Environmental justice is emerging from the shadows.

By Rick Skowen

As a social work doctoral student in 1989, Mary Rogge showed her professor a concept paper she had written on the connection between the natural environment and the plight of the disenfranchised and people of color.

“I saw this gray fog come over her,” recalls Rogge. “The natural environment and social work—she didn’t quite get it, but she did ask, ‘Show me how it works.’”

Now 20 years later, Rogge, associate professor at the University of Tennessee College of Social Work, has authored the first entry on environmental justice ever to appear in the Encyclopedia of Social Work, for its 20th edition released this year.

“We have been slow to engage as a profession,” Rogge says of social work’s inclusion of the natural environment in research, teaching, and practice—a criticism shared by others interviewed here. She knows of no existing specialization or concentration in the United States or Canada for environmental social work—or social work in natural environment, as she prefers to call it. But indicators suggest that may soon change.
When Rogge was in graduate school, environmental activism and social work were “compartamentalized,” she says. “I had colleagues who worked for the Sierra Club and other environmental groups but kept it separate from social work.”

Now, however, environmentally savvy and committed students are demanding social work curricula that include the natural environment as a key component in research and practice. One such student is Leah Nguyen, who spearheads the Environmental Social Work Initiative (ESWI) at the Brown School. When she first began study at the School, she was struck by the dearth of environmental focus in her coursework.

“It’s incomplete to think about helping people without addressing the environmental crisis. People who have the least resources will always be hardest hit,” says Nguyen. “There’s too much of a divide between environmental and social issues. Environmentalism has historically focused on conservation of pristine areas and social work has focused on accepted social problems. However, the field of environmental justice shows us that there are strong correlations between environmental conditions, economic class, and race. Ultimately, we all have to live in the environment.”

Nguyen and other ESWI members are performing a literature audit at the School with an eye toward working with faculty to provide curriculum recommendations. Additionally, the group is organizing a speakers and skills seminar series to expand practice knowledge of environmental social work, is assessing the Brown School’s energy and resources usage, and is working to develop partnerships in the community for ongoing collaboration in environmental social work practice. ESWI was formed after Nguyen received resounding support from fellow students for a petition that calls for increased institutional support of “curriculum, programming, school policies, and community actions that respond to the mounting environmental crises.”

One ESWI member, Devin Peipert, concurs that insufficient attention has been paid to the environmental dimension of social work. But Peipert, whose primary area of interest is in environment and international development, remains reluctant to place blame.

“I wouldn’t accuse social work only as being slow to respond to environmental issues. In general, the link between social issues and the natural environment has been underappreciated in the U.S., but there is great potential for this relationship to gain more attention as environmental issues move closer to the forefront of the political landscape,” says Peipert. “A lot of good research has been done, but there’s room for lots more.”

Peipert comments that “the link between social and environmental issues rests in the very real impact aspects of the natural environment have on human well-being” and sees a number of “large, important venues where social workers can think, practice, and affect” communities where these issues exist. He cites public health and the environmental justice movement, noting that “lead poisoning and environmental wastes affect marginalized groups more—those low economically and ethnic minorities.” Practice, policy analysis, and research, says Peipert, “can help communities overcome vulnerabilities to health problems, both nationally and internationally—industrialized nations have used developing nations as the dumping ground for wastes we would not tolerate to be dumped here.”

He sees opportunity for social work researchers and practitioners to impact environmental factors in international development as well. “Often developing nations are more directly dependent on natural resources, and marginalized groups...
Standing of the natural environment at all levels—personal, family, community, regional, national, and global—can improve outcomes for all peoples.

“From toxic environments for children in schools to powerless, isolated communities where we know, from research, that toxic wastes are dumped,” social work can have an impact, says Gamble, who taught classes on sustainable community development. “On a regional level, bio regions and watersheds need to be cleaned up to provide safe water to the region. On the national level, where we’ve seen that the federal government is way behind communities and municipalities in setting standards for air pollution and clean water,” social work organizations can also strive to effect policy, she contends.

Greening Social Work Education and Research

However, this sort of overarching incorporation of the natural environment into social work here has lagged behind social work in other parts of the world, according to Gautam Yadama, associate professor and director of International Programs at the Brown School.

“There are many community development specialists and social workers focused on addressing environmental issues around the world. Here in the United States we do not see a strong move toward teaching environmental social work,” says Yadama, whose research includes forestation and community development issues in India.

“Interest in environmental social work stems from a concern to mobilize and act on behalf of communities that are at a greater risk of losing their livelihoods due to degradation of natural resources or water pollution, adverse health due to toxic waste dumping in communities or declining quality of water resources, and environmental hazards such as lead paint,” says Yadama. “So the question is how do you prepare graduate students to understand these concerns and think of ways to work with communities in addressing problems that stem specifically from environmental degradation or environmental hazards.”

