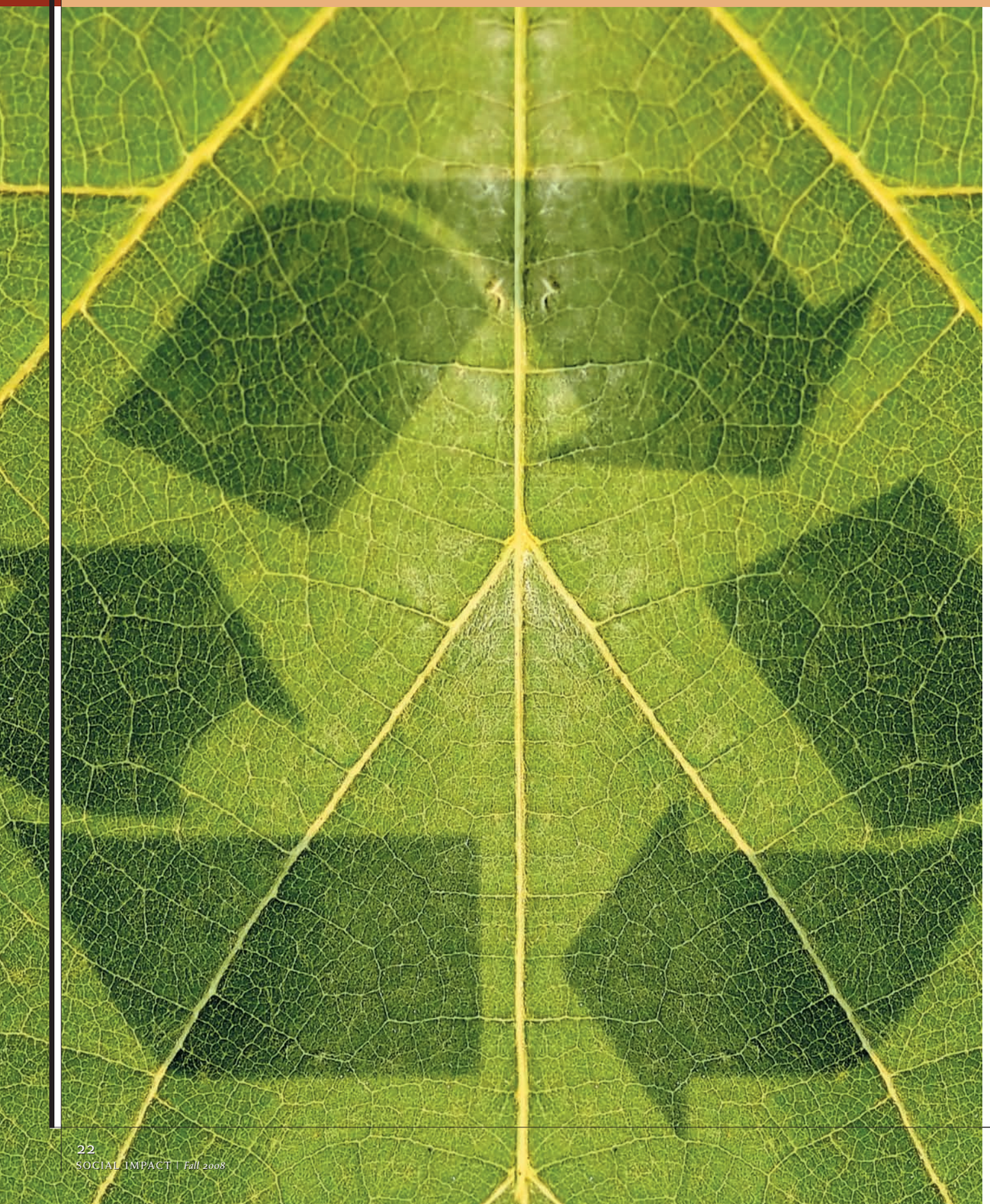

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Green Dream

Environmental justice is emerging from the shadows.

By Rick Skwiot

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.

The Student Vanguard

When Rogge was in graduate school, environmental activism and social work were "compartmentalized," 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 course work.

