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The Intersection of Environmental Justice, Climate Change, Community, and the Ecology of Life



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We dedicate this book to our families, our communities, and all life on this planet, both current and those to come in future generations. While we take seriously the gravity of the climate crisis, we hold on to hope that through individual and collective action we can address the global environmental crisis; heal the natural world; redress environmental, economic, and social injustices; and find ways to create a sense of hope and action moving forward.

Foreword

Ande A. Nesmith, Cathryne L. Schmitz, Yolanda Machado-Escudero, Shanondora Billiot, Rachel A. Forbes, Meredith C. F. Powers, Nikita Buckhoy, Lucy A. Lawrence, and Lacey Sloan — we speak your names with deepest of gratitude for your masterful creation of this work *The Intersection of Environmental Justice, Climate Change, Community, and the Ecology of Life*. It takes courage to live honestly, to speak your truth, to point out the truth, and to take on the responsibility as human beings to nurture and protect our home, Earth, and all of its inhabitants. This work queries the questions: What happens at the intersection of justice, change, and ecology? How do they co-exist for the benefit of human beings and the environment?

In response to the invitation to introduce this most critical work during a time of crises, most notably the Coronavirus pandemic, as culturally diverse women of a writing circle called 'Ike Mana named by Ms. Ku'uipo Kumukahi of Hawai'i, we enter from a place of hope and anticipation for greater opportunities in the horizon as a result of this life changing work. We speak from the 'āina (land) of Kanaka Maoli, whose ancestors we honor as both natives and visitors to this land. We embrace a collective kuleana (responsibility) for protecting the environment as a lifeline for indigenous communities and revitalizing culture and the environment in which culture exists with a renewed commitment to justice for all life forces. In alignment with the focus and spirit of this work on environmental justice and the reciprocal responsibility between living organisms and the environment, we acknowledge and simultaneously condemn the devastating impacts of colonization, oppression, and trauma on indigenous land and people in nations across the globe. The consequences of the destruction of sovereignty, the right to self-governance, is a form of injustice that can live on for generations as part of the psyche and community identity. We align with the commitment of these authors as allies, and this work towards justice for the environment and the sacredness of life itself.

As reflected in this work, the beauty of life is that healing can occur among all life forces, even in the midst of crises. Evidence of such healing occurred in Hawai'i during the COVID-19 crisis in which restoration and renewal occurred in the 'āina (land), wai (water), and 'ai (food). A healthier physical surrounding was apparent in the color of the ocean, the smell of plants and trees, and the warmth of families sup-

porting keiki (children) and kūpuna (elders) spiritually, mentally, and emotionally. Despite human genius and innovation, pre-COVID-19 unhealthy environmental conditions occurred at the intersection of human carelessness, recklessness, and disrespect for land, water, air, and all of nature's creations. However, COVID-19 brings a renewed commitment to cultivating a healthier Earth for present and future generations. As the renowned Hanauma Bay located on the island of O'ahu, Hawai'i was closed to human contact, all of its inhabitants were visibly restored and renewed. This crisis gave us pause and an opportunity for our communities to reset environmental protection. It gave Earth the needed time for healing and restoring with human beings absent from nature for a period of time. The crisis also gave us time to quarantine toxic worldviews and behaviors, marginalizing and containing them in order to avoid infecting others with such toxicity. As stewards of our environment, we must pledge to not return to our old ways, not to forget the lessons learned, and use this opportunity to move forward in healthier and just ways. As emphasized by the authors of this work, we live in a hyphenated world of justice and injustice, equity and inequity, thus we must navigate that hyphen carefully for the benefit of generations to come.

