

ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

Environmental justice is an emerging discipline devoted to ensuring that all people have equitable access to natural resources (e.g. water, open space, green areas), as well as fair treatment with respect to the implementation and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies.

This area of action and inquiry has emerged in response to inequality in decision-making processes and the distribution of harm and benefit relating to environmental issues. Whereas its roots lie primarily in urban areas where communities of color and the poor have the greatest challenges, the geographic extent of environmental justice topics now spans from urban to rural contexts and from local to international venues.

OPPORTUNITY:

The importance of social science research in addressing environmental problems is increasingly recognized, as indicated by new funding windows, hiring at peer institutions, and increased awareness of the need for interdisciplinary approaches to complex challenges. Within the College of ACES, the Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Sciences (NRES) integrates biological, physical, and social science to identify, teach, and publicize solutions to pressing challenges while enhancing human well-being. This mission is ideally suited for the study of environmental justice. The Department of NRES seeks to expand the scope of environmental justice inquiry by integrating issues relevant to diverse geographic and socio-political contexts, from local (water pollution, fracking, access to green space) to global scales (water security, biodiversity loss).



To address this important topic, NRES proposes a five-year research and teaching initiative to build capacity in this field at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. It will be the first university-based program of its kind at Illinois and, to our knowledge, anywhere in the state—a state with salient environmental justice issues. NRES is uniquely positioned to address environmental justice, given the department's broad scope that includes environmental policy, applied ecology, human dimensions, and the physical sciences (e.g. environmental chemistry and analyses of water quality). As the project develops, we will partner with University of Illinois Extension, other departments within ACES (e.g., Human Development and Family Studies) and units across campus for outreach, education, and integrated scholarship. New partnerships with communities and non-governmental organizations will be essential.

The timing for this initiative is ideal. NRES is conducting a search for a fully-funded faculty position in the field of environmental justice and the new hire is expected to start in August 2018. The NRES Assistant Professor in Social Dimensions will focus on the nexus of inequity, the environment, social processes, and outcomes.

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RESOURCES REQUIRED:

Whereas the new faculty position will be instrumental in developing capacity in environmental justice at the University of Illinois, resources are needed to attain “critical mass” and support a cohort of visiting scholars, graduate students, and outreach specialists. This collective expertise will push the frontiers on environmental justice issues within the academy and to external stakeholders.

A named professorship specific to the discipline of environmental justice will ensure continuing visibility and national prominence of the program. We also propose to develop undergraduate field courses in which students will work as a class with specific Illinois or Midwest communities in need. Students will gain practical research, presentation, and communication skills while addressing real-world problems right here in Illinois. The fundamental goal of this initiative is to have positive impact on the well-being of people and communities with immediate and long-term outcomes.



College of Agricultural, Consumer
and Environmental Sciences