"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

don't have much political power in determining how forests and other resources are managed."

Peipert predicts such involvement by social work professionals to mushroom: "The perceived relevance of environmental issues is increasing," he says. "I expect it to grow significantly."

Redefining and Refocusing Social Work

Nguyen's petition posits that the defining social work perspective of "person-in-environment" demands professional focus on the natural environment, a concept that Rogge supports.

"As a profession, we need to intentionally redefine 'person-in-environment' to incorporate natural environment," says Rogge. "Then it will become more apparent to us what we need to do locally, nationally, and internationally."

She believes that the environment needs to be infused into every aspect of everything social work professionals do, across the micro-macro practice spectrum.

"What does it mean to those among us who have the least? I view it as a justice issue. Justice, according to our national and international codes of ethics, focuses on social justice and economic justice. Environmental justice fits in as a core value," she says.

Rogge sees social work as well positioned to address environmental issues in both physical and mental health, in global economics, and in community development and organization.

"We need to ask as a standard question in social work research and practice, 'What's the connection to the natural environment?' " says Rogge.

Dorothy (Dee) Gamble, clinical associate professor emerita at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill School of Social Work, says that adding an understanding 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.

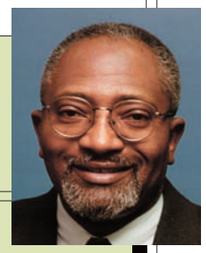
"There are many community development specialists and social workers focused on addressing environmental issues around the world. Here in the United States we do not see a strong move toward teaching environmental social work," says Yadama, whose research includes forestation and community development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

> "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."
>
> Gautam Yadama,
> director of international programs, the Brown School

Rogge estimates that only "10 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 envi-

An Outside View from an Environmental Justice Insider



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, 2005).

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 fomenting 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 of 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 are families that don't have a lot of money, but they want the same good education for their children.

SI: Few, 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.

Complex dynamics

As environmental social work grows, it faces the challenge of understanding the complex interrelations between environmental and social issues and gauging the impact of any environmental action on the vulnerable populations it purports to help.

"We need to better understand the dynamics between the social and environmental systems," says Gautam Yadama. "Understanding how the poor suffer from environmental degradation and might even contribute to environmental decline is essential."

In developing countries, particularly, poverty presents people with few alternatives, says Yadama.

"Livelihood strategies of the poor in many ways reflect limited choices. All one has to do is note the primary source of energy for the poor—biomass. Burning plant and agricultural material as fuel is not clean and has harmful effects on poor households that daily inhale smoke and other toxins."

However, available technology that might reduce harmful emissions is not always accessible to the poor due to economic and cultural constraints, he says. To gain a better grasp of how those 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."

ronmental 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.

> "Students often think that when the people with the most power don't support us, they are bad people. But it's more complex than that."
>
> Mary Rogge, associate professor, College of Social Work, University of Tennessee

Teaching Business and Political Savvy

Rogge agrees that in dealing with environmental issues, social workers need to be able to understand and work with corporations as a fact of globalization and attendant environmental issues.

"It's a very necessary part of social work education," says Rogge. "In so many social work issues where we deal with power we think dichotomously: If the government doesn't support our program, they are the enemy. Students often think that when the people with the most power don't support us, they are bad people. But it's more complex than that.

"We need to ask, 'What are the pieces that are supportive of social work's historic mission?' It gives us a more balanced approach, critical thinking, and complexity. It gives us space to develop common language," she says. "Some corporations are working to maximize conservation and minimize damage."

Maxine Lipeles, director of Interdisciplinary Environmental Clinic at the Washington University School of Law, agrees that savvy social workers need to have an understanding of how corporations, the law, and politics intersect.

"Regulators and companies are open to hearing from communities but don't know how to approach them; communities often don't know how to communicate with regulators and companies. Social workers," says Lipeles, "can help make communities more effective in communicating with decision makers."

To deal with often complex environmental issues, she says that some background in the law "would be helpful" to social workers—at least to the extent that one knows at what point to get a lawyer. But often more important are grassroots organizing abilities and political know-how.

"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 and 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." ▣