This masterful work underscores our collective responsibility for the Earth and all of its inhabitants. First, Chap. 1 offers an overview of climate change, ecology, and justice as a call to action. The current human-initiated global environmental crisis has resulted in devastating conditions in land, air, and water, particularly in vulnerable communities. Interdisciplinary responses are urgently needed with leadership from communities across cultural spectrums. It is our collective kuleana to leverage existing climate science to enact policies that protect our planet and all life forces. Chapter 2 discusses water, air, and land as the foundation of life underscoring the delicate balance of life and life supporting elements as essential to the health and well-being of our planet and ecosystems. Healthy land, air, and water are critical to sustain life and eliminate threats such as degrading freshwater, pollution of ocean and air, destruction of natural resources, and detrimental human behavior. Also emphasized is the interdependency of the physical, social, cultural, and economic well-being of humans and a healthy planet.

Chapter 3 speaks of the importance of celebrating and preserving the ecology of life as a way of honoring and preserving our planet for generations to come. The health of the Earth and ecology, as well as the health of human beings, are interconnected and can be threatened by power, privilege, and control. There is a need to find balance and restore the Earth with an eco-centric worldview that promotes ecological justice and celebrate and protect the ecology of all life. Efforts must be on both local and global levels. Chapter 4 denounces environmental injustice and encourages transformative change. Such environmental injustice occurs at the intersection of deeply rooted systemic and structural oppression linked to racial, gender, and socioeconomic forces that have negatively impacted communities.

Chapter 5 focuses on threats to human health and well-being during global environmental crises such as climate change, ecological loss, and human-induced disasters. Nonetheless, the resilience and strengths of the human spirit can mitigate injustice and vulnerability of people and their environments. Likewise, Chap. 6

advocates for decision-making power and politics as methods for rebuilding and sustaining communities and their environments. Whereas, Chap. 7 examines pathways to transform community and environment through a holistic and cross-disciplinary approach which embraces systems-level changes that confront the consequences of race, class, and gender injustice. Finally, Chap. 8 is a call to action to decolonize nature and promote health. The complexity of environmental justice was underscored by the impacts of COVID-19, which was felt worldwide. The pandemic accentuated the relationship between human health and environmental health, and facilitated healing and decolonizing people to rethink the future.

We come in full circle with our ancestral obligation to the ‘āina and all of its inhabitants and the responsibility of social work as a profession to stand up and speak up for environmental justice. Social work is positioned to lead interdisciplinary teams, collaborations, and partnerships with communities to address complex issues such as environmental justice. Social work values and ethics serve as anchors for advocating change and rethinking today’s global crises. This is a call to action for social work and its allies to strengthen the resolve to build relationships of trust among communities, develop leaders that reflect society’s rich tapestry, and integrate the environment and ecology into national and international conversations to promote justice for all.

By ‘Ike Mana¹:

Halaevalu Vakalahi, Adrienne Dillard, Momilani Marshall, Tammy Martin, Sophia Kim, Poki’i Balaz, and Puni Kekauoha

¹ ‘Ike Mana is a writing hui, named by Ku’uipo Kumukahi, sweetheart of Hawaiian music, that was established as part of an initiative to empower and cultivate writing among women in Hawai’i. Formidable women ever connected by the ‘ike (knowledge) attained, resulting in the mana (power) sustained, propelled by love for people, and shared for the advancement of the lāhui.

Preface

Humans are *storytelling animals*. This ability is part of what makes us a unique species. Gottschall (2013) suggests that our species in fact is addicted to story, noting that even during sleep, our minds continue to tell stories. We are all part of an ongoing story, tightly interwoven with the ever evolving chronicle of plants, animals, and Planet Earth. It is a narrative full of comedy, tragedy, birth, death, and rebirth. The writing of this book began as a way to present our fears and passions on ecological and environmental justice issues that engaged us empathetically, intellectually, and professionally. The process of writing this book has changed us in ways we did not foresee. As we began our journey, the urgency became even clearer. And, because of the complexity, we began to understand the difficulty of sharing ecological and environmental concepts and issues in ways that bring us together to be part of the process of creating the pressing and necessary changes. We hope that together we can be part of finding ways to move forward personally and communally to address these dire issues.

