



The emerging field of rural environmental justice studies in Australia: Reflections from an environmental community engagement program



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ABSTRACT

This article provides insights from a recent community engagement and research program of relevance to the emerging rural environmental justice field in Australia. Following a brief summation of the Australian policy context, we review health, education, social science and environmental scholarship, which indicate few studies have been undertaken explicitly on rural environmental justice in Australia. The voices of rural residents on environmental justice issues are rarer still. We then present findings from research conducted during 2013–14 in the NSW Riverina-Murray region of rural Australia. The results give voice to a rich vein of concern and understanding relevant to rural environmental justice amongst rural residents. Survey results ($n = 237$) on residents' views of environmental problems are explored with a focus on causes and barriers to change.

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1. Introduction

Australian rural environmental justice scholarship in the fields of health, education, social science and environmental movements is embryonic and patchy (Byrne and MacCallum, 2013, p. 164; EDO, 2011, p. 3). The absence of a robust Australian evidence base in these pivotal research fields impedes environmental justice policy development, particularly as it relates to rural issues. Nonetheless, insights from a recent community engagement and research program indicate that the concept of environmental justice resonates with some rural Australian communities. Findings from a 2013–14 survey ($n = 237$) in the NSW Riverina-Murray region of Australia give voice to a rich vein of concern and understanding relevant to environmental justice among rural residents, particularly their views on the causes of environmental problems and barriers to change.

2. Background

This analysis is informed by an understanding of the distributive, procedural, recognition and geographic facets of environmental justice. Distributive justice refers to the heightened

exposure of disadvantaged social groups to environmental hazards. Procedural justice encompasses 'access to justice' issues, such as barriers to "meaningful involvement and participation of relevant stakeholders in decision making processes, access to information, access to affordable and quality legal advice, [and] legal rights" (McNamara et al., 2013, p. 6). The socio-political contexts that give rise to distributive and procedural injustices are incorporated within these components by some scholars, while others emphasise or extend them to a third component of 'justice as recognition' (McNamara et al., 2013, p. 7; Schlosberg, 2007, pp. 25–26; Walker, 2012). Both approaches encompass issues such as the exclusion or silencing of socially disadvantaged communities from decision-making processes. This may result from ignoring or maligning stakeholders through practices such as ridicule, stigmatisation or de-funding of critics (McNamara et al., 2013). It may also flow from structural and institutional inequalities such as the decline in industrial conditions, rights and collective organisation within rural workplaces (Masterman-Smith, 2013).

Another facet of environmental justice draws attention to spatial distribution issues. Though urban studies of environmental justice in Australia are more common than rural investigations, different emphases are apparent (Arcioni and Mitchell, 2005; Brown, 2009; Burns and Inglis, 2007; Edwards, 2011; Laidlaw and Taylor, 2011; Lloyd-Smith and Bell, 2003; Prior and Partridge, 2009; Rankin and Nugent, 2004). Urban studies attend to issues such as manufacturing pollution, waste, food insecurity and heat stress, while rural studies of relevance to environmental justice

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have focused on the impacts of fossil fuel extraction and agriculture (Evans, 2007; Higginbotham et al., 2010; McNamara et al., 2013). A feature of rural studies is their attention to the “geographic inequity” that occurs when the wellbeing of particular locations – like mining town residents and workers – is sacrificed to produce economic benefits largely accruing to non-residents – like shareholders and urban energy consumers (Lloyd-Smith and Bell, 2003, p. 21; for example Cottle, 2013). Similarly, residents in agricultural basins, which feed mainly urban populations,

... may be exposed to environmental hazards ... due purely to the fact that they live in a rural area, [for example] ... smell, noise and air quality associated with proximity to facilities housing intensive animal industries such as broiler farms and feedlots (EDO, 2011, p. 22).

Notwithstanding these general observations, the dearth of environmental justice scholarship on rural communities, in which extractive and agricultural industries predominate, provides a poor gauge of the issues for those directly affected and policy makers.