Rogge estimates that only “so social work faculty in the United States and Canada are engaged in substantial work in social work and the natural environment.” This suggests that substantial teaching about the interrelatedness of environmental issues and social well-being likely lags behind student awareness and interest. Efforts to embed an environmental mandate on international social work, it makes sense for us to take the lead in preparing social work professionals to work with communities that are at a greater environmental risk.”

Gautam Yadama, director of international programs, the Brown School

Described by others as “the father of environmental justice,” Robert Bullard describes himself as a “scholar-activist.” He’s written 14 books on sustainable development, environmental racism, urban land use, industrial facility siting, community reinvestment, housing, transportation, climate justice, emergency response, smart growth, and regional equity, including The Quest for Environmental Justice: Human Rights and the Politics of Pollution (Sierra Club Books, 2003).

Recently Social Impact talked with the Ware Distinguished Professor of Sociology and director of the Environmental Justice Resource Center at Clark Atlanta University about the role and education of social workers in fostering environmental justice.

SI: What do you see as an effective role for social work and social workers in advancing the cause of environmental justice?

BULLARD: It’s important that social work really take a lead in this area. Social workers are in the home, have contact with the family and the individuals who in reality are dealing with the environment. For example, lead poisoning is a leading cause of health problems for inner-city children, drenched in color, and often learning disabilities can be attributed to the environment in the home, school, and community. If social workers are aware of where and how these problems come from, they can be better able to face school principals, nurses, and teachers, not just the victims. These families that don’t have a lot of money, but they want the same good education for their children.

SI: What if any, social work graduate programs in the United States or Canada have a focus or concentration on environmental social work? What sort of education or research about environmental issues and action do you see as particularly valuable for schools of social work to be engaged in?

BULLARD: We frame environmental justice in a way that is very multidisciplinary, including the work of social workers, political scientists, hydrologists, epidemiologists, sociologists, lawyers, and more. No matter what the discipline, environmental issues should be a module or a specialty area dealing with environmental justice or health equity issues, with readings and case studies—and not just the research of sociologists but social work research as well. It’s important for us to understand and define environmental justice so schools, communities, and homes are included, so everything is germane. People really need to dig deeper to see where the patterns are. With a multidisciplinary approach, the environmental justice movement is richer and more diverse. Bringing in all these different approaches. Our goal is to be comprehensive and inclusive.
A new project to examine the social and technical aspects of implementing emission-reducing technology in rural India. We will work closely with the Foundation for Ecological Security and poverty presents people with few alternatives, says Yadama.

“Living at the intersection of social, economic, and cultural constraints, he says. To gain a better grasp of how these social and environmental issues connect, Yadama is embarking on an interdisciplinary study.

“Professor Pratim Biswas, chair of the Department of Energy, Environmental and Chemical Engineering, and I are starting a new project to examine the social and technical aspects of implementing emission-reducing technology in rural India. We will work closely with the Foundation for Ecological Security and Indian Institute of Technology, Bombay,” says Yadama, “to examine the range of social, economic, cultural, and technical considerations in the uptake of emission-reducing technologies in the villages of two Indian states—Orissa and Andhra Pradesh. In this project, we will create opportunities for students to understand issues of environment and society.”

Environmental focus in social work education have come piecemeal at many institutions, including the Brown School.

“In some courses we are giving the students an idea of what these issues are,” says Yadama. “We have not, at the present, organized this content in a systematic way into the curriculum. There is no focus as such. But given Brown School’s mandate on international social work, it makes sense for us to take the lead in preparing social work professionals to work with communities that are at a greater environmental risk.”

However, some professors—like Yadama, Rogge, and Gamble—do focus on raising student awareness of how environment issues impact their clients and their work, adding another dimension to their training.

“By combining economic, environmental, and social issues, students look at things more broadly,” says Gamble. “Development should not be simply about growth but thought about in terms of quality, making progress through making things better and sustainable.”

But tackling behemoth issues such as international development, deforestation, and corporate environmental problems that redound to threaten the well-being of marginalized communities might seem at first beyond the scope and grasp of social work education, research, and practice.

Not so, says Yadama.

“There is much going on in the field under corporate social responsibility initiatives. One important area concerns corporations and the environment. In India, for instance, nongovernmental organizations are bringing increasing pressure on corporations to incorporate practices that minimize the impact on environment, health, and water quality—all likely to have a disproportionate adverse impact on the poor more than the wealthy,” he says.

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“Social workers can help people get training in asking for meetings, accessing public records, and rescheduling daytime public meetings to when and where community people can attend,” says Lipeles. “They can help them create and design an effective ongoing organization and network with other organizations. And if the politics are stacked against you, you need to be able to figure out how to work around that.”

What shape environmental social work research, education, and practice might ultimately take may have many answers. But given increasing public awareness of social work student interest in environmental issues, it will likely grow quickly.

“We have a tremendous amount of work to do,” says Nguyen. “As interrelated environmental and social conditions worsen and consensus grows about these problems, people will be ready to make changes that social workers can facilitate. Our practical understanding of social justice and our mandate to work with the most vulnerable peoples give us important reasons to be involved.”