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230 Park Avenue, New York, New York 10017



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MAN AND HIS WORLD

BLACK ENVIRONMENTALISTS SEE

ANOTHER SIDE OF POLLUTION

By David Hendin
Enterprise Science Service

NEW YORK--Like everyone else in the United States, blacks are affected by the crisis of the environment. But as in housing problems, employment problems, health problems and educational problems, blacks are affected in a different way.

"Our biggest fight is to make middle class people see it's not just a fight for clean air, but a fight for everyone in this country to live in a personal environment in which he can live like a human being," says Mary Lou Oates, coordinator of environmental action for the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO), in Washington.


"There are environmental problems in inner city areas that are just not generally talked about, such as lead-base paints," that are flaking off walls in old buildings and poisoning children, she says.

Looking at another side of the problem, Miss Oates adds: "It's not a question of being in it (polluted atmosphere) for eight hours and then going home to Long Island. Middle class people are holding off pollution in a personal way. Poor people don't have this option open to them."

In St. Louis, a group called "Black Survival," is organizing youths gangs and community groups to act on the environment of the ghetto.

"They tell us that trees are necessary because they give off oxygen that we need for breathing. One of the problems in our neighborhood is that we don't have any trees," says Freddie Mae Brown, leader of the group.

"Black Survival," and the NWRO are not alone in recognizing a need for ghetto participation in the environment movement.

"Restoring to livability the filthy inhuman environment in the ghettos of our cities, where millions of Americans are trapped into an unfruitful existence, is as much an environmental issue as anything else,"  Sen. Gaylord Nelson, D-Wis., said in a recent speech at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

Yet, the conservationist-Senator and involved blacks point out that the environment crisis cannot eliminate other problems the black community is faced with.

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"Anyone who thinks the environmental issue is a neat way to avoid facing the tragic problems we have caused the black man in America is going to be sadly mistaken," Nelson said. "It will provide no escape, and I think the young people of America are going to help see to that."

Miss Brown says that the response to "Black Survival" in her community has been "overwhelming." She notes that it "seemed to be a thing," in the black community that anyone who would "mess with environmental problems was out of their head," because of other problems pressing the blacks.

"But in terms of all the things we're dealing with for a total environment, we have to deal not only with jobs and housing, but air and water pollution as well."

Even though NWRO's foremost fight is for an adequate income for all Americans, Miss Oates says that NWRO groups around the country are being encouraged to join in with local environmental action groups.

"The question is," Miss Oates adds, "whether the middle class people are only concerned for the fact that their children are not going to have the life expectancy that they would have in a clean environment, or do they want to make it possible for all children to live what we like to call an American way of life?"

Reflecting the paradox of the situation, Miss Oates continues, "It's kind of silly to talk about clean air if people are starving to death, or adequate recreational facilities if people don't even have coats to keep them warm when they get outside."

Miss Brown sums up the gist of the situation in a sentence that provokes some serious thinking.

"For the first time in our lives," she says, "there's something that can't be divided: the air."