What is Environmental Justice?

We All Need It!

Whether living in cities, towns or villages, all people on the planet depend on a healthy environment in order to be healthy. That means we all need fresh air to breathe, clean water to drink, and **nutritious** or healthy food to eat.

The Pollution Problem

Unfortunately, our environment is not as healthy and safe as it should be because of **pollution**, or things that make the environment dirty. Pollution can damage our air, water and land, and it can be unhealthy for people and other living things like plants and animals. Although pollution affects everybody, some places have more pollution than others. People that live in neighborhoods with a lot of pollution can get sick more often than people living in less-polluted areas. For example, people who live close to highways where cars and trucks cause pollution can experience more breathing illnesses, like bronchitis and asthma, than people who live further away from highways.

Making the Problem Worse

Imagine if the same neighborhood near a highway was also near an **industrial** area that had a power plant and a factory. The pollution coming from the power plant and factory, *plus* the pollution coming from the highway, ends up creating *a lot* of dirty air for the people living in that neighborhood to have to breathe in.

Investigating the Problem

In the 1980's, a group of African-Americans living in the State of North Carolina protested and complained about the government's plan to add more pollution to their neighborhood – an area that already had a lot of pollution. A **commission,** or specially formed group of people, researched pollution in different neighborhoods across the United States and discovered that, even though we're all supposed to be treated equally, mostly African Americans and Latinos were living in the highest polluted neighborhoods. Many people were upset to learn of this, since the color of our skin should not determine how polluted or clean our neighborhood is! People began to call this unfair treatment **environmental racism.** That means that some communities or neighborhoods where mostly people of color live are polluted by more industries, as compared with other communities where most of the residents are white. Concerned citizens realized this wasn't fair, so they have been working hard to make sure all neighborhoods are healthy places and less polluted. They helped create a worldwide movement called Environmental Justice. **Environmental Justice** means that *all* people, no matter where they live, how much money they have, or what color their skin is, have equal rights to live, work, and

play in healthy environments and make decisions about their environments.

Let's Take a Closer Look...

Unfortunately, not everybody in lives in a healthy environment. In the southeast area of San Francisco, many residents are living in older homes that may have lead paint or harmful indoor air, and they are living near polluting factories and highways. Not only that, but there are not a lot of places in that area of the City where people can buy fresh fruit and vegetables, which help keep our bodies strong and healthy. In other words, people in San Francisco's southeast neighborhoods can have a lot of health problems because they are living close to pollution, plus they don't have easy access to fresh, healthy food. This is an example of environmental **injustice**, or unfairness, and many people are working to make positive changes.

The Story of a Hero

People everywhere are working to improve the environment in their communities. An environmental justice hero in California is Cesar Chavez. Chavez was a Mexican American farm worker who lived in California and moved from farm to farm to harvest seasonal fruits and vegetables. Chavez and the rest of the farm workers were living in very poor housing conditions, working many hours for little pay, and being exposed to harmful **pesticides**, which are chemicals used to kill insects on crops.

Cesar Chavez knew that the combination of poor housing, low pay and contact with poisonous chemicals was very unfair to farm workers, so he organized the farm workers to ask for better working conditions. This took many years, but with the support of people all over the United States, Cesar Chavez and the farm workers were successful. They convinced farm owners and governments to change farm worker conditions and make them better, although farm workers today still have to speak up when they think their working conditions are unfair or unhealthy.

Let's Help Keep it Fair!

1. Create less pollution. When we drive our cars less, and save energy, we help protect people, especially in neighborhoods most affected by pollution.
2. Make less garbage. Only use what you need. Often, the stuff we take (like a plastic bag at the grocery store, when we're just buying one item) ends up as waste. Reuse what you can (like steel water bottles). Recycle and compost too. By making less waste, we help protect the people living in neighborhoods most affected by waste.
3. Learn what's happening in your city. Many communities have meetings that discuss important issues in the neighborhood.
4. Encourage family and friends to attend neighborhood meetings, and ask them to be active in your community by voting to let local government leaders know when they think that something is unfair.

BE FAIR!