful community involvement/public participation in the decision-making process.
How Do We Empower the Public?
The Community Small Grants Program is a financial assistance program available to help communities; grassroots organizations, and other non-governmental organizations become knowledgeable about environmental justice. The primarily purpose is to assist community-based organizations that are working in developing solutions to local environmental issues. The Community Small Grants Program was established in 1994, and since then, more than 900 grants of up to $20,000 each have been awarded to community organizations. As a result of these grant awards, community-based organizations (i.e., grassroots groups, churches, and other nonprofit organizations) have expanded citizen involvement and given people the tools to learn more about exposure to environmental harms and risks, and consequently, to protect their families and their communities as they see fit. Some projects have included: (1) creating and implementing a community-based model for permanent solutions to polluted, abandoned land, in low-income neighborhoods by producing A Guide to Vacate Lots booklet; (2) educating migrant farmworkers about coliform contaminations; (3) developing activities which promote awareness of the dangers of lead-based paint and (4) protecting surface water and groundwater on Native American reservations by developing rational criteria for abandoned wells.

How Does Someone Determine the Health and Demographic Data Around a Specific Location?
The National Environmental Justice Program Office is working with the Agency in making more information available to the public through the Envirofacts database. This will be done by including census data and health statistics along with the EPA data already available. Health data (such as county level mortality statistics) will be provided from federal sources where such data is collected. These are the National Center for Health Statistics, the Centers for Disease Control, the Agency for Toxic Standards and Disease Registry and other health departments and agencies. The EnviroJustice Mapper tool is available now. You may visit the web site for more information about this database. http://www.epa.gov/epahome/Data.html.

How Can You Work With Communities?
EPA's Regional Coordinators have suggested a number of communication techniques for working with all communities but especially low income and culturally diverse communities:

- Listen to what is said;
- Take the community seriously. If you hear from a community resident that there is a problem, listen and see if you can help;
- Make use of facilitators when groups bring a problem to a local meeting;
- Identify and work with informal networks;
- Get out early and talk with your community members;
- Work with the media cognizant of the specific community in which you are seeking information;
- Recognize that culturally diverse citizens are frequently not members of national environmental organizations and may need to be contacted through other more local means;
- Hold workshops with local community leaders;
- Build bridges for long term planning changes;
- Be sensitive to working with culturally diverse groups. Each culture sees the issue differently; and
- Involve both four year and two year academic institutions near the community, especially the Tribal Colleges, Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU), and institutions which serve Hispanic students and Asian students.
What Is Your Role?
Learn about the community in which you are working. How familiar are you with its population? For example, are there people who don't speak English well, people who can't read, or people who are shut in? Will work schedules keep people from attending community meetings?

Did you know that 32 million (14 percent) of the people in the U.S. speak a language other than English at home? For example in California, 0.6 million people speak Chinese and 5.5 million speak Spanish at home. Over 17 million (8 percent) of the people living in the U.S. speak Spanish at home.

Are announcements and information of special interest to non-English speakers, such as fish advisories and Superfund site fact sheets, available in the native language needed to reach the most impacted people? What is the requirement to reach the most impacted people? How diverse is the community?

Consider Age. Inter-generational equity means that younger or older generations should not bear a greater environmental burden. Children are especially vulnerable to harm from toxic substances and may be exposed through normal play. Is there a relatively high population of children in the community? Do children play outdoors where they may come in contact with contaminated soil and water?

Understand cultural diversity. Many cultural groups depend upon fishing to augment their diet either because of poverty or tradition. Of the 250 million Americans, 49 million (20 percent) are African American, American Indian, or Asian American; 22 million (9 percent) are Hispanic American.

Poverty severely limits options and opportunities. Low income groups cannot always move away from undesirable places, do not have adequate health care and may suffer more exposure to environmental hazards.

How Can I Obtain More Information About Environmental Justice?
You can contact the Office of Environmental Justice at 1-800-962-6215 or 1-202-564-2515 or you can contact the office or region you are most interested in by calling the individual listed on the EPA Contacts Page [http://www.epa.gov/compliance/resources/publications/ej/ej_bib.html](http://www.epa.gov/compliance/resources/publications/ej/ej_bib.html).