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The Justice of Environmental Justice: Reconciling Equity, Recognition, and Participation in a Political Movement

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While the environmental justice movement has gathered much attention from academics, activists, and government officials alike, it seems odd that little has been written on what, exactly, is meant by the *justice* of environmental justice. For the most part, the concept has been used to illustrate the fact that low-income communities and communities of color face more environmental risks than more well-off or white communities; this is linked, of course, to the other injustices in economic and social conditions disempowered communities face. Environmental justice activists and academics call for more equitable distribution of environmental risks—or, more succinctly, for less risk overall, but especially in communities already unduly burdened. But there is more to the conception of environmental justice than just this distributional aspect, and, in fact, a focus solely on distribution is problematic. Environmental justice activists have also called for *recognition* of communities as unfairly affected, and insist on being seen and heard by both a mainstream environmental movement and a government that has, for the most part, ignored them. Further, the movement has insisted on changes in the way environmental policy is made, in order to bring in community *participation* in both the design and ongoing oversight of environmental risks.

So the concept of environmental *justice* in political practice deals with more than simply distribution. But, again oddly, there has been no thorough attempt to try to define exactly what the justice in environmental justice means. I attempt an initial foray into the issue, starting with an examination of the conceptions of justice as equity, recognition, and participation in the political theory literature. This illustrates the theoretical discussions of justice by contemporary political theorists such as Nancy Fraser and Iris Young. I then follow each of those notions through