Within the chapters, we present a variety of narratives as we explore complex and challenging topics. We worked to create a relatable, interesting, and understandable approach to exploring the richness of the ecology and the complexity of environmental injustice. We invite you to unpack and process the information through reflection questions designed to engage personal and collective growth; we offer activities and additional resources to support continued learning.

We approach environmental injustice and the climate crisis from a position that is ecologically centered rather than human-centered. Throughout this book, respect is paid to all forms of life inclusive of – and beyond – humans. The reason for this is twofold. First, we acknowledge the interdependence of all life within our biosphere. To some extent, it is our effort to distinguish ourselves from our environment and our devaluing of other life forms that led us into this existential crisis. Second, we believe that all life has value and deserves a healthy planet, free from exploitation, to live on regardless of species.

The authors of this book bring a wealth of experiences, identities, and world-views. We are all justice workers, many working across disciplines in the community and on university campuses. We bring a values-based, social justice-centered

focus which we all represent. Some of us started our careers with a focus on the ecology and environmental justice. Others of us started our work in critical analysis and the struggle for equity and justice. All of us have been forever changed in recognizing, along with much of the world, that the impact of climate change has occurred and continues to occur.

The injustices and the devastation created by the human-caused ecological destruction, environmental injustice, and the climate crisis demand a response from *all* of us as humans on the planet. Therefore, you find that our tone and approach is very much influenced by and embedded in justice. The stories we offer in the Appendices come from our personal and professional experiences, conveying ideas for active roles in the change process at the local level, while always recognizing the global context. We also present stories we have heard or encountered when working with service users and communities that face an array of ecological and environmental injustices.

We recognize that the current climate crisis and the related injustices are severe, infuriating, and heartbreaking. At the writing of this book, a coronavirus pandemic and a focus on gross racial and gendered inequality are sweeping the world, the damage and disparities of which have not yet been fully calculated. Yet, we have to be informed and face these realities if we hope to spark change. But rest assured, we do not stop there. We try to wrap up with hope and strategies for action. As such, we present models and strategies for action with the potential for success and explore solutions for positive transformation. The concerns are often so big and complex that they are sometimes referred to as *wicked problems*, which are complex problems we cannot easily solve. Yet they are so important that we must all do our part individually as we come together to create and engage in change. We cannot remain in denial or paralyzed by grief and overwhelm. Though these are valid emotions, we must continue to heal as we act to resolve the things that are causing us stress and grief in the first place.

Throughout each chapter we direct the reader towards reflections and actions that focus on their own personal experiences and expertise, other stories they have heard, and ways they may move forward with the information they learn about in this book. Finally, situated within this position of hope, we invite readers to join us as we collectively continue creating the story of a future of possibilities, together.

Our Story

We, the authors of this book, each had our own path for coming together. Some of us have studied and researched this topic for a decade or more. Others are newer to it. Some of us were heavily engaged in sustainability or living lightly on the Earth long before we became involved in research and writing on the topic. For others it was the other way around. Several of us have served on the Committee on Environmental Justice of our professional organization, the Council on Social Work

Education, working to infuse our educational standards with the language of environmental justice – while others have worked from the outside in.

We have a history of addressing ecological concerns (e.g., researching toxic environments in urban spaces, enhancing green spaces for health and mental health, advocating for environmental justice) and a focus on issues of justice. The climate crisis demands an engaged response from us, as humans and as global citizens. These are personal, interpersonal, community, structural, and professional concerns. We must be part of the solutions, lending our expertise to interdisciplinary teams for action. This is not simply for those in social work and other social service professionals who are passionate about the environment, rather it is for *every* person interested in justice at any level of service, research, or education, with any population. The climate crisis and mass ecological destruction affects us all. With this book, we aim to move the conversation forward and contribute to the ongoing story of our work with the intersecting issues that come together under the umbrella of the global environmental crisis – ecological justice, climate change, environmental justice, and sustainability.

