

Equality concerns have loomed large in American thought for at least the past decade, exemplified by demonstrations against “the one percent” and the Black Lives Matter movement. These concerns have also moved toward center stage in environmental law. This has been a major shift in emphasis that seems likely to reshape the meaning of environmentalism. It’s still not clear how to conceptualize this shift. At this point, three perspectives seem to have emerged.

One of these perspectives is environmental racism. Environmental racism has been [defined](#) as “the institutional rules, regulations, policies or government and/or corporate decisions that deliberately target certain communities for locally undesirable land uses and lax enforcement of zoning and environmental laws, resulting in communities being disproportionately exposed to toxic and hazardous waste based upon race.” This concern over racial inequity has been at the heart of the environmental justice (EJ) movement, although the movement’s goals are not necessarily defined in racial terms.

An emerging alternative perspective is called [intersectional environmentalism](#) (IE), which is the Generation Z response to early conceptions of environmental justice. (Full disclosure: I am not a member of Generation Z). This approach originated with Leah Thomas’s call for the environmental movement to “stand in solidarity with the black lives matter movement and with Black, Indigenous + POC communities impacted daily by both social and environmental injustice.” That sounds very much like the vision of anti-racism. But there may be some subtle differences.

The [website](#) of Thomas’s group says that IE “brings injustices done to the most vulnerable communities, and the earth to the forefront,” advocating for “justice for the people + the planet.” The reference to justice for “the planet” hits a note that I haven’t seen in discussions of environmental racism. An [essay](#) by Thomas says that she began with an interest in environmental studies and only then began to worry about whether the movement was serving disadvantaged communities. “When striving to become better environmentalists,” she says, “it’s also important to consider what communities are more likely to be exposed to the ramifications of climate change the fastest.” The bio that accompanies the article says that she “launched the intersectional environmentalist platform to explore the relationship between environmentalism and cultural identity.”

A final perspective is exemplified by the Green New Deal and Biden’s climate program. Biden has made climate change an urgent priority. He has also made

environmental justice, defined in terms of disadvantaged communities, a central goal. Biden goes beyond either EJ or mainstream environmentalism, however, in linking climate action to an affirmative economic vision, which features large-scale job creation, revival of U.S. manufacturing, and an attack on economic inequality. This economic vision is aimed not only at the poor but at the struggling working and middle classes.

It's not altogether clear whether these perspectives differ in some fundamental way or whether they merely involve differences in emphasis. Differences in emphasis matter. For now, all three perspectives are pointing toward aggressive environmental action. Down the road, however, when choices about priorities have to be made, these differences may give rise to tensions over the future of environmentalism. At some point, there may be tradeoffs between rapid action on climate change, redressing racial injustice, and creating good jobs. Those tradeoffs may be resolved differently depending on which goals get the most emphasis.