

Winter Term 2009

GEOG/ENVS 1012 Environmental Justice

Winter 2009

Who has the right to pollute? Who decides where pollution goes? Is it just or fair for minorities and the poor to bear a greater burden of the waste? In this course we will explore the foundations of the environmental justice ("EJ") movement, current and emerging issues, and the application of environmental justice analysis to environmental policy and planning. Through reading various EJ theories, perspectives, and case studies, we will critically analyze social and political issues that have important environmental dimensions. Although we will focus mainly on the United States, we will also consider international issues and perspectives. **SOC NOR** (S. Strife, a visiting winter term instructor)

Susie Strife, '01, is a doctoral candidate and an affiliate faculty in the Environmental Studies Program at the University of Colorado. She is an EPA Star Fellow investigating the physical, emotional, and psychological impacts that environmental degradation has on children and youth in environmental justice communities.

ES Newsletter Report from K. Morse: (see in print version at:

<http://www.middlebury.edu/media/view/101521/original/EnvNews09.pdf>

Winter Term 2009 brought alum Susie Strife ('01.5) back to campus to teach a course entitled Environmental Justice. Strife, an I.S./E.S. major at Middlebury, recently completed a doctorate at the University of Colorado in Environmental Studies. Strife's research focused on the perspectives of minority children growing up in the most polluted zip code in the state of Colorado--a community plagued by four overlapping Superfund sites, multiple oil and lead refineries, and numerous hazardous waste sites that contribute 34 million pounds of toxic waste annually.

Strife spent the month of January asking Middlebury students to re-think traditional notions of the word "environment" to include the places where people "live, work, play and pray." Members of the class spent the month thinking about whether it is fair or "just" for minorities and the poor to bear a greater burden of pollution, waste, and environmental health and safety hazards. Through heated debates, discussion and classroom presentation, the students addressed both the inequitable distribution of environmental burdens (pollution, industrial facilities, crime, etc.) and inequitable access to environmental amenities such as nutritious food, clean air and water, parks, recreation, health care, education, transportation, and safe jobs. The class also analyzed the challenges facing environmental inequality researchers as they try to verify whether inequities exist and why. Ultimately, the students challenged each other to expand their understanding of environmental problems to include human and social inequities, which certainly made for a stimulating J-term. Sophomore Kate Olen, an E.S.-Human Ecology major in the class reflected that throughout Winter Term Strife's "teaching style and unique outlook on the subject matter continued to enlighten and excite me in ways I had never before experienced." Olen particularly appreciated Strife's passion for teaching "the broad, often frightening, implications of environmental problems" for marginalized social groups "regionally, nationally, and internationally."

On January 26th, Strife and her students, along with members of the Sunday Night Group and the Environmental Studies program, welcomed guest speaker Nia Robinson, director of the

Oakland.-based Environmental Justice and Climate Change initiative. Robinson's provocative presentation to faculty, staff, and students shed light on the impact of climate change on minority and socio-economically disadvantaged human beings. Robinson described her own start as a community activist in her hometown, Detroit, offered powerful commentary on some of the underlying assumptions of the "green jobs" movement, and outlined a wide range of organizations working to keep issues of social justice at the center of climate change politics. Here, Robinson was the voice of millions – those we often forget to think about when we hear the words global warming or climate change.

Readings and discussions of environmental justice play an increasing role in E.S. coursework in religion, history, geography, and sociology as well as other disciplines, with several senior thesis topics and internships broaching issues of justice, equity, and the environment this year. Meanwhile, Susie is back home in Boulder where she currently teaches sustainability courses at the University of Colorado and is Sustainability Education and Outreach Specialist for the Boulder County Commissioner's Office.