Your Story

Before launching into this book, we invite you to consider your own story. We present you with many questions here. Write down your answers and then revisit them after you complete the book. Ask yourself in what respect your answers have changed and where you may seek to grow and act in the future. First, pause to answer these broad questions:

- How did you come to read this book? What do *environment* and *ecology* mean to you? How concerned are you about the environment?
- If you had to tell someone the story of your life, where would you begin? What would you highlight?
- What stories do you have about your special connections to place?
- What are your connections to the ecological environment that are not immediately surrounding you?

The path to awareness is personal and contextual, we hope you are open to reflecting on what we share, as well as your own experiences and context. We invite you to take a different turn on an old saying, *don't just do something, sit there*. Sit there mindfully, that is. Think of your own stories as you engage with the materials presented in the book. Identify your connections with the environment (natural and built) surrounding you.

How do you begin? Start with right now. Consider your surroundings as you read this page and briefly answer these specific questions:

If you are outside:

- Is it sunny or cloudy?
- Are you alone or around others?
- Are there any plants, animals, or birds around? Describe them.
- Describe the air. How comfortable is the temperature? Is there wind? Is it raining or snowing? Is it smoggy or clear?

If you are inside:

- Describe the lighting. Is there natural light? Is it bright? Dim?
- Is the space you are in comfortable, inviting, loud, congested?

Regardless of where you are:

- Do you want to be in this space or do you wish you were elsewhere?
- Where else would you like to be?
- And if you could be anywhere in the world out in nature, where would you be? Why?

The here-and-now is as much a part of your story as where you came from. Importantly, your story is a collective one, in which you are an integral and unique part.

We also invite you to *not just sit there, do something*. We encourage you to join a network, in-person group, social media, some place where you can engage in dialogue – or even just silently observe. Reflect on topics of climate, nature, and ecological justice or any narrower related topic. What are you hearing? What are you learning? What do you already do to either limit your personal impact on the planet or the address the impacts of humanity? If your answer is either “nothing” or “I’m not sure, I have not really thought about this,” no worries! This is a starting place. Think about, as you read this book, where you fit and what you can *do*.

Our Dream of the Future

Finally, let’s think about the future. Now more than ever before, humans must consider the reality of a radically different future and a planet altered from the one we grew up on. Yes, we are even talking about our youthful readers. You too will live on a different planet in your adulthood than you are currently experiencing because, as the saying goes, the train has already left the station. Climate change is moving *that* fast and interacting with the human-initiated ecological degradation. It is not about our future children or grandchildren or the generations to come. We are living in it and with it already, right here and right now. The ecological balance is at a critical tipping point and picking up steam. All life, including we humans, are strapped into our seats, on a journey whether we like it or not.

We invite you to be both realistic and a dreamer. Start with your dreams. What is important to you? What do you love that you want to protect? It can be a place or a person; it could also be a memory. Shall we dare to dream of a future that will be

full of snowy winters and sledding, barefoot summers on beaches? Of dense forests and clear air? Birds and wildlife? And then the realistic part. As you read this book, determine realistically where *you* can start as you join with others in making our dream a reality.

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Cathryne L. Schmitz, PhD, MSW is a Professor Emerita in the Department of Social Work at the University of North Carolina Greensboro (UNCG). Her scholarship focuses on environmental justice, critical multiculturalism, analysis of the privilege/oppression nexus, global engagement, leadership, interdisciplinary education, organizational development and community building, and peacebuilding. She has been engaged in intercultural global education, environmental education, knowledge building, and curriculum development. Dr. Schmitz has numerous publications and is currently focusing in the areas of environmental justice, identity and culture, interdisciplinary knowledge building, and organizational/community transformation. She has expanded her focus through her cross-disciplinary appointments with the Department of Peace and Conflict Studies and the Program in Women and Gender Studies. Dr. Schmitz also contributes to and learns from her work in the community and with the UNCG Center for New North Carolinians. Dr. Schmitz served on the CSWE Commission on Diversity and Social and Economic Justice from 2010 to 2016 and on the CSWE Committee on Environmental Justice from 2015 to present, serving as Chair from 2015 to 2019.