

# **Community Engagement: The Key Element of Environmental Justice**

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## **Abstract**

The best strategies to achieve environmental justice take into account the definition of “environment” as being all parts of a person’s livelihood. The nonprofit organization GreenRoots demonstrates successful efforts to achieve environmental justice by engaging with the community in order to understand what’s important to their livelihood and what constitutes their environment. By examining my experience interning at GreenRoots, the organization’s completed and ongoing projects, and scientific literature surrounding environmental justice, I argue that the secret to meaningful environmental justice efforts is community engagement. While interning at GreenRoots, I saw that educating and working with the community led to greater forward momentum behind projects and more recognition by city and state officials. GreenRoots projects, including a resident tree watering program and making air quality data available to the public, consistently centered the average community member. I compare GreenRoots to other environmental justice organizations to see how and where they differ, and test my theory that community engagement leads to successful environmental justice efforts. Lastly, the works of Anna Grear, Richard Rothstein, Phil Brown and Edwin J. Mikkelsen, and Dorceta E. Taylor provide necessary background information about environmental justice in relation to community action.

It is becoming increasingly crucial to create a reliable, successful model for environmental justice. The challenge in creating a standardized procedure is that every community has different needs. However, if that standardized procedure starts and ends with community input, involvement, and action, environmental justice organizations can tailor their

efforts perfectly for the people they serve. In addition, just as environmental justice scholarship shifts its definition of the environment to include housing, urban living, and general community livelihood, environmental justice organizations must center their approaches around community engagement. By doing so they can go much farther in their efforts and have the greatest possible impact on their communities.