Environmental justice has had negligible policy traction in Australia until very recently (Agyeman and Evans, 2004; EDO, 2011). The push for environmental justice policy development has been largely driven by community advocates, such as the Environmental Defenders Office (EDO) and Environmental Justice Australia (Victoria). In the wake of their efforts, an Environmental Justice Plan was a part of the Victorian Labor Party's policy platform that underpinned their 2014 state election success. The Plan recognised that communities are entitled to all relevant information and legal avenues regarding “the potential health impacts of pollution or contamination of the local environment by nearby industrial facilities” (Victorian Labor Party, 2014, p. 75). It committed the Victorian Government to establishing environmental justice laws and regulations through the Department of Sustainability and Environment and the Environment Protection Authority. These agencies would also be responsible for public education, research and creating procedures to resource the remediation of contaminated areas. This approach emphasises four kinds of environmental justice rights: i) the right to environmental health, wellbeing and amenity; ii) the right to relevant information and knowledge; iii) the right to protection from harm; and iv) the right to remediation where harm is incurred. While there is some attention to procedural justice in this formulation, it stops short of several other rights commonly expounded by the environmental justice movement. These include: v) the right to make decisions about developments with environmental justice implications, including the right to reject them (Deacon and Baxter, 2012; O'Faircheallaigh, 2012); vi) whistle-blower protection, particularly for workers who expose their employers (Collins, 2010, p. 9; Condit, 2011; Pellow, 2000, p. 594); and vii) the right to financial compensation where harm is incurred (Warlenius et al., 2015). Moreover, there is no explicit mention of social equity aspects of environmental justice, such as those that specifically affect rural communities.

In contrast, environmental justice policy development began over two decades ago in the United States with the issuing of Executive Order 12898 (Mohai et al., 2009, p. 410). It requires “all agencies of the federal government to take environmental justice concerns into account in all rule making and prohibit[s] discriminatory practices in programmes receiving federal funds” (EDO, 2011, p. 7). Consequently, 41 US states had established environmental justice policies or laws to varying degrees by 2009 and over 800 community grants had been distributed by the Office of Environmental Justice, within the US Environmental Protection Authority by 2007 (EDO, 2011, p. 7). Although the US context

highlights the under-development of Australian policy on environmental justice, it is not without shortcomings.

Many believe that the pace of US policy and regulatory change has been too slow, particularly under more conservative governments (Mohai et al., p. 421–422). In 2007, environmental justice scholars and leaders reported to the US Senate on key areas for policy advancement. Some of the recommendations sought to address the reactive nature of much policy-making (Mohai et al., p. 408, 422), by advocating stronger ‘right to know’ protections for workers and residents and institutional incentives to prevent environmentally unjust corporate and state practices. Some argue that too much attention has been devoted to techno-legal remedies in the context of flawed legislative, regulatory and compliance regimes, leading to limited benefits for affected communities (Mohai et al., p. 410). Further, those who see environmental injustice as an inevitable externality produced by a capitalist political economy, are sceptical about the likelihood of substantial improvements unless there is systemic change to the mode of production (Rudel et al., 2011). These debates are aided by a robust and theoretically diverse body of academic scholarship in the United States.

3. Literature review

In Australia, the embryonic state of domestic research mirrors and contributes to the policy lag on environmental justice (Byrne and Houston, 2014, p. 211; Chakraborty and Green, 2014). A synthesis of all studies that have engaged with rural socio-environmental issues in general is beyond the scope of this article. Instead, this review focussed on the extent to which an environmental justice framework is informing relevant Australian scholarship. Hence, keyword searches were conducted for “environmental justice” combined with “rural” or “regional” within many Australian academic journals across a range of disciplines. The journals included: the *Journal of Sociology*, *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, *Rural Society*, *Health Sociology Review*, *Australian Social Work*, *Australian Journal of Human Rights*, *Just Policy*, *Australian Journal of Political Science*, *Australian Journal of Psychology*, *Australian Journal of Anthropology*, *Australian Journal of Education*, *Australian Journal of Environmental Education*, *The Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, *Australian Journal of Adult Learning*, *Journal for Research in Rural Education*, *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education* (previously *Education in Rural Australia*), *Medical Journal of Australia*, *Australian Critical Care*, *Australian Journal of Rural Health*, *Australian Nursing and Midwifery Journal*, *Australian Nursing Journal*, *Australian Emergency Nursing Journal*, *Australian Journal of Emergency Management*, *Australian and New Zealand Health Policy*, *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health*, *Australian Law Journal*, *Australian Indigenous Law Review*, *Alternative Law Journal*, *Australian Journal of Legal Philosophy*, *Deakin Law Review*, *Youth Studies Australia*, *Australian Geographer*, *Australian Journal of Environmental Management*, *Labour and Industry*, and the *Journal of Industrial Relations*. Results from these searches rarely contained substantial engagement with the concept of environmental justice and, in the few instances that did, detailed analysis of rural dimensions was rare (Evans, 2010/11; McLean, 2012; Millner, 2011; Nagtzaam, 2014; Riley, 2013). This review indicates that few disciplines appear to have explicitly embraced an environmental justice analytical framework. Nonetheless, elements of a nascent rural environmental justice field are discernible from the broader literature, particularly within the health, education, law and socio-political literature, from which key insights and gaps are explored below.

3.1. Health sector

The literature reviewed suggests major knowledge gaps about

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