

Developing an Analysis

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We, as organizers for environmental justice, work to build an ecologically sustainable and socially just society. We envision a society that uses renewable energy, not coal, to power homes, not only because this averts the catastrophic promise of climate change, but because it brings our social and economic relations into a better harmony than could be achieved in an "extract, burn, and belch" energy economy. We desire clean land, water and air to nourish ourselves and Earth's manifold organisms. We desire the equitable and just use of land, water, and air, for these are inalienable human rights that can and ought not be bartered on whims of greed. We may do so now, but as the emergence of climate change and intensifying environmental, economic, and social ills show – this is not a system we can or ought to sustain.

As we create a movement to collectively embody a redefined relationship between humanity and the environment (of which we are a part!), we must investigate the types of social relationships that define our society today. Ignoring the reasons and the implications of how and why social groups interact would impede our work towards ecological sustainability. Recognizing them but failing to embody our conclusions in our movement, would be just as hurtful. Not only must we calibrate carbon emission reductions with an eye for perfection, but we must turn that eye inward and acutely examine our own inter-human relationships – on an individual and *societal* level.

Human domination of nature, whether exhibited in climate change or the many connected strands of the greater ecological crisis, stems from inter-human relationships of domination. This may sound unorthodox, when we are indoctrinated with the simplistic idea that a damaged environment stems from the pollutants that soil it. In SEAC, we add further dimensions to this picture – what is the social context of a pollutant, and why is it that they are concentrated in working class and people of color communities? Why is it that those who have contributed the most to climate change are the ones most sheltered from its effects? While it is conceivable that we could solve the carbon problem without addressing these underlying causes, we cannot expect to create a sustainable and just world if we do not address these underlying causes. As we move forward and make real strides in solving the carbon problem, we must not shy away from the broader questions of justice: would we want our government to continually delegate decision-making power primarily to men in our government? Would we want an economy where the "rich get richer and the poor get poorer?" How long can we expect a clean environment to exist alongside a society full of "ills" that contradict the values of environmental justice? These are questions we must ask, and come to answer.

The way we treat our natural surroundings is a product of the behaviors that arise through our social interactions; it is a product of the social structures or patterns that guide the way we work, exchange goods and resources, raise our children, make decisions, and perceive other cultures. We live in a society where social groups of different "spheres" of life do not live equally. We are hierarchically divided into advantaged and disadvantaged groups. This is privilege and oppression. Our economy includes groups that are favored over others; so do our culture, our political institutions, and even the family in its current permutation. In short, certain groups are kept oppressed for the benefit of the privileged ones; for example, the additional unearned benefits that men, as a social group, receive (male privilege) are only possible with the oppression of women. Oppression and privilege are *arbitrary* and *systematic*. *Arbitrary* in that neither oppression nor privilege are ingrained in a person's DNA and *systemic* in the sense the relationship between privilege and oppression are a result of institutional forces acting in society over

time. Oppression is not just someone yelling racial slurs. That is bigotry. Oppression is when more African-American males are incarcerated than graduate from college.

In order to consistently navigate the complex web of webs that is our society, we need an analysis. With an analysis, the distinctions between individual bigotry and systemic racism, chauvinism and male privilege, homophobia and heteronormativity, elitism and class exploitation, littering and ecological destruction – the individual and the systemic - become clear. It is necessary in the daily work of building our organizations in a way that does not mirror the economic, political, cultural, and sexual inequalities that pollute humanity and in turn our Earth. It is required so that our organizing will be inclusive, welcoming, and empowering for oppressed social groups that have been forced into quietude. Ultimately, an analysis allows us to transcend the simple and false and cynical conclusion that "humans are inherently bad" and come to understand that our humanity's modern manifestation is but one possibility amidst an infinite palette of economic, political, gender, cultural, sexual, and creative possibilities that are ours to mix and